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HOW EUROPEANS UNDERSTAND SOLIDARITY, RECIPROCITY AND FAIRNESS IN THE EU

INSIGHTS FROM CONVERSATIONS AMONG CITIZENS

Edited by

Björn Egner, Hubert Heinelt and Jens Steffek



How Europeans Understand Solidarity, Reciprocity and Fairness in the EU

This edited book sheds new light on the understanding of solidarity, reciprocity and fairness from the perspective of European Union (EU) citizens and, with this, how cohesion in the EU can be achieved.

Drawing on extensive focus group research across nine countries, the book presents the results of this large project to assess what citizens think they owe their fellow Europeans in other parts of the EU. It brings together participants from different social milieus – highly qualified professionals, low-paid and unemployed persons and young adults – and reveals much about how average citizens think and talk about the issues and crises facing the EU, such as the reasons behind their beliefs and the statements they develop when discussing such issues, and therefore, provides a deeper insight into how exactly EU citizens understand solidarity, reciprocity and fairness when it comes to transborder relations and their attitudes towards EU cohesion.

This book will be of key interest to scholars and students in European studies/politics, and more broadly to comparative politics, international relations, civil society organisations and the wider social sciences.

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1 Introduction

Björn Egner, Hubert Heinelt and Jens Steffek

This edited volume sheds new light on how Europeans understand solidarity, reciprocity and fairness in the European Union (EU). It also discusses the implications that this may have for cohesion in the EU. The book presents the results of an ambitious empirical research project in which citizens of nine European countries were asked to explain what they think they owe to citizens in other parts of the EU. Although there is a considerable amount of literature on cohesion, solidarity, reciprocity and fairness in the EU (see, e.g. Gerhards et al. 2016, 2018, 2019 as well as publications referred to below), this book is the first one to draw on the results of extensive focus group research, which gives us access to the reasons that people have for their beliefs. We can gather those reasons from the arguments and storylines they present when discussing realistic scenarios related to questions of solidarity in the EU. The contributors to this book collaborated as a team and conducted 27 focus groups in nine countries of the Eurozone, three in each country under study, that were designed to cover different social milieus: high skilled professionals, lower paid and unemployed persons, and young adults.

The contributors to this book start from the assumption that the cohesion of societies crucially depends upon perceptions of solidarity, reciprocity and fairness (Carnes et al. 2015; Fehr and Gächter 2000; Kolm 2008; Komter 2014; Tyler and Blader 2001; Ross 2021). Solidarity is the overarching concept in this regard. However, “[s]olidarity is [not only] an elusive and contested concept” in scholarly debates – as emphasised by Forst (2021: 2) – but also in debates among citizens. To clarify what solidarity can mean from various perspectives, Forst argued (by referring to Rawls 1999) that we should distinguish between a rather broadly understood concept of solidarity and context- or issue-related conceptions. Accordingly, one should consider solidarity as a concept in a general sense and then look for different conceptions of solidarity. A conception usually closely linked to solidarity is reciprocity, and when solidarity is thought of in the context of reciprocity of support, questions of fairness quickly arise. This is, in short, how the three key terms of our analytical framework are connected (see also Chapter 2).

Reciprocity relations exist horizontally (among citizens) and vertically (between citizen and state). In the case of the European multilevel polity, these relations take on additional dimensions, that is horizontally between EU member states and/or their citizenries, and vertically between the EU level and the member states and/or

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their citizenries. Studies in law, psychology, sociology and behavioural economics have shown that citizens are more inclined to comply with public law and pay their taxes if they expect that others are doing the same, and if the state treats them fairly (Livingston 2020: 32–49; Bazart and Bonein 2014; Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. 2008). In a similar vein, they are more likely to support welfare state arrangements when they believe that today’s contributors will be tomorrow’s beneficiaries (van Oorschot 2000: 36): paying into a social security system makes sense when one can reasonably expect to profit from that system in the future, when others will contribute. Expectations of diffuse reciprocity and fairness are thus part of the proverbial “cement” that collates modern societies (Elster 2011; Manatschal 2015).

Conventionally, the academic literature on solidarity envisaged the nation-state as the quasi-natural framework to discuss such questions. European integration and, in particular, the advent of the Euro as a common currency of the Eurozone have made matters more complex (Carstensen and Schmidt 2018). Citizens entangled in Europe’s multilevel polity need to make sense of the new relations of solidarity that are unfolding beyond the boundaries of their home country (Gerhards et al. 2018; Hartner-Tiefenthaler et al. 2012). Discussing them becomes most pressing in times of crisis when a coordinated European response to a common challenge is needed (Ciornei and Ross 2021; Kyriazi et al. 2023).

In the wake of the sovereign debt crisis, heated debates arose in many EU member states about the necessity and legitimacy of transfer payments between economically stronger and weaker members of the Eurozone (Lengfeld and Kley 2021; Wallaschek 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic raised issues of not only direct medical aid and the transfer of patients across borders but also financial burden-sharing to deal with the socioeconomic fallout from the restrictions introduced to curb the spread of the virus (Heermann et al. 2023; Kneuer et al. 2022; Becker 2022; Heinelt and Münch 2022; Russo 2023). Those controversies testify to the unsettled status of reciprocity expectations. The same applies to conflicts over EU migration policy and the distribution of asylum seekers, which also affects the very foundations of solidarity in the EU (Gerhards et al. 2019; Lahusen and Grasso 2019; Münch 2018, 2022). Not least, when the Russian army invaded Ukraine in 2022, the EU and its member states were forced to respond to a scenario unseen in Europe since the Second World War: a country seeking to conquer a neighbouring sovereign state by military means and in blatant violation of international law. Faced with Russia’s aggression, the EU showed solidarity with Ukraine in terms of military, financial and humanitarian aid and provided shelter for millions of refugees (Allin and Jones 2022; Bang Carlsen et al. 2023; Bosse 2022; Handler 2022).

Thus, the EU is confronted with enormous and recurring challenges to the solidarity among its member states and citizens. Those challenges raise thorny issues of who owes what to whom, why and how it should be repaid (i.e. under which terms, with/without conditions). At the same time, it is evident that the EU still lacks the strong collective identity that bolsters the cohesion of nation-states in an effective manner (see Eder 2009; Kuhn 2015; Wodak and Boukala 2015), and a common public sphere (see, e.g. Trenz 2004; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2014), where expected standards of solidarity, reciprocity and fairness of exchanges could

be discussed across borders. Nevertheless, or maybe even because of this, conceptions and practices of solidarity in the EU have been studied extensively over the past years with a view to achieving cohesion (see, e.g. Grimmel and My Giang 2021; Lahusen 2020; Starke 2021; Vandenbroucke et al. 2017).

The existing literature has identified four types of actors involved in European solidarity relations that we can distinguish and that also point us to different levels of analysis. Starting from the top, there are studies of European solidarity that scrutinise beliefs, policies and actions at the level of EU institutions (e.g. Cohen 2018). Second, there is the member state level of analysis where solidarity is expressed by the words and deeds of national governments (e.g. Kaeding et al. 2022). Third, domestic parties and civil society groups have also been studied quite extensively and constitute a societal level of analysis (e.g. Durán Mogollón et al. 2021; Reinl and Wallaschek 2024). Fourth, there is the individual level of analysis where we find an enormous amount of studies on the attitudes that citizens display towards European solidarity and reciprocity (e.g. Lahusen and Grasso 2019; Lengfeld and Kley 2021).

At the individual level, information about the attitudes of citizens of EU member states (and even members of particular milieus or social groups within them) toward mutual aid is available from surveys. A particularly good source of information is the Eurobarometer survey. When EU citizens were asked about their preferences for a future EU society in 2030, 83 per cent of respondents stated that they would prefer more importance given to solidarity, while only 13 per cent emphasised individualism (Eurobarometer 2021b: 113). A Eurobarometer survey from 2018 asked citizens about their perception of the EU and their attitude towards the support of other member states in cases of economic crises, natural disasters and problems of guaranteeing a minimum living standard for the population (Eurobarometer 2018). The survey results indicate a high willingness among EU citizens to show solidarity across borders. However, there was less support for transborder solidarity in the case of the minimum living standard than in the case of the natural disaster. These findings indicate that citizens' support is conditional upon the perceived causes of the problem while the respective conditions are rendered more complex in the case of transnational solidarity. It is interesting to note that, indeed, European citizens seem to make context-dependent differentiations which largely echo the distinctions made in the theoretical academic literature on solidarity (see Genschel and Hemerijck 2018; Heermann et al. 2023; see also Chapter 2).

However, we still know little about how exactly EU citizens understand solidarity when it comes to transborder relations. They are context-dependent and thereby give solidarity a particular meaning for people, specific to the social environment they are living in. It is therefore unclear what EU citizens expect from their fellow citizens from other EU member states; and what they expect from other member states' governments or EU institutions when they use these terms in everyday conversations.

Therefore, our book looks for the empirical foundations of what the political philosopher Andrea Sangiovanni calls "reciprocity-based internationalism" (Sangiovanni 2013: 218). According to Sangiovanni, different principles of social justice

apply to different types of social and political institutions, depending on the context and the kind of social interaction at work there. Unlike traditional theories of social justice that discuss reciprocity and fairness in the framework of the nation-state, Sangiovanni includes international organisations and the EU, asking what reciprocity requires in these specific contexts. We take up Sangiovanni's framing of the reciprocity problem but give it an empirical twist. We are chiefly interested in what citizens think about transnational solidarity and how they justify or defend duties of reciprocity and fair treatment when challenged. The following questions guided our research endeavour:

- What are the solidarity-related expectations towards fellow Europeans, other EU member states and the EU institutions that citizens actually have?
- What do Europeans think they owe to each other?
- What kind and what extent of transnational reciprocity do they expect?
- What role do they think European political institutions should play in creating robust solidarity relations?
- What European-level policies do they think are required to achieve solidarity and, in the end, social cohesion?

Guided by these questions, we analysed how citizens debate issues of solidarity, reciprocity and fairness related to the European integration project, trying to uncover the reasons they have for their opinion. In this regard, recent studies on solidarity in Europe reveal shortcomings in that they tend to be based on either survey data (e.g. Bauer 2019; Heermann et al. 2023; Gerhards et al. 2019; Lengfeld and Kley 2021; Reinl et al. 2023; Verhaegen 2018), national parliamentary debates (e.g. Closa and Maatsch 2014) or the analysis of newspapers (e.g. Goldberg et al. 2021). We have learned a great deal from such studies: we know how parliamentarians debate solidarity and how journalists write about it; and we have learned which social groups are more likely to favour redistribution across borders. Yet neither media analysis nor large-N surveys give us access to the expectations and reasoning of the citizens themselves. Therefore, the research project on which this book is based employed focus group discussions among citizens to uncover ideas, related associations and arguments that people refer to in their collective reasoning about solidarity and which can lead to cohesion in the EU.¹ Thus, solidarity-related political reasoning is studied “at work” (cf. Krueger 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Nyumba et al. 2018; Hennink et al. 2020: 138–168).

Focus groups are a tool to observe reasoning through communicative interaction as the members of such a group are either cooperatively developing a shared understanding of the topics at hand or presenting and elaborating different ones – and maybe eventually agreeing that these are incompatible (for certain reasons). Thus, with the help of focus group discussions, we are able to carve out beliefs, styles of reasoning and arguments related to solidarity in Europe's multilevel polity that social sciences (and policy-makers) have not perceived or could only partially capture so far.

Our reflections about common reasoning in communicative interaction start from a particular axiomatic premise – namely that “human beings are storytelling

animals. [. . .] And if stories are important for us as individuals, then it also probably follows that stories must play an important role for groups and the collective action in which these groups engage, such as those present in the processes” (Jones et al. 2014: 1) of public debates. Therefore, the research on which this book relies is rooted in the tradition of the “argumentative turn” (see for debates about international relations, e.g. Risse 2000, 2004 and Müller 2004 and for debates about public policy, e.g. Fischer and Forester 1993 as well as Fischer and Gottweis 2012) and, in particular, is connected to the debates about narratives.

The latter once again encompasses a wide range of approaches (see, as a recent overview only for the area of public policy, Blum and Kuhlmann 2023). However, these approaches share, as a basic common understanding, that narratives usually represent “causal stories” (Stone 1989) “that indicate specific views of the world and of the relationship between cause and effect” (Barbehön et al. 2016: 241), because through “causal stories” different events, experiences or observations are placed in relation to one another. The term “causal stories” does not refer to causality in an objective scientific sense but to an understanding of relationships between causes and effects from the perspective of actors involved in communicative interactions. Therefore, it is important to underline that statements made in communicative interaction do not depict the world neutrally but rather constitute it in a particular way and thus create possibilities for interpretation and action (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 52). Arguing – which can ultimately lead to inherently meaningful narratives – is the medium through which actors try to impose their view of reality on others, suggest certain social positions and practices, and criticise alternative arrangements (Hajer 1993: 47).

We share the assumption of interpretive approaches that narratives are highly dependent upon social context and policy issues at stake, thus always situated in a specific time and a specific place. It is therefore unlikely to find exactly the same narrative in other places and historical circumstances. Yet, more abstract elements of narratives connected to key conceptions found during the analysis of the transcripts of the focus group discussions (see Chapter 13) might resemble each other across time and space. Such abstract elements of narratives can constitute *topoi* and *storylines* (see Chapter 14).

Topos (plural: *topoi*) is one “of the most widely used concepts from classical argumentation theory” (Žagar 2010: 3; for the use of this concept by policy scholars, see Münch 2024) which goes back to Aristotle (Smith 1997). *Topoi* refer to commonplaces that are used in communicative interaction because it is assumed by the speaker that they are considered meaningful and reasoned by other participants of the conversation (or the audience). In this way a statement that is made with reference to a particular commonplace does not need to be underpinned by further argumentation, because the person making the statement assumes that it is a *reasoned statement*. It is important to emphasise that commonplaces gain their relevance because they are the result of “a practice of reasoned argument” or “a shared social practice of argumentation” and as such “a shared form of social life” (Balkin 1996: 221). Such practices and forms of social life are remarkably diverse all over the world, and they are related to different temporal and societal contexts.

When a topos is cited, the reason given for a proposal usually remains implicit and needs to be reconstructed by the analyst. It says a lot about a particular context as to why a particular commonplace is used and why the related claim passes as a reasoned statement in a given group of speakers.

Storylines are equally context-dependent but go a few steps further. They usually contain much more than just one or two statements that are assumed to be well-grounded with convincing reasons.

Storylines “serve to position social actors and institutional practices in ongoing, competing narratives” (Fischer 2003: 87), and to order and re-order their understandings of the situation (Hajer 1995: 56). They serve as condensed versions of narratives or framings. To this we can add that storylines reflect the intertwined cognitive and emotional interpretations by [. . .] actors of what goes on around them.

(Verhoeven and Metzke 2022: 227)

Why do we care so much about the discursive and narrative dimension of European solidarity and do not, like much of the literature, explore individual attitudes through surveys or by controlled experiments under laboratory conditions? Our starting point was that societal conversations about solidarity have an independent effect on legitimacy and identity in the emergent European political community. This is because the formation of political identities and the legitimation of governance alike are discursive phenomena. In these discourses the very reasons for supporting a governance arrangement are communicated and critically debated (Steffek 2003; Schmidt 2008). Due to their dialogical nature, our focus groups allow us insights into public conversations about European governance going on in the respective countries. Entangled as they are in a conversation with others, focus group participants do not produce idiosyncratic statements and storylines. In the give and take of reasons, the participants draw from a repertoire of ideas, arguments and topoi shared in their political communities that is transmitted mainly, though not exclusively, through the mass media. While media debates are tilted towards elite speakers, our focus groups are in touch with the ideas and storylines as they are being (re-)produced in the midst of society.

As a post-national polity, the EU is a particularly interesting case to study solidarity relations because it cannot rely on common myths of origin, a shared language or all the cultural artefacts usually attributed to a nation. Rather, the European integration project is forward-looking in the sense that it pursues common goals and promises to realise jointly held values (Foret and Calligaro 2018; Manners 2008). “If Europe stands for anything, it is the completion of the Enlightenment project of democracy, rule of law, respect for the differences of others, and the principles of rational discourse and science” (Fligstein 2008: 178). Discourses about solidarity connect to this value base of European integration (Ross 2021; Saurugger and Thatcher 2019: 467). Studying such discourses is systematically important for our understanding of the European integration process because it gives us insights into

the emergence of a common European identity and the perceived legitimacy of the integration project.

This book is organised as follows. The next chapter is dedicated to our analytical framework and clarifies some key concepts that we discuss in this book. The discussion not only begins with cohesion and solidarity in the EU context but also considers reciprocity and fairness as they are so closely related to solidarity. Chapter 3 then zooms in on the methods used in our empirical research and on case selection. We explain how the focus group discussions were conducted and how we use them for analysis.

These opening chapters of the book lay the groundwork for the nine chapters that follow and in which country-by-country results of the focus group discussions are presented. All country chapters are structured in a similar manner: after a general introduction, the first section gives an overview of the country by briefly presenting its political system and some key figures on its population and economy.² The second section summarises political and public debates about European integration in the respective country. These sections outline the country-specific discursive context in which the focus group discussions are embedded. Finally, the third section of each country chapter presents core findings from the three focus group discussions conducted in the country. By using quotations from the focus groups, we show that there are different self-perceptions within the countries about the country's position in the EU, which are connected to the way people discuss solidarity, reciprocity and fairness. For example, the history of the countries as well as their size, the self-perception of economic strength and special relationships with other countries will be considered. The findings in this section are presented in the form of a descriptive overview to highlight common patterns that emerged among the focus groups participants in a country.

The nine country chapters are followed by Chapter 13. In this chapter, the results of the comparative analysis of the 27 focus group discussions are presented. The chapter starts with a general analysis of how solidarity and its conceptions are seen by the focus group participants. In further sections, we analyse how reasoned statements are linked to those conceptions and how the notions vary across scenarios. This discussion is complemented by Chapter 14, in which we present topoi used by the participants to underpin their statements and some country-specific storylines – which shed light on how people assess the specific situation of their country as an EU member in past, present and future.

The book concludes with a summary of our findings in Chapter 15. Against the backdrop of the research questions raised in the introduction, we consider perspectives on the future of European integration expressed by the focus groups participants and relate them to social cohesion of the EU, its possibilities and limits. We also point out implications of our findings for political projects, such as the proposal of a European-level unemployment insurance scheme. Our evidence clearly shows that citizens across Europe do not support this idea, for pragmatic reasons but also out of fairness considerations. Recognising and taking such sentiments into account are not only a central challenge for policy makers but also an opportunity for new debates – in both the public and academic spheres – about the future of the EU.

Notes

- 1 A recent study on European social citizenship (Busemeyer et al. 2023; Eick et al. 2023) also touching upon citizens' views of European social policies is a rarer example of complementing quantitative survey results with findings from focus group discussions.
- 2 Most country chapters were finished before November 2023. Therefore, more recent developments and events in the studied countries (such as national general elections) have not been considered in these chapters. Also, survey and statistical data were used to contextualise focus group discussions and thus do mostly precede the fieldwork.

2 Cohesion, solidarity, fairness and reciprocity

Clarifying the concepts in the EU context

Jared Sonnicksen

2.1 Introduction

The question of what holds a community together has routinely and continuously confronted politics and political thinkers.¹ Yet it is more current than ever, not least in the European Union (EU). A series of challenging political trends and recent crises have underlined both the political and social-scientific relevance of cohesion, from the Euro crises, growing migration and “Brexit” (see, e.g. Krunke et al. 2020; Lahusen 2020), to the COVID-19 pandemic (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2021). These crises have coincided with, and even intensified, ongoing challenges to established politics and polities. They include declining political trust and waves of populism in numerous countries, or growing “Euroscepticism” vis-à-vis the EU (see, e.g. Hooghe and Okolikj 2020; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

For decades, the European integration project has often been regarded as enjoying a broad “permissive consensus” among member state citizenries. Until the establishment of the EU in the early 1990s though, the European Communities had rather limited authority, exercising regulatory power in a much narrower scope of areas. Since then, the EU has expanded both powers and membership through several treaty revisions and enlargements. However, it has come to witness an increase in not only politicisation but also contestation. The palpable shift from loose consensus to a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks 2009) is directed at various European policies and even the entire EU as a polity. These challenges are reflected, for instance, in growing attention among EU scholars to potential *disintegration* (see, e.g. Jones 2018; Vollaard 2014), and possible reforms of the EU’s political system, or “constitution”, to cope with looming fragmentation (see, e.g. Bellamy 2019; Fabbrini 2019; Schmidt 2019).

It is against the backdrop that the research project underlying this edited volume sets out to explore cohesion and solidarity in the EU in general, and how fairness and reciprocity can contribute to their achievement in particular. This research interest renders it likewise necessary to address the enabling and constraining factors for achieving and maintaining solidarity and cohesion in a complex economic and political community. This chapter aims to clarify the concepts guiding this collaborative research endeavour. Taken together, these key concepts also provide a basic analytical framework for the comparative empirical investigation that follows.

It allows us to identify statements as pertaining to, for example solidarity or reciprocity, even when participants did not mention those terms explicitly in a focus group context. However, it does not define what solidarity means, or ought to mean, in the EU context. The analytical framework remains open to the interpretations of solidarity and reciprocity that citizens provide in the focus group discussions.

This collaborative research project was designed to inductively capture empirically existing conceptions of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity, mainly by prompting discussion among citizens in selected EU member states. Moreover, as guiding premise, the identifiable perceptions and orientations will reveal crucial insights into solidarity, its limits but also conditions and possibilities in the EU. The following chapter surveys – in a compact manner – the variety of meanings, understandings and usages of the key concepts as discussed in the academic literature. This discussion provides necessary orientation to facilitate the identification and categorisation of referents, ideas and argumentations that relate to, or reveal, understandings of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity.

In order to contextualise particular challenges to cohesion and solidarity in an ambiguous union of multiple peoples and states, the following presents a brief review of the EU as multilevel polity and in the context of recent crises. Subsequently, the third and fourth sections explore the guiding concepts, cohesion (on its own), and then solidarity, fairness and reciprocity. Solidarity as well as reciprocity and fairness can each independently entail multiple meanings (e.g. ethical, moral, legal, political) and dimensions (e.g. horizontal, vertical, temporal; interpersonal, intergroup, interstate). They also relate in various ways to each other, as well as to further cross-cutting concepts and, most notably here, cohesion. Thus, it is necessary first to untangle this conceptual knot, elaborating on each concept individually for one and in their specifically *political* senses for another. Building on this conceptualisation, the fifth section provides a more systematic overview of the concepts' meanings in their multiple dimensions and their multifaceted interlinkages. The chapter concludes with a summary and an outlook for applying these concepts in the case studies collected here.

2.2 Revisiting the EU as multilevel polity in the wake of recent crises

The EU constitutes a complex and ambivalent political system that differs fundamentally from other regional integration organisations in the world. This applies for many reasons, not least given the high degree of institutionalisation of its own supranational institutions (e.g. Sbragia 2008) for one, and its structural and functional interconnection with governmental actors at multiple levels of its member states (e.g. Piattoni 2009) for another. Furthermore, the EU institutions as well as decision-making and regulatory processes encompass both *supranational* and *intergovernmental* elements. This variety is reflected not only in polity and politics but also in diverse policy-making patterns (Heinelt and Knodt 2011; Heinelt and Münch 2018; Wallace et al. 2015). Although widely considered *sui generis*, or in a classificatory league of its own, the EU has nevertheless – or perhaps rather for

this reason – been framed from various disciplinary and theoretical-conceptual perspectives (see, e.g. already Puchala 1971). The conceptualisations of the EU span from international organisation to unique arrangement of multilevel governance, or rather a political system (see, e.g. Pollack 2005). Yet, despite its distinctiveness, the EU exhibits many governmental features akin to other polities constituted as states on account of its scope and trajectory of powers, “checks and balances”, and a popularly elected parliament (see, e.g. Hix and Høyland 2011: 2–16; Sonnicksen 2017: 509–517). At the same time, which dimension or policy area is considered affects whether or to which extent the EU resembles a system of government and multilevel, even (quasi)-federal, system (for overview, see Kreppel 2011).

The idiosyncratic character of the EU nevertheless represents an, perhaps the, overarching circumstance that links to multiple political, societal as well as scholarly debates. One especially well-known and long-standing debate pertains to the democratic dilemma or “deficit” of the EU (already e.g. Abromeit 1998; Weiler et al. 1995). Leaving normative perspectives on limits and possibilities of EU democratisation (cf., e.g. Grimm 2015 vs. Habermas 2015) aside, the widely attested challenges for democracy in the EU have immediate relevance to the context at hand. They relate to the thorny question of how to fulfil requisites of democratic legitimacy. Yet, they also concern difficult questions of how to determine the appropriate standards in the first place vis-à-vis an unconventional Union: that is not a state, but “much more” than an international organisation. The EU combines states and peoples under the linchpin of a common, albeit nationally derivative, Union citizenship² with rights to free movement of goods, capital, services and persons in an internal market with extensively integrated policy areas (see, e.g. Beetz et al. 2017; Hurrelmann and DeBardeleben 2009; Ronzoni 2017). Moreover, with the different conceptions of the EU come different conceptions of state and popular sovereignty and, with that, diverse understandings, preferences and contestation on what the EU *is* and *should be* and *do*, respectively (for overview, see Beetz 2019). In addition to complicating standards of legitimacy (see, e.g. Steffek 2019), these ambivalent circumstances pose fundamental, though perspective-dependent, implications for solidarity in the EU multilevel polity (Bolleyer and Reh 2012). These challenges have only intensified in the wake of recent crises (e.g. Scharpf 2015), and so has the relevance of coping with them. Political and scholarly debates reveal the return of reform discussions to the political agenda. Among other questions and interests, there is renewed impetus to counteract disintegrative tendencies as well as to improve democratic legitimacy and governance efficiency and also sociopolitical cohesion. This figures into the context of the edited volume at hand and its underlying research project in general, and the present chapter in particular, which sets out to elaborate on key concepts.

2.3 Cohesion: untangling the conceptual knot

Cohesion is a multifaceted term with various types and variable definitions (see, e.g. Fonseca et al. 2019). In the EU context alone, already the Treaties refer to cohesion not only as a main principle of integration but also as a policy goal in

multiple respects, for example the promotion of “economic, social and territorial cohesion [. . .] among Member States” (Art. 3(3) TEU). At a basic semantic level, cohesion implies “binding together”, as opposed to diffusion, fragmentation or atomisation, for instance. It may also imply unity and accord, as opposed to fracture and discord.

With regard to its societal relevance, cohesion has been commonly referred to as the “glue” of a society (see, e.g. recent overview Bertelsmann 2017), an inference likewise commonly attributed to *societal institutions* (see, e.g. Searle 2005) or to *social capital* (see, e.g. Putnam 2000).³ Institutions and social capital are undoubtedly important factors that also bear substantial terminological and phenomenal overlap. However, cohesion in a society – or a political community for that matter – extends further. Indeed, cohesion may be conceived, and measured, by the range and intensity of networks and links between individuals and groups, but it also involves patterns of attitudes, memberships and behaviour (Friedkin 2004). This points to the relevance of micro- or individual-level factors on the one hand, and the complexity of capturing cohesion in larger populations or at country-wide scale on the other, not to mention in a multilevel polity like the EU. This complexity is certainly reflected in research on cohesion in the EU, for instance, in a recent conceptual framework on gauging cohesion by measuring citizen attitudes (criterion: support for EU integration); trust (criterion: support for transnational solidarity); identity (criterion: affinity to EU) and behaviour (criterion: “Europhile” voting) (Reinl and Braun 2022). More generally, social cohesion is an intensely researched subject of (social) psychology and the social sciences (see, e.g. Chan et al. 2006). Yet, underlining its ambiguity further, cohesion also may stand for an outcome, for instance of integration, or conversely a prerequisite to the achievement of the latter. It may thus constitute a property, a process, product or a pattern.

One approach to gauging cohesion focuses on interpersonal relations, typically construed as *dyadic*, in groups and networks, by which the respective attachments and connectivity – for example nodes and interactions within a group or network – are assessed (see, e.g. Moody and White 2003). While this relation-centred subtype and respective approaches allow for capturing cohesion in groups or even in local communities, it also reveals several limits. For one, even with regard to relational cohesion, the strength of cohesion, the “stickiness” of social bonds – for example the holding together, willingness to cooperate or assist others – may relate to the intensity and frequency of interconnections, but this is not necessarily the case, as for instance Granovetter’s seminal “the strength of weak ties” (1973) illustrated. More fundamentally, cohesion also entails an *ideational* dimension, which in turn comprises a variety of referents, such as attitudes, beliefs or a feeling of belongingness. Beyond externalised actions and interactions, what holds people together in a community – and not least a polity – includes common norms and principles, “shared beliefs” (Bar-Tal 2000), as well as storylines which can be uncovered, for example, in (group) discussions (see Chapter 3 in this volume) about the common past, present and future. These ideational features take on special relevance for larger-scale cohesion. Intimate group ties are harder to experience at the national and certainly supranational levels, where for example a common past, the belongingness to a people, etc., needs to be more abstractly (re-)imagined.

Considering a particular community or polity, cohesion can be conceived as the corresponding achievement of unity, integration and common welfare (broadly understood), all of which are underpinned by an ideational dimension (see, e.g. Fonseca et al. 2019). The latter would include the aforementioned referents (e.g. storylines, common identity/-ies). Cohesion so conceived then may be measured by various indicators, such as anti-discrimination legislation, social welfare and other redistributive instruments, as well as by patterns of trust and support in various “others.” Consequently, cohesiveness could – and often seems to – imply a rather high degree and/or extent of *unity* and *equality* and rather low degree and/or extent of *difference* and *asymmetry*.

While admittedly simplified, this dualism indeed points to a widely discussed challenge to cohesion with diversity (see, e.g. Hooghe 2007; Portes and Vickstrom 2018). Briefly surmised, “internal” societal changes like individualisation, cultural and socioeconomic diversity (and inequality) and “external” ones through globalisation and Europeanisation have coincided with changing patterns of, and often declines in, cohesion, social and political support and trust (see, e.g. Armingeon and Schädel 2015; Diskin et al. 2005; Newton and Zmerli 2011). Essentially, it would seem that manifold diversity poses a challenge for social and political cohesion, but one that must be endured, particularly in a democratic polity. This applies especially given the generally positive normative expectations attributed to cohesion in the form of civic commitment, mutual recognition and tolerance, participation, and/or trust in institutions and other people. Whether for empirical or normative reasons, cohesion is commonly deemed necessary for a democratic polity. This underlines all the more so the relevance of cohesion against the backdrop of multiple challenges confronting the EU.

In any political community, cohesion carries connotations and implications related to government as well as to the citizenry. However, this seems particularly relevant for a democratic community such as a modern state (see, e.g. Dahl 1983; Lorwin 1971), and not at least a large-scale, multilevel and multimember state union like the EU (see, e.g. Zuleeg 1997). At the same time, though, multiple transitions in democratic polities and societies have spurred on renewed political debate, as well as social science attention to, political cohesion. There appears to be particular concern for the factors related to decline in as well as the maintenance of and potentials for (re-)strengthening of cohesion (see, e.g. Bellamy et al. 2019), for instance as to whether these lie with the respective societies (e.g. patterns of trust, social capital, civic engagement), with political institutions (e.g. governmental bodies, party and voting systems, channels of participation) or rather policies (e.g. means and ways of (re-)distribution, a social safety net).

In the EU context, cohesion has long been designated a specific policy area. Cohesion policy is dedicated to reducing structural, and especially, regional discrepancies, while the related measures and programmes have also contributed significantly to the development of EU multilevel governance (see, e.g. Hooghe 1996; Heinelt and Petzold 2018; Molle 2007). On the other hand, cohesion is also expressed more generally by the EU treaties as part of the wider goals of European integration (see again, e.g. Art. 3(3) TEU). Both the specific cohesion policy instruments (for their development over time, see Petzold 2022: 123–127) and the more

general cohesion goals of the EU reflect multiple relevant dimensions of cohesion. The former suggests concrete measures geared toward convergence and reducing disparities among member states; the latter invokes more diffuse images of social, economic, territorial and political unity.

Finally, cohesion in a polity relates to social ties among citizens, respective supporting institutions, and a range of ideational and attitudinal orientations linking people together in a community. Identities, it almost goes without saying, surely play a pivotal role (see, e.g. Tyler and Blader 2001). However, like solidarity, cohesion entails commitments. Hence specific notions, perspectives and expectations are necessary for cohesion, such as fairness and reciprocity. Their prevalence or deficiency may relate to whether institutions, laws, other groups or people are deemed trustworthy, just and reliable and thus to the extent to which various political actors, groups and individuals are prepared to work and hold together.

As solidarity perhaps most approximates cohesion, especially in its modern sense of “binding together” (see already again Durkheim 1893 [1967], as well as e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966: 191ff., 223), the following section addresses first the proverbial “binds” of solidarity and then proceeds to a discussion of reciprocity and fairness.

2.4 Solidarity, fairness and reciprocity: unpacking the concepts

Solidarity has overarching relevance to, and potential overlaps with, fairness and reciprocity. The term solidarity itself conveys, at the most basic level, a notion of “wholeness” (lat. *solidum*). In elementary semantic sense, it may even be equated with cohesion in general but also linked with union, communality, mutuality or support, among others. Hence, multiple overlaps between solidarity (as a kind of “togetherness”), reciprocity (as “give and take”) and even integration (as bringing parts together towards a whole) become immediately recognisable. At the same time, solidarity touches upon further fundamental concepts, principles and phenomena related to the nature of social *bonds* or *ties*. These, in turn, have been conceived from various theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, for example philosophical, theological, sociological, psychological or political. Cross-cutting the variety of perspectives are also different analytical approaches to, and understandings of, solidarity as a descriptive or rather normative concept. By and large though, solidarity as well as fairness and reciprocity shares a general attribution of interpersonal/interrelational and of ethical qualities. This becomes further evident in juxtaposition with such orientations and behaviour like competition or “fending for oneself.” The following provides a compact delineation of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity.

2.4.1 Solidarity

While drawing on its multifaceted historical and ideational development (see, e.g. Banting and Kymlicka 2017a; Fetchenhauer et al. 2006; Große Kracht 2017; Stjernø 2005), solidarity may, in short, be said to signify a condition or outcome (something achieved), a norm or value guiding individual and especially collective

action (something pursued), and a respective set of attitudes or orientations (something thought, felt and/or perceived). It may be *institutionalised* in various informal (e.g. most traditionally, kinship and friendship) or formal settings (e.g. farmers' cooperatives, trade unions or regimes of social insurance). These represent but a few familiar manifestations of solidarity.

Solidarity has only relatively recently been defined as an explicit concept, that is early to mid-19th century and initially in France (Große Kracht 2017; Hayward 1959). Within a short period of time, the concept proliferated across a wide spectrum of community-oriented ideas and ideologies, spanning from Catholicism to Communism. However, as an empirical phenomenon, it had, of course, long “existed before the idea was formulated” (Stjernø 2005: 25). What drives humans to follow not only individual but also both group “selfishness” and “altruism” has been explored by evolutionary biology (see, e.g. Dawkins 1976). However, beyond species survival, precisely this evolved or “natural” disposition to pursue “mutual aid” (Kropotkin 1902 [1915]) has proved elemental to the theorisation of cooperation, and in political settings especially *continuous reciprocal* cooperation (Axelrod 1984). Like in politics in general, “institutions matter” also for solidarity. Rule-based behaviour is a key factor for communities and the maintenance of mutual cooperative action, such as for regulating and sharing common resources, and this is part of “covenants with or without a sword” (Ostrom et al. 1992), that is in the presence or absence of hierarchic coercion.

Consequently, solidarity is neither explainable by micro-level individual preferences alone, nor solely by macro-level structural conditions. It rather transcends persons and polities and serves a pivotal part in relations within groups as well as the social order (see, e.g. Hechter 1987). Solidarity also reveals the limits of strictly rational-choice type premises. Accordingly, the pursuit of solidaric-type cooperation is not merely individual but rather group-oriented, while further motives like commitments, norms and roles – that is in addition to and beyond cost-benefit calculation – also tend to be at play (Smith and Sorrell 2014). The (social-)psychological *in-group* factors of solidarity suggest its universality among humans (i.e. found throughout human time and space). Yet they appear equally bound to constraints in orientations and practices of solidarity, as solidarity – akin to other prosocial biases and empathy – tends to be stronger within groups sharing commonality and similarity (Billig and Tajfel 1973; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Yamagishi and Mifune 2009). Thus, solidarity or mutual cooperation and support are at once inherently human as are the demarcations of in- and out-groups along the lines of belongingness and favouritism of own groups, which may take various forms (e.g. related to age, gender, culture, territory, profession, status or class).

Yet how belongingness, the *internal* membership and *external* boundaries of groups are defined varies enormously. This in turn connects to the evolution of solidarity in the European context. While multiple facets have been reframed as “WEIRD”-ness (i.e. Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Developed) of Europe (Heinrich et al. 2010), particularly noteworthy here seem to be the establishment of modern statehood along with the extended abstraction and corresponding organisation of rule, society and peoplehood (see also e.g. Anderson 1983).

Another critical antecedent has been attested to the comparatively early (i.e. several centuries ago) disbanding of predominantly kinship-based social institutions, fostering not only individualism but also *impersonal* prosocial orientations (Schulz et al. 2019). Essentially, one can derive a constitutive importance of the dimension of political development for the conception, though also institutional organisation, of solidarity. Accordingly, many other later disruptions and transformations in societal order like industrialisation, mass employment and poverty, mass literacy, mass enfranchisement factor into the rise and consolidation of modern warfare and also of the welfare state by the mid-20th century in Europe (Obinger and Petersen 2017). It is a simplification, but hardly a stretch, to surmise that European statehood and nationalism culminated in previously unfathomable violence in two “Great Wars” and much further-reaching extents of community ties, citizenship and respective institutionalisations of solidarity. Moreover, a *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen* (Bloch 1935 [1962]), the parallel but uneven development of modern nation and welfare statehood, ties into a complexly bounded legacy for the onset of European integration and European solidarity.

With a more specific view to political systems, solidarity can be differentiated by types as well as levels (see, e.g. Gould 2020: 26–32; Starke 2021: 21–25). Moreover, concepts of political communities can likewise be defined at different levels such as local, regional or (trans)national, which has implications for notions of solidarity, its extension and limits (see, e.g. Mason 2000). The re-scaling of solidarity in European countries transpired – in the grand schemes of things, quite rapidly, albeit variably – with manifold internal differentiation of societal groups, roles and cleavages and at multiple levels (e.g. local, regional, national and even inter- and supranational), as well as with democratisation, for much of the 20th century. Incidentally, precisely these processes of differentiation and stratification elicited Durkheim’s seminal analyses of modern societies, and his delineation of a shift from “mechanical” solidarity in traditional societies to “organic” solidarity based on division of labour, new forms of interdependence and also comparatively weaker and yet much more diverse social ties (Durkheim 1893 [1967]; see further on the origins of the concept, e.g. Prainsack and Buyx 2017: 1–16; Große Kracht 2017; Schmale 2017; Stjernø 2005).

Thus, solidarity becomes underpinned by political and socioeconomic institutions as well as ideas and ideologies that link it with notions of equality and justice (Banting and Kymlicka 2017b: 4; Laitinen and Pessi 2015). More specifically, different types of solidarity tend to entail different kinds of orientations and commitments. We can distinguish “human solidarity” with unidirectional support for fellow human beings in distress from “civic solidarity” with reciprocal duties of engagement with public institutions and to the (republican, not just social) community of citizens, or “political solidarity” as commitments to political issues, rights, justices and other causes (Scholz 2015). The aforementioned motives and limits of solidarity may be writ large for the macro level (on dynamics of “ideation” and “scaling up” from micro to macro level, see Kamkhaji and Radaelli 2021: 16ff.). The increased internal diversity of modern European societies and also cross-border commitments in a European Union pose fundamental challenges for achieving and

maintaining solidarity. The latter in turn represented one of the main motives of European integration in the first place, given the overarching goal of overcoming interstate animosity and conflict.

This discussion shows that solidarity in modern polities is already multidimensional, for example horizontal, vertical, temporal (from current to cross-generational), institutional. Clearly, solidarity also relates to various referents, for example individuals, groups, demos or *demoi*, regions, states, intergovernmental, supranational, policy-specific. Furthermore, this multidimensionality becomes magnified in the EU (see, e.g. Knodt and Tews 2014), which has deepened integration and widened membership over time, while its complex nature raises fundamental questions – such as those about the “democratic deficit” – to which standards for solidarity are also relevant (see, e.g. Sangiovanni 2013).

Turning to our empirical research project specifically, the above review already reveals an enormous complexity of the concept, which is informative, but also requires a reduction. For these purposes, we do not propose an elaborate typology of solidarity. Instead, we opt to extrapolate a dichotomy with two fundamental conceptions of solidarity: solidarity as support (i.e. unilateral or unidirectional) and solidarity with the expectation of reciprocity. Solidarity as support refers to practices of aid without explicit expectation of return (whether immediate or future) and certainly without formal entitlements. This type of solidarity finds expression in providing assistance to others, for instance, in emergencies and natural disasters, or for underprivileged groups in need (e.g. an oppressed minority, a marginalised group). In such cases, support tends to be one-sided and is often understood as unconditional (“give without take” or without expectation of return, etc.). Moreover, support is voluntary, which does not preclude a sense of humanitarian or otherwise ethical commitment (but it is not a legal or institutionalised duty). In addition, such practices of solidarity as support – which may be ad hoc, situational, etc. – do not require strong social bonds and are comparatively less likely to create them. On the other hand, solidarity as a reciprocal relationship can be conceived instead as involving exchange relationships between equals. Members (or those “belonging”) to a reciprocal solidaric relationship may be individuals and also states or other political communities and organisations. Practices of this solidarity type tend to involve mutuality and thus a legitimate expectation – at least potentially – of assistance or aid in future cases of need. This expectation, moreover, is more likely to be underpinned by legal or otherwise more formally institutionalised entitlement. Typical examples of this kind of solidarity generally find expression in welfare states, and unemployment as well as public health or even life insurance schemes, and also various professional cooperatives. In turn, this warrants more conceptual clarification of reciprocity.

2.4.2 Reciprocity

Reciprocity represents a key element or dimension of manifold interpersonal and societal relationships and is often linked with solidarity, cohesion and fairness. Under the Common Provisions of the EU Treaty, reciprocity is explicitly

mentioned only in the context of “*reciprocal* rights and obligations” between the EU and “neighbouring countries” and other states (Art. 8 (2) TEU; reiterated in Art. 217 TFEU pertaining to third countries and international organisations). However, reciprocity applies implicitly as well as much more broadly and principally to the EU treaties. Indeed, treaties in international law represent an expression of “reciprocal”, mutual recognition, obligations and bindingness between contractual parties, from constraining conflict (e.g. arms reductions) to facilitating cooperation (e.g. trade agreements; Keohane 1986). Reciprocity in these legal senses has characterised the foundations of integration among EU member states and its development from the outset (see, e.g. Hallström 2000). However, the general relevance of reciprocity, and in relation to other norms and orientations, solidarity and fairness in particular, extends further and deeper.

In semantic terms, *reciprocal* indicates a “back and forth” in movement, or the inverse of something like a number in mathematics. Transferred to social relationships, it implies further mutuality, which finds formal expression most typically in contracts, exchange agreements or recognition of rights and duties and also more informally like in exchanges of gifts, favours or aid. Furthermore, in addition to concrete actions, reciprocity involves *expectation* – be it underpinned by codification in law, contract or otherwise formal agreement and also informally regulated and/or institutionalised as in the senses of *do ut des*, *quid pro quo* or “give and take.” Reciprocity thus requires giving things, providing services, recognising others in expectation of gifts, services, recognition or other things in return. Moreover, the facets of *anticipation* as well as *comparison* are fundamental to reciprocity (see, e.g. Gächter et al. 2012). It may take various forms, also depending on particular relationships and contexts, such as in terms of time (e.g. proximate or distant future, gauged against the past), type (e.g. what kinds of goods, services, trade-offs) or obligation (e.g. more or less binding, more concrete or rather abstract and possibilistic).

Against this backdrop, reciprocity can immediately appear rather economic and transactional in character and, thus, easily invites associations with rational, utility-oriented perspectives on interactions and exchanges (see, e.g. Falk and Fischbacher 2006). Extending further, reciprocity may even be construed as lying at the heart of social exchange theories (see, e.g. Blau 1964) and of pivotal interest to the evolution of cooperation, spanning from social groups to complex societies (see, e.g. Gintis 2000). Indeed, the approach of “tit-for-tat”, that is taking similar responses to others such as to cooperate or defect, has proved a defining part of Axelrod’s theory of the evolution of cooperation (Axelrod 1984). This example shows that reciprocity can be positive or rewarding (e.g. offering a gift, returning a favour) as well as negative or retaliatory (e.g. having revenge, “eye for an eye”). Though reciprocity can surely be framed and examined with rational-actor and other *instrumentalist* type theories and perspectives, it still seems to commonly entail a moral dimension and even constitute a veritably timeless and universal norm (Gouldner 1960; see also, e.g. Elster 1989; Lister 2011). The notion of “return in kind” generally transcends myriad interpersonal, social and societal contexts, but its particular manifestations and understandings may vary greatly.

Thus, reciprocity should also be conceived as embedded in complex social contexts and structures. They can encompass different dimensions and levels as well as intensity of interlinkage, which also can facilitate the emergence and/or maintenance of mutual benefits, obligations and rights, and thus solidarity (Molm 2010; Scholz 2015). The types of relations of reciprocity bear likewise relevance for not only interpersonal but also intergroup and wider society and institutional trust (see Eschweiler et al. 2019). While obviously not synonymous with trust, reciprocity – as expectations and reliability of mutual support, cooperation, and similar, whether in specific or more diffuse forms and understandings – appears to make up an important dimension of trust in political communities as well (e.g. Eschweiler et al. 2019; Rothstein 2013). How these relations of reciprocity are structured, institutionalised and perceived are thus also pivotal to perceptions of fairness in a conventional political system. They become more complex, indeed complicated, in the case of the EU.

2.4.3 Fairness

With fairness, we face yet again a term with multiple meanings and associations. At the same time, it represents perhaps the most challenging concept to address here – that is in the context of a cross-European study – as it finds quite different counterparts in other languages (see Annex 6). Most fundamental among them is *justice*, which is not the exact same as fairness, though it corresponds with a number of dimensions or aspects related to justice. “Fair” in its etymological origins – which, incidentally unlike cohesion, solidarity, reciprocity or justice, does not derive from Greek or Latin, but rather Old Norse and Old English – actually referred to beauty, light, and/or agreeableness (one thinks of, e.g. “fair weather”; see Hackett Fischer 2012). From this basis, it was not a far step toward its further evolved sense of “decency” (see also, e.g. *eerlijkheid*, honesty, in Dutch for fairness) and the rather common-knowledge referent in competitions of “fair play”, as opposed to “foul play”, which emerged already several hundred years ago.

Moreover, in English common law, many principles of which became adopted in the United States Constitution of the late 18th century (see, e.g. the 6th amendment), fairness became a standard for conducting “unblemished” or “unbiased” trials, and thus a fundamental part of *due process* (Langford 2009). It is strongly related to the imperative of treating like cases alike. The right to a fair trial with, for instance, impartiality of judges, the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof laid upon the state, is meanwhile recognised as a universal right. It is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Art. 10) as well as European (Art. 6) Conventions on Human Rights. The notions of “fair trial” and “fair play” reveal a fundamentally common *procedural* denominator. At the same time, fairness in competition or trials does not focus on, nor necessarily require certain *outcomes*. It instead implies *processes* that follow *rules* which apply *equally* to every contestant, participant or defendant. Understood accordingly, fairness involves protection against *undue* bias, discrimination or preference, while procedures conforming to the requisites of fairness so construed – and accepted – may receive

consent and legitimacy, even when the resultant outcomes are unfavourable (see, e.g. MacCoun 2005). Perceptions and understandings of fairness thus also serve as constraints, even in otherwise competitive settings (see, e.g. Kahneman et al. 1986). This in turn reveals a major dimension of fairness as not only the equality of opportunity but also *procedural justice*.

However, fairness, even if so construed, must still entail some further substantive and moral facets than the consistent application of the rules alone, for instance since “bad” rules – even if applied consistently – would hardly be deemed fair (Hooker 2005). Fairness implies a grounding in morality and a necessity of justifications of actions, decisions, judgements and even arguments or ways of thinking, which may or may not be preferable to all but at least comprehensible and *reasonable* (see, e.g. Scanlon 1998). Furthermore, fairness may also be conceived as requiring some form of (re-)distribution. The seminal theory by Rawls of justice “as fairness” (1958, 1971) underlines the need for social institutions to serve equality and liberty which guarantee equality of opportunity but also a certain degree of *distributive justice*. The fairness of allocations, not only of material resources, but also of powers – for example among levels and branches of government – and of rights takes on a particular relevance for political communities.

What is fair in (re-)distributive matters may open further-reaching questions and even underpin theories of solidarity and social justice. Fairness in distribution would consequently pertain to the procedure leading to an allocation (e.g. of power, wealth, other resources) following legitimate rules. It also involves the limitation or conformity of the actually achieved distribution within certain limits or bounds. That this is the case relates to the even ordinary and quotidian, conscious or unconscious, application of ethical standards in human interactions, by which morality and indeed *fairness* of actions and interactions as well as the contributions of various “others” are assessed, ranging from personal or more proximate arrangements of mutual cooperation to the broader societal context (Baumard 2016; Fiske 2011). As such, fairness in communities also links to notions, norms and institutions and practices of reciprocity as well as solidarity.

2.5 Cohesion in a political community: fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

As shown earlier, cohesion carries largely positive connotations, given that it is typically deemed a desirable, if not necessary quality for the viability of a political community. Normative considerations admittedly motivated the research project presented in this edited volume, too. It essentially takes as granted the importance of – at least certain extents of – cohesion for the effectiveness and legitimacy of modern governance. However – and here in stark contrast to the concepts of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity – cohesion fails to suggest an individual-based charge or duty. Fairness, reciprocity and solidarity may stand for qualities that can be attributed to a particular populace, rule arrangement, institution or even entire system, as is the case with cohesion. Yet, they each may also prescribe certain kinds of individual and/or collective behaviour as well as its respective expectation: for

example to act or “play” fairly, to reciprocate a deed or contribution, to have or show solidarity with others, etc. The same cannot really be said of cohesion (e.g. one can hardly “cohere”). It appears rather to comprise a (structural) outcome and thus is situated at a different level of conceptualisation and analysis.

Moving forward, cohesion – again, while also a normatively loaded concept – should be understood for our purposes chiefly as a *descriptive* concept. Furthermore, cohesion is conceived here as an overarching phenomenon of interest, and a kind of “umbrella” term for several concepts, each with several dimensions and various points of reference. Accordingly, we may even think of the other concepts as *sources* that contribute to cohesion. This bears conceptual overlaps with other frameworks, which treat solidarity as one dimension of cohesion, though along with other indicators like support and voting behaviour that can also be measured through survey data (cf. again most recently, e.g. Reinl and Braun 2022). However, we depart from such approaches as well, as the analytical interest and potential contribution here lie more in mapping conceptualisations and understandings related to cohesion. Again, cohesion encompasses more than types of (inter-)actions and institutions, as the “glue” of a political community includes many other diffuse or intangible and ideational components like identities. Nevertheless, the analytical focus in this book lies with assessing solidarity along with its supporting concepts, in the EU, and this for several reasons: for one, on account of their crucial relevance for *political* cohesion, for another given the relative lack of their assessment in connection with EU cohesion.⁴ Accordingly, and building on the prior conceptual elaboration, the following provides a more systematic overview of these key concepts, their respective dimensions and points of reference. This provides a common conceptual basis for their subsequent operationalisation for the focus group discussions carried out in nine EU member states and presented in this volume.

The concepts of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity are each not only multivalent but also multidimensional. The dimensions refer to interactions, interconnections and interrelations. They can be structured by governmental, administrative and other public institutions, formal and informal rules, policies, among other things. Their multidimensionality applies for the context of any political system but becomes more complex in a democratic, and all the more so a multilevel one. In short, these dimensions of the respective sociopolitical relationships can be summarised first and foremost as *vertical* and *horizontal*, the former between the state and citizenry, the latter among the population, between citizens and between (civic) groups. Cross-cutting the two dimensions is time. For instance, various relations, orientations and expectations of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity may be based on past, present, and/or future behaviour and actions. Moreover, the supranational and intergovernmental character of the EU extends both the vertical and horizontal dimensions to the relationship between the EU and its member states (through also their sub-units and potentially citizens directly) and between the member states (potentially also their citizenries), respectively. Accordingly, our coding frame is designed not only based on the specification of the concepts but also with particular regard to levels and reasoning in solidarity relations (see Chapter 3).

Secondly, solidarity, fairness and reciprocity each share a fundamental sense of commitment, albeit implying different kinds of duties or obligations. They can be summarised as more *formal* (e.g. procedural based) or rather more *substantive* (e.g. outcome based) ones.

Thirdly, in addition to duties, these concepts are grounded in *rights*, particularly in a modern democratic, rule-of-law polity as well in the intergovernmental arena of relations between (semi-)sovereign states. These rights can be surmised as based on or emanating from *equality* (e.g. of citizens and/or of states), or rather from a norm of *differentiation* (e.g. adaptation to or accommodation of differences, inequalities in particular). At the same time, there are a number of principles and other normative or ideational referents that overlap the concepts of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity, that is ones that serve as common points of reference, norms appealed to, and similar in the context of these key concepts such as equality, justice or constituency, to name a few. In our coding scheme, the category of “reasoned statements” refers to these supplemental norms and concepts.

2.6 Conclusion and outlook

This chapter, along with the edited volume as a whole, is concerned with cohesion and solidarity in the EU, a topic of not only political but also far-reaching relevance for political science analysis. The related state of the art encompasses copious studies. They include ones investigating patterns of European political attitudes (e.g. pro-, sceptic- vs. anti-integration), support and trust as well as identities. They provide, moreover, invaluable insights in order to gauge European cohesion, its levels and differences in different member states or variably defined socioeconomic groups. At the same time, there remains, again, much reason to explore further and delve deeper into citizens’ actual understandings of pivotal concepts, notions and ideas related to cohesion. In other words, it is imperative to find out more about what “they say and think”, and what this reveals about nothing less than conditions, which include limits as much as enabling possibilities, of cohesion in the EU. Of particular interest are how solidarity, fairness, reciprocity and related expectations and perceptions connect to cohesion in the EU, not least in the light of the current state of affairs and challenges. To this end though, and given their multivalence and complexity, it has been especially necessary to delineate these key concepts and provide a more systematic overview. This served to facilitate operationalising the concepts for the focus group discussions carried out in the case study countries, thus providing a basic analytical framework (see Chapters 3 and 13).

The preceding exploration should make evident that the EU as a polity poses challenges, indeed complications, to the assessment – and certainly the realisation – of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity on account of the particular character of this multilevel, multimember state polity. At the same time, the key concepts vary of course in different disciplinary contexts. They likewise differ in other languages, certainly nominally, and also vary to certain extents in potential connotations. These circumstances have posed specific challenges for a collaborative research project carried out in multiple EU member states. This thus reveals

the need for – and hopefully achieved value of – the conceptualisation undertaken here. Accordingly, we have attempted to explore, first briefly the EU polity and then more elaborately the key concepts, also so that they may “travel” across the different cases. This potential for travel becomes possible, indeed likely, through capturing the varieties of meanings of the key concepts. Consequently, if not general notions of solidarity or fairness, but a *particular conception* of solidarity or a specific *sense* of fairness can be assessed in multiple groups and discussions. The preceding analysis lays no claim to be exhaustive or definitive. It does however lay a groundwork that enables gathering and assessing perceptions and understandings in different groups and country cases –to determine when and which not only different things are *said* but also similar ideas are *meant* and expectations *shared*. As a result, we might just find more cohesion among Europeans in understandings and perceptions of what does and should hold them together.

Notes

- 1 This chapter benefitted greatly from discussions with colleagues involved in the HEU-REC research project, and especially multiple rounds of feedback from the editors. In addition to my deep gratitude to them, I extend thanks to my colleagues at the Institute of Political Science, RWTH Aachen University, who participated in the colloquium dedicated to critical discussion of this chapter.
- 2 See Art. 9 TEU: “Every national of a Member State shall be a citizen of the Union. Citizenship of the Union shall be *additional* to and not replace national citizenship”, (emphasis added); reiterated in Art. 20 TEU.
- 3 For an analysis on the conceptual development of “social capital” towards its association with a “public good” for one (to which Putnam [2000] contributed significantly), and its divergence from original sociological meanings for another, see, for example Portes (1998).
- 4 In contrast, Sangiovanni (2007) has notably contributed normative analyses of the potential of reciprocity as normative standard for justice in the EU (though also in international politics).

3 Exploring how Europeans understand solidarity in the EU

A focus group approach

Inga Gaižauskaitė, Björn Egner, Hubert Heinelt, Jan Kotýnek Krotký, and Jared Sonnicksen

To investigate what European Union (EU) citizens understand by solidarity and how this may or may not contribute to cohesion in the EU, the research project brought a multinational group of scholars together to produce case studies and collaboratively a comparative study focusing on a number of EU member states. The development of the EU has been marked by ever-closer integration. However, it has also witnessed increasing contestation in recent years, while several crises – outlined in the introductory chapter – have sparked debates that touch profoundly and saliently on issues of solidarity. They, in turn, are elemental to cohesion and legitimacy in a political community.

To allow for in-depth case analyses based on focus group discussions with EU citizens and fruitful comparative insight within the framework of a feasible research programme, nine country cases were selected. They serve to represent the diversity of EU member states. We selected three groups of three countries each that share commonalities regarding geographical location and economic wealth. The first group comprises three Northern EU member states that belong to the group of net contributors to the EU budget: Finland, Germany and the Netherlands. The second group consists of countries from Central-Eastern Europe that are currently net recipients of funds from the EU budget, yet with prospects of becoming net payers in the future on account of their economic growth: Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. The third group are Southern European member states that are net recipients and were affected severely by the public debt crisis: Greece, Portugal and Spain.

In addition to drawing on available empirical data and respective studies, we organised a series of focus group discussions conducted in each of the nine countries to study citizens' conceptions of solidarity and related reasoning. The resultant findings and their comparative analysis are part and parcel to answering the guiding questions and research aims, as outlined in Chapter 1, but re-summarised in brief:

- how is solidarity viewed, as well as,
- how could and should it be achieved in the EU (which may lead to facilitating cohesion)?

The following provides an overview of the research approach and concrete steps and measures taken.

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3.1 Selecting countries and participants: three social groups from nine countries each

Conducting focus group discussions and especially analysing the translated transcripts of the resulting electronic recordings are both time-consuming and resource-intensive (Hennink et al. 2020: 165–166). This, therefore, poses a practical limitation to the number of focus group discussions within the remit of this research project. Nevertheless, this limitation is theoretically guided as well as commensurate with the focus group method itself, which, in contrast to surveys and polls, does not seek to generate large, randomly selected samples representative of an entire population (i.e. of a country) but rather precisely smaller groups whose discussions can provide rich insight into understandings and reasonings. Because of the limitation, focus group discussions were carried out only in the aforementioned three groups of countries that are members of the EU and the Eurozone. Eurozone membership as criterion proves crucial in the context of solidarity. Since the 2008 financial crisis, the rescue of the common currency and the bailouts of beleaguered member states have been at the core of many solidarity-related debates. Indeed, matters of mutual aid as well as hardship – and thus corresponding relations and tensions – became not only particularly salient but also palpable to European publics at large.

In each of the selected countries, three focus group discussions were conducted with groups consisting of a maximum of eight persons each (in accordance with the suggestion by Stewart and Shamdasani 1990: 57f.). Moreover, the focus groups brought together participants with a similar sociodemographic profile (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990: 42f.). In selecting the participants for the three focus groups of different sociodemographic profiles, we used a purposive criterion-based sampling method (Patton 2002) also following the principle of diversity (Flick 2007). The core criteria for each group were education, employment status and position, income level and age, which are considered according to the results of quantitative studies relevant for support or scepticism with regard to European integration.

Using time-series multilevel regression models based on Eurobarometer surveys, Bauer (2019: 246–250) found that certain groups of people show significant variances in EU support during the EU fiscal crisis. On the one hand, there is a tendency for high skilled self-employed, managers, house persons, students and women to display higher-than-average support for the EU. Statistical evidence from the Eurobarometer 2016 also indicates that highly educated individuals tend to put more trust into the European Parliament (EP), think that European integration should go further and are more emotionally attached to the EU. Unemployed people, at least in some countries, take the contrary position; they tend to put less trust into the EP and are more likely to say that Europeanisation has already gone too far. However, these findings vary across member states. Additionally, unemployed people show a quite different attitude towards the EU, since they tend to approve harmonisation of social benefits across the EU despite their general Euroscepticism (Gerhards et al. 2016: 687). Concerning age groups, we also see a complex picture where young and old people in all countries have reservations about Europeanisation of policies while the middle-aged group is more in favour (Gerhards et al. 2016: 688).

Although the effects vary between different countries as well as between different regression models constructed by Bauer (2019: 249), the results suggested to us that the three focus groups conducted in every country should bring together citizens with the following characteristics:

- High skilled, higher-paid employees and managers (hereinafter referred to as “high skilled”).
- Lower paid workers and unemployed persons (hereinafter referred to as “lower paid and unemployed”).
- Young adults, mostly university students (hereinafter referred to as “young adults”).¹

The group of young adults was also chosen for the focus group discussions because, due to their age, they neither have personal experience of border controls when travelling in the EU nor of a life without the Euro (except for younger people in Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia).

In order to check whether the selection of these three groups in the chosen three batches of EU member states is meaningful for detecting possible different understandings and expectations of solidarity, a review of the results of the special Eurobarometer survey on the “Future of Europe” (Eurobarometer 2018) was undertaken. This Eurobarometer survey was chosen because it provides results of this kind of studies the closest to the time of the focus group discussions were conducted. The findings are presented as annexes to this book. They are taken up in the second section of each of the following country chapters, in which the political and public debates in the respective countries are considered. Likewise, the results of the focus group discussions are reflected in the third section of each of the following country chapters in light of these survey results to see if our findings from the focus group discussions reflect the attitudes and opinions captured in this survey.

3.2 Preparation of the focus group discussions

The focus group discussions were prepared jointly by all members of the project team who also contributed chapters to the book (see the list of authors). In addition to the project leaders and editors of this book, researchers from all countries under study were employed for at least six months at Technical University Darmstadt. They conducted the focus group discussions in the selected countries, transcribed and translated the recordings of the discussion and were engaged in the initial phase of the development of the coding frame used for the comparative analysis of the findings from the focus group discussions (see Section 3.5).

To ensure that the focus group discussions were moderated as uniformly as possible (though also ensuring flexibility, see Hennink et al. 2020: 143–149, 153–157) and that the key topics (see Section 3.3) were covered in all discussions, the project team prepared a guide for moderators to be followed during the field work. The discussion guide also included estimated time limits for each phase of the discussion and classified the questions: those that had to be asked in all cases; those that could be used to prompt the discussion (i.e. fall-back or reserve questions) and those that may be skipped if time was not sufficient.

The draft of the discussion guide was piloted in a mock focus group discussion with young adults – volunteer students of TU Darmstadt.² With this pilot study, it was aimed to test whether the three selected scenarios (see below) could be discussed in the planned time frame of approximately 90 minutes, if the prompts (i.e. discussion questions) by the moderator were understandable, and if there were any other difficulties for the participants to respond to the questions.

In addition to this, the project team decided on strategies and criteria for recruiting the participants of the focus group discussions – namely through previous contacts from research projects of their home institutions, alumni networks of these institutions, non-ideological organisations (e.g. the fan club of a local football team), relevant public institutions (e.g. public unemployment agency) and finally social media appeals and personal networks of team members. To ensure the required homogeneity in the composition of each focus group and to make the focus groups as comparable between countries as possible, the team members were continuously in contact to monitor the recruitment process and discuss the allocation of individual persons to sociodemographic groups when necessary.³

Table 3.1 provides an overview of the final composition of the focus groups in the selected EU member states.

3.3 Conducting the focus group discussions

The average length of the focus group discussions was 93 minutes, which corresponds well to the planned timeframe (also recommended, e.g. by Acocella and Cataldi 2021: 136).

All discussions started with an ice-breaking phase, in which participants were asked to write down and present the first thoughts that come to their mind when they hear about the EU. The ice-breaking phase concluded by asking the participants to present their personal attitudes towards European integration and also to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of their country's membership in the EU. The purpose of the ice-breaking phase was to motivate and mobilise all participants to openly engage in the discussion.

This phase was followed by the core part of the focus group discussions. Here, the participants were confronted with three scenarios and asked to comment on them and give reasons for their statements. The scenarios related to

- (a) an occurrence of natural disasters,
- (b) a new financial, economic or Euro crisis (hereinafter referred to as “financial or economic crisis”),
- (c) addressing social and regional disparities in general and the idea of an EU unemployment scheme (hereinafter referred to as “social disparities”).

These scenarios were selected on the basis of whether they were likely to encourage participants to make statements about their understanding of solidarity and reasons they provide in line with their understanding. However, and even more importantly, they were also deliberately chosen against the background of the different concepts of solidarity outlined in Chapter 2.

Table 3.1 Focus groups by countries, the number of participants and their gender and mean age

<i>Country</i>	<i>Focus groups</i>	<i>Participants</i>		
		<i>N</i>	<i>Females/males</i>	<i>Mean age</i>
Finland	High skilled	4	1/3	46.0
	Lower paid and unemployed	4	1/3	45.5
	Young adults	4	2/2	21.0
Germany	High skilled	6	1/5	41.7
	Lower paid and unemployed	5	1/4	38.0
	Young adults	6	2/4	25.0
Greece	High skilled	8	4/4	30.8
	Lower paid and unemployed	4	1/3	32.0
	Young adults	6	4/2	21.0
Latvia	High skilled	7	3/4	37.1
	Lower paid and unemployed	6	4/2	38.8
	Young adults	6	4/2	21.2
Lithuania	High skilled	4	1/3	43.5
	Lower paid and unemployed	5	3/2	43.8
	Young adults	6	3/3	21.8
The Netherlands	High skilled	5	2/3	45.8
	Lower paid and unemployed	4	3/1	50.0
	Young adults	4	4/0	22.3
Portugal	High skilled	7	4/3	42.1
	Lower paid and unemployed	5	3/2	47.4
	Young adults	6	3/3	20.3
Slovakia	High skilled	7	4/3	44.7
	Lower paid and unemployed	5	4/1	39.2
	Young adults	5	2/3	21.2
Spain	High skilled	6	3/3	41.0
	Lower paid and unemployed	5	3/2	40.2
	Young adults	6	5/1	21.8
	Total	146	75/71	34.9

For each of these scenarios, the participants were asked to state what they expected from the EU and from other member states, and what their country, but also, they personally, would be willing and able to do. These questions allowed to address the vertical and horizontal dimensions of solidarity. This is about the relation between the EU, the member state and the citizen on the one hand, and between the member states and the citizens of the individual member states on the other.

Finally, the scenarios were also selected (as already mentioned in Section 3.1) because respondents in a Eurobarometer survey (2018) were also asked for answers to questions which are related not only to solidarity among EU member states in general, but particularly in cases of a natural disaster and the guarantee of a minimum living standard for the population. This makes it possible to compare the statements of the participants in the focus group discussions from the selected member states with the findings from this survey.

Nearly all focus group discussions were conducted between the middle of December 2021 and the beginning of March 2022. Only the focus group discussions in the Netherlands were carried out later (in the middle of May 2022) due to recruitment issues.

Due to strict COVID-19, regulations were in place during the time period when most focus group discussions were held, focus group discussions were held online in some countries. This was the case in Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovakia. Fortunately, there were no noticeable differences in the dynamics of communication between the focus group discussions conducted online and those in person. The online discussions proved advantageous in that they allowed us to also include participants from rural areas and not only from the urban contexts where the face-to-face discussions took place (for other advantages of remote focus group discussions, see Dos Santos Marques et al. 2021).⁴

For nearly all focus group discussions, the national language was used. The exceptions are the followings: the Finnish participants preferred speaking in Swedish because the discussions were conducted in a region with a high concentration of the Swedish-speaking minority. In Latvia, the participants in all focus group discussions declared their ability and willingness to communicate in English. This was accepted because the participants were able to express themselves in English and thus their statements did not have to be translated from Latvian into English – which usually implies an element of interpretation (see Section 3.4).

Each participant was ascribed a code name using a country code (e.g. FI for Finland), a group number (e.g. FG1 for a focus group which high skilled people), participant gender and number (e.g. F1 for a female participant). These code names (e.g. FIFG1_F1) were also later in the book when supporting the findings with quoted statements from the participants. Therefore, the quotations in the following chapters do not contain any information that would allow identifying an individual participant.

3.4 Challenges of using the transcripts of the focus group discussions – and how they have been addressed

The first challenges we encountered in using the transcripts of the focus group discussions related to the translation of the transcribed recordings from the respective native language to English. The translations were done by the moderators of the focus group discussions in the respective country. Although all the researchers involved had jointly agreed on certain standards and guidelines for this process, in the end it was not only a matter of translation but also interpreting what a participant had meant by a statement, taking into consideration particular contexts and geographical specificities. Similarly, even a simple term in a certain language might require an interpretation, which can be illustrated by the following example:

A non-Dutch speaker will likely not be able to know what it means when people in the Netherlands refer to their country as a *klein kikkerlandje*. Translated literally this means *small frog country*, but it is an idiomatic way of describing the country that refers to the nature of frogs as cold-blooded animals and, in a figurative sense, of the Dutch having a cold-blooded nature. The term

klein kikkerlandje can also mean that the Netherlands is a small country, but the diminutive suffix “je” adds nuance as well so that the phrase can also be used in a both self-effacing and affectionate manner, meaning that the Dutch want to be seen as a small country. Such interpretations were noted in the translated transcriptions by those who conducted the focus group discussions. Moreover, such metaphors are important for understanding self-perceived challenges and abilities of particular countries in the case of transnational solidarity.⁵

Another difficulty was how to deal with terms that referred to historical events, places or national political debates that foreigners typically do not know but that had immediately recognisable meaning for the participants. These could be debates about current challenges that have arisen through EU legislation but have not occurred in other countries. Examples are the nitrate pollution of soils from intensive agriculture in the Netherlands or the (suddenly) restricted drilling of private wells in Lithuania. But it could also be events that bear a particular symbolic meaning in a certain country – such as a natural disaster that led to special support measures. In the Ahr Valley in Germany, a catastrophic flooding occurred in the summer prior to the focus group discussions and several participants simply alluded to “the Ahr.” Participants also mentioned places unknown elsewhere that were indicative of exceptionally high unemployment in the national context, such as the small towns of Rimavská Sobota and Poltár in Slovakia. Some Slovak participants named these places as shorthand for desperate cases that could not be tackled, no matter how ambitious the EU’s measures were.

To ensure that such references remained comprehensible, explanations were added in notes to the translations of the transcribed recordings of the focus group discussions. To increase intelligibility of the explanations, a team member unfamiliar with the country revised the translated transcripts and highlighted any parts requiring clarification.

Although aimed to preserve authenticity of the participants’ communication and language as much as possible during the transcription and translation processes, quotations used in the book were edited whenever necessary for the purposes of clarity and comprehension. Editing focused on removing segments of text which were in excess (e.g. rambling repetitions), redundant (e.g. technical marking) or not relevant for what is being reported (marked with [. . .]) or adding words or short explications to logically complete the quotation (marked with [text]). However, it was ensured that the editing did not change the meaning of the original quotation.

3.5 Analysing and comparing findings from the focus group discussions

The comparative analysis of the focus group discussions was allocated to a separate work process, the results of which are presented in Chapters 13 and 14. This section describes the process of preparing for and conducting the analysis of the

corpus. It will start with the description of processing the transcripts into a database and of key characteristics of the corpus. Furthermore, the used coding frame and coding process are presented. The latter also requires some crucial remarks on the definitively used conceptions related to the concept of solidarity as well as of the reasoned statements, which were put forward by the participants to support or reject certain conceptions of solidarity. Finally, notes on quality management for coding are made and the tools of the comparative analysis are described.

3.5.1 Characteristics of the data corpus

For the comparative analysis, we used the programme MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2022, a multitool software for text processing and analysis. MAXQDA allows to condense the corpus of transcripts of all focus group discussions to a list of categorised text blocks which are accessible for *qualitative* comparisons. Thereby, connections and patterns of communicative interaction can be traced across peoples' understanding of solidarity, and comparisons can be made between sociodemographic groups and country cases. In addition, the size of the corpus allowed to use MAXQDA *quantitative* analysis tools as guideposts indicating the dominant categories and repeating patterns.

The corpus for the analysis of the focus group discussions consists of 27 transcripts, translated into English (see above).⁶ Each document was named by a conjunction of country and the sociodemographic group (e.g. "Spain young") to ensure easy and consistent retrieval of data for the comparison.

The text of each document was divided into paragraphs, separating contributions to the discussion of the moderator and each participant (including a pseudonymised participant code; see above). Apart from the moderator and participant statements, the texts include technical marks (e.g. "long pause"), non-verbal communication (e.g. "laughing") and other markings in the text necessary for the comprehension of the translated transcript (e.g. adding clarifying or complementing words or phrases).⁷

Overall, the corpus consists of more than 340,000 words. With the tools available in MAXQDA for comparative analysis, we explored the corpus content in more detail and found several methodological insights that are particularly important to reflect upon.

First, although the course of focus group discussions varied as one can expect (Hennink 2014), all moderators managed to cover all planned discussion phases and compulsory questions (see Section 3.2) in each of the 27 focus groups. They also guided the discussions in a similar trajectory across the groups. We did not observe particularly deviant cases of dominance by individual participants or, conversely, resignation with regard to participation in the discussion.

Second, there are observable differences when comparing the moderators' engagement across discussions (estimated by share of the moderator text segments vs. participant text segments) and participant engagement (estimated by length of discussions and size in words of the participants' verbal output). Closer inspection

of the content of the moderators' and participants' contributions to the discussion shows that these differences are related to several aspects:

- *Participants' communication style.* Based on descriptive statistics of the corpus, it could be noted that country and social milieu patterns were more important than individual participants' styles. For example, in all focus group discussions in Finland, participants tended to provide very concise responses, often in few sentences, whereas Portuguese participants tended to "go around" their answer in a wordy, repetitive or less coherent manner. Likewise, with few exceptions, lower paid and unemployed participants across countries tended to produce the smallest verbal output.
- *Adaptation of the moderator to the way the participants engage.* Moderators needed to react to the dynamics and actual course of discussion in a particular group (Hennink 2014). For example, the Greek focus group moderator was asked to repeat questions more often than other moderators; the Portuguese moderator had to repeatedly ask participants to be more concise and give opportunity for others to speak as well. In the Finnish focus group discussions, conversely, the moderator's input was larger based on quantitative estimates as participant responses were particularly concise. In general, it could also be observed that lower paid and unemployed and young adult participants tended to require slightly more input from the moderators to facilitate the discussions in contrast to the high skilled groups.
- Finally, a review of the distribution of codes (on the coding see, Section 3.5.2) across focus group discussions shows that despite the aforementioned variations, all groups produced comparably meaningful content for the planned analysis. The average number of different codes covered in one focus group discussion is 23, ranging from 18 codes (German high skilled group) to 25 codes (in seven other groups).

Given the above, a comparable and meaningful content of the discussions was conclusively reached in all 27 cases.

3.5.2 Analytical approach and development of the coding frame

The definitive coding frame (O'Connor and Joffe 2020; Schreier 2012) was developed in a (dialectical) interplay of conceptions deductively derived from the scientific debate (as presented in Chapter 2) and inductively generated conceptions drawn from the statements of the participants of the focus group discussions. A coding frame developed in this way fits the purposes of the study (Saldaña 2013) which was focused on solidarity-related political reasoning of Europeans "at work." In such a reasoning "at work", people may talk about solidarity in the EU by using terms (or even fully elaborated conceptions) that are common in the academic debate. However, people may use them in a different way depending on the meaning these terms have in the context in which people are communicating

with others. Finding out what meaning Europeans associate with solidarity and the reflections they link to it was precisely the aim of the study.

Based on this coding frame, *conceptions* that the participants associated with solidarity and *reasoned statements* giving meaning to these conceptions were searched and marked in the transcripts. This was done with the aim (a) to discover patterns of the argumentative combination of conceptions and reasoned statements and (b) to compare such patterns across sociodemographic groups of the participants, studied countries, and the three scenarios involving a need for support considered in the focus group discussions.⁸ The coding frame includes three types of codes (see Table 3.2):

- Codes related to different conceptions of solidarity and reasoning related to these conceptions; these could, therefore, be labelled as core codes. They will be described in detail below.
- Codes marking segments of the transcripts corresponding to the different phases of the focus group discussions (i.e. the ice-breaking and wrap-up phases and the discussed scenarios of natural disasters, a financial crisis and dealing with social and regional disparities).
- Codes covering segments of the transcripts other than the responses of the participants (i.e. contributions of the moderator and technical remarks) which could be labelled as methodology codes.⁹

To develop the coding frame of the core codes, regular meetings of members of the research team took place to refine these codes based on initial reflections about conceptions of solidarity (presented by Sonnicksen 2021). A preliminary open coding of transcripts started with comments of those members of the team who had conducted the focus group discussions in their country and transcribed and translated the recordings. These team members commented on the suitability of these initial reflections on the conceptions and their coding. These discussions led to a first draft of the coding frame, which was further refined by a special coding team (see for more details Section 3.5.3) via trial coding of selected parts in the corpus and in regular consultations with the colleagues who conducted the focus group discussions in their countries and wrote the country chapters. The resulting provisional coding frame was then applied to the coding of one transcript by five different coders, each coding independently. This was followed by a refinement of the coding frame by all coders and finally an agreement on the final coding frame, which was applied to the entire corpus.¹⁰

The final coding frame (see Table 3.2) has a two-level code structure: “parent codes” and respective core codes. The “parent codes” consist of codes belonging to each other – namely (a) the basic conceptions of solidarity, (b) reasoned statements by which participants underpin their understanding of solidarity, (c) the levels at which solidarity should be practised from the perspective of the participants, and (d) other narrative elements. Overall, 25 core codes were included in the final coding frame.

In Chapter 2, we explored two *basic conceptions of solidarity* as connected to expectations of reciprocity and unidirectional or one-sided support. Here, reciprocity is only vaguely considered or expected, or not at all. Where the first conception is in essence what Scholz (2015) called “civic solidarity”, the second one is what she characterised as “human solidarity.”

Table 3.2 Final coding frame

<i>Parent code</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>N of coded segments</i>
	<i>Core codes</i>	
Conceptions of solidarity	Unidirectional support	1,380
	Reciprocity	213
Reasoned statements	Need	145
	Deservingness	57
	Practicability	155
	Availability and ability	326
	Obligation	132
	Fairness and equality	131
	Cost and benefit	84
	Conditionality	154
	Convergence	55
	Subsidiarity	225
Levels of solidarity	EU to member country(ies)	130
	Country to country	748
	EU to individuals	739
	Individual to individual	291
Units of solidarity	Clusters of countries	246
	EU as a frame and a community	466
Other narrative elements	Trust	81
	Temporality	311
	Construction of challenges	348
	Construction of courses of action	165
	Construction of “us” and “them”	60
	Attribution of roles	621
	Issue relabelling	150
	Total: 7,413	
	<i>Additional codes</i>	
Phases of the focus group discussions	Ice-breaking phase	27
	Scenario of a natural disaster	27
	Scenario of a financial crisis	27
	Scenario of addressing social disparities	27
	Wrap-up phase	27
	Total: 135	
Methodology codes	Moderator speech	2,286
	Technical elements	1,072
	Total: 3,358	

Reasoned statements were considered in the study (and accordingly in the coding process) as expressions of the consideration of participants why solidarity is or is not possible or even inappropriate.

- This refers first of all to considerations about the *need* of help; that is participants discuss the presence or absence of a necessity for help.
- Reasoned statements about *deservingness* deal (in line with Schneider and Ingram 1993) with the question of why people deserve or are entitled to support and may blame people or member states that their situation of need is self-inflicted.
- *Practicability* is addressed when participants discuss whether, when and how support is feasible and/or suitable.
- Statements about *availability and ability* are related to discussions about if and what resources could be used for helping others.
- *Obligation* relates to an issue when participants comment on whether there is a legal or moral requirement to act in solidarity.
- Statements on *fairness and equality* deal with the realisation of solidarity in the EU and between EU member states, both in relation to the financing of solidarity-based help and the receipt of it. These statements were mostly not made by referring to conditions considered as crucial in the scholarly debate for defining standards of fairness (or justice) – such as the “veil of ignorance” on which Rawls (1999) bases his “A Theory of Justice.” Instead, although they referred to rules that should be applied universally, most of them were nevertheless interest-led or quite pragmatic.
- The statements on *costs and benefits* consider and weigh up the costs and benefits of solidarity-based support – for the EU in general or even just for individuals or individual member states.
- Statements about *conditionality* concern reasoning about the question of why certain conditions have to be met by the recipients of solidary aid or should be imposed when/if it is to be provided (on conditionality, cf., e.g. Koch 2015).
- When making statements about *convergence*, participants express aspiration for processes aiming at or leading towards EU member states getting closer in certain regards – and achieving in the end economic, social and territorial cohesion.
- Statements about *subsidiarity* assume that the EU or members states should not take action if an issue can or must be solved at a lower level of government or by the potential recipients themselves.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, not all statements referred to as *reasoned statements* must be statements that can claim general validity. Rather, the decisive point is that those who have expressed them assume that the validity claim is shared in the group – or at least by some other participants of the focus group discussions.¹¹ Furthermore, it is not that logically related “good reasons” must be given to make a statement a reasoned statement. Instead, it is sometimes enough under certain conditions to refer to *topoi*, that is commonplaces that are used in

communicative interaction because it is assumed by the speaker that they are considered meaningful by other participants. Some examples of topoi to which participants refer in the focus group discussions are given in Chapter 14. Additionally, it has to be noted that we cannot and do not evaluate the factual truth behind reasoned statements, which may be only “reasonable” for those who make them or accept them as reasonable, even if they may be factually incorrect.

For the coding, larger units of text were used (ranging from a sentence to several paragraphs), which were conceptually meaningful and provided enough contextualisation to ensure validity of the interpretation (O’Connor and Joffe 2020). The same unit could be coded with multiple codes. Following the research aims, the codes under parent code “Reasoned statements” were not independent. Segments were *only* coded as such if the statement was related to codes under parent code “conceptions of solidarity” (i.e. we sought to code statements that “argued” specifically about solidarity).

The expected *storylines* (see Chapter 1) had to be reconstructed from different pieces and threads of discussions within the focus groups, using interpretive strategies to link single statements together. In concrete terms, this was done in the following way: we searched for recurring statements by various participants and also for statements by individual participants that were strongly supported by others (e.g. by the following expressions: “[. . .] I totally agree with her/him . . .” “I am not able to put it better than she/he did” etc.). Attention was also paid to whether these statements related to each other and complemented each other. This could (ideally) be the case in a chronological or even historically extended form (as in the “fado story” reconstructed from the focus group discussion conducted in Portugal; see Section 14.1). However, it was also sufficient if the statements could be put together in a factually meaningful way (as in the “story of pride and prejudice” reconstructed for Finland; see *ibid.*). In doing so, we have departed from standards that are applied to narratives in a sophisticated form by proponents of the Narrative Policy Framework (see Shanahan et al. 2018: 176; Jones et al. 2014; 4–7; Jones and Radaelli 2015) and also by representatives of an interpretive reconstruction of narratives.¹² For us it was enough to capture storylines as “condensed versions of narratives” (Verhoeven and Metze 2022: 227) – as mentioned already in Chapter 1.¹³

A different approach was taken in the search for *topoi*. The transcripts of the focus group discussions were searched for common phrases that were employed by participants to underpin the meaningfulness of their statements. These commonplaces could be ones that are obviously in general use or specific ones that are only prevalent in individual countries. The authors of the country chapters, who – as mentioned – not only came from the respective countries but were also the moderators of the focus group discussions in these countries, were helpful in identifying the latter. In the search for topoi, it was initially irrelevant to us whether the participants who used them were able to convince the other participants with their statements – just as an argument that is well presented (viewed from the outside) without the use of a commonplace does not necessarily have to be convincing in the specific context of a communicative interaction. Rather, what was relevant for us was the emergence of commonplaces during the discussions. However, it turned

out that participants who used commonplaces often succeeded in convincing others with their statements. This mostly led to the others agreeing and the discussions on the point in question appearing to be clarified and thus concluded.

As shown in Table 3.2, more codes were assigned in the focus groups transcript corpus than were used for the analysis and results presented in Chapter 13. This applies particularly to the “other narrative elements.” These “elements” were coded because it was initially assumed – as mentioned in Chapter 1 – that more than storylines and various reasoned statements (partly just referring to commonplaces/topoi) argumentatively underpinning the support of particular conceptions of solidarity would be detected. To reconstruct possible narratives or uncover “narrative patterns” (Barbehön et al. 2016: 239) that express a certain understanding of solidarity in the context of the EU and give it a well-founded basis, the six core codes under the parent code “other narrative elements” were included in the coding frame (for the reasons for including them, see Heinelt and Egner 2021: 4–7 and 9.) However, the analysis of these codes did not lead to a meaningful result in the attempt to detect full-fledged narratives. Nevertheless, they served as a contextual background for comparative analysis (e.g. trust).

3.5.3 Coding process with core codes

The coding team, comprising of five members,¹⁴ conducted the core coding of the whole corpus. Each transcript was independently coded by two coders. There were four team members ascribed as “Coder 1” (each coded independently an assigned set of transcripts) and one team member ascribed as “Coder 2” (who independently coded all 27 transcripts). Within the team, there was a leader and a co-leader¹⁵ who were assigned the task of coordinating and documenting the coding process and subsequently confirmed the final coded version of the corpus for the purposes of the analysis.

Assessing reliability of coding in qualitative research is not a uniformly agreed procedure. To this end, there is an ongoing debate about an applicability of numerical intercoder reliability (or intercoder agreement) assessment in the interpretive tradition of qualitative research (see, e.g. Hennink 2014: 191–192; O’Connor and Joffe 2020: 3–5; Saldaña 2013: 35). Considering the purposes of the study and the collaborative practice of coding (Saldaña 2013), it was decided to take a combined approach involving a three-step assessment and leading to group consensus on the final coding.

Firstly applying the MAXQDA intercoder agreement function (providing a percentage agreement and a Kappa coefficient according to Brennan and Prediger 1981), an assessment following the independent coding step by two coders was completed for each transcript as an interim indicator of coding consistency. Coding was considered as in agreement when the minimum code overlapped at a rate of 70 per cent when text segments coded by Coder 1 and Coder 2 were compared in MAXQDA. The average intercoder agreement percentage across the transcripts at this stage was 59.6 per cent (ranging from 46 per cent to 83 per cent of transcript average), which indicated a moderate level of intercoder agreement.

Second, each disagreement detected was collaboratively reviewed and discussed to reach a joint coder consensus (O'Connor and Joffe 2020; Saldaña 2013). Each intercoder agreement assessment and consensus session included Coder 1, Coder 2 and the coder team lead to assure balance of intercoder discussion.¹⁶

Finally, the coded text segments were retrieved by each code and checked that all segments attributed to a code were consistent with the intended meaning of the respective code. After this consistency check, the corpus coding was confirmed as complete and ready for analysis.

3.5.4 Data analysis and presentation

Both quantitative and qualitative MAXQDA tools were used for the analysis of the coded corpus. For the quantitative part, primarily the code matrix browser (which shows the distribution of code frequencies across selected documents or specified document sets) and the code relations browser (which shows co-occurrence of two selected codes in a segment or a document) were applied to retrieve the distributions of codes and cross-code relations. These tools were employed in different combinations fitting to the research aims: for the overall corpus, the comparisons across sociodemographic groups, country cases and inside country cases, and across the discussion phases. This facilitated a tracking of patterns looking at how the coded conceptual meanings displayed or shifted in and across the focus group discussions. In Chapter 13, the most distinct results are presented in the form of tables.

However, quantitative distributions of codes only supplied a very general picture of the meanings attached to transnational solidarity. This was not enough for a study that aimed to analytically trace reasoned statements – particularly those referring to *topoi* – and their argumentative linkage to conceptions of solidarity and to reconstruct, wherever possible, storylines surrounding them. Therefore, for the main – qualitative – analysis, the involved team members engaged in thorough interpretive reading of coded segments to detect patterns of reasoning and storylines about solidarity. Hence, qualitative comparisons of coded segments were used, retrieving them in multiple cross-display variations. Content comparisons of coded segments (i.e. interpretive reading of coded text segments under a selected code) were done in multiple combinations of code relations (i.e. occurrences of two selected codes appearing together), looking further into differences or similarities between country cases, sociodemographic groups and discussion phases. This way, nuances in lines of reasoning, explications behind quantitatively traced patterns and relevant contextual components linked to the participants' perceptions of solidarity were traced. These findings are presented in Chapter 13, structured into themes and supported by quotations of participants.

Notes

- 1 We excluded persons from this group who were studying political science or European studies in particular, since this would have likely changed the dynamics and character of the focus group discussion (i.e. participants should all be laypersons/non-experts on the discussion issues).

- 2 The project team is grateful for the help of the students who actively participated in the mock focus group on 19 November 2021.
- 3 All participants were informed in detail about the project and the conditions of their participation in it. Each participant provided written informed consent to take part in the research. Participation was voluntary and participants did not receive any remuneration. However, any costs incurred related to participation (e.g. transportation, parking) were covered. Also, as an incentive for participation and expression of gratitude by the research team, participants were invited to a dinner after the discussion.
- 4 Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic also had a negative impact on the focus groups. As some recruited participants had to withdraw at short notice due to an infection with COVID-19 and could not be replaced by newly recruited persons, some groups were quite small and the planned gender balance could not be reached. Nevertheless, no group was smaller than the required minimum of four people (Krueger and Casey 2009).
- 5 While not metaphorical, a similar challenge arose when a participant in one of the German focus group discussions referred to the *Beitragsleistungsproportionalitätsprinzip* when it comes to the funding and the level of benefits of an EU-wide unemployment insurance scheme. What is just one word in German has to be translated into English as *principle of the proportionality of contributions paid to social insurance schemes and their benefits*. While it is an appropriate literal translation, it does not fully express the meaning associated with the term in debates in Germany about fair and reciprocal contributions and benefits of social security systems. *Beitragsleistungsproportionalitätsprinzip* means that a certain percentage of the gross salary is to be paid as a contribution to a social insurance scheme, which differs according to the level of salary. The level of benefits provided by this scheme is measured proportionally according to the level of contributions paid earlier – or in simplified terms, what one pays in determines what one gets out. Albeit certainly not by every person, the broad consensus in Germany considers this proportionality fair, regardless of whether the level of benefits is sufficient to cover a minimum level of need. This understanding of proportionality is core to a welfare state that Esping-Anderson (1990: 27) calls “conservative”: this type of welfare state “conserves” the status that individuals had in the employment system also in case of social need resulting from unemployment, old age and illness.
- 6 The documents of translated transcripts of the focus group discussions are stored in TU Darmstadt’s institutional repository TUDatalib. The HEUREC data set can be accessed via this link: <https://doi.org/10.48328/tudatalib-1346>.
- 7 We also used MAXQDA memos to include more extensive explanations related to country specific contexts, translation related nuances or other explanations needed for the better comprehension of the transcripts.
- 8 See Section 3.5.4, where it is outlined how these patterns were searched for (with the help of the programme MAXQDA) and how they were found.
- 9 These codes were employed as an additional layer for the assessment of data quality. Procedural aspects of the discussions (e.g. time stamps, pauses, intrusions, technical issues) which were not directly linked to the participants’ contributions to the discussion, were coded as “technical” segments of the transcripts. These codes were excluded from the coding reliability assessment process that was applied to the core coding.
- 10 The developed coding frame was accompanied by (1) a codebook (Hennink et al. 2020; Saldaña 2013) that included codes, definitions of codes and examples of transcript segments corresponding to the codes (see examples in Annex 5), and (2) coding rules specifying the agreements of the coding team which was applied during the coding process.
- 11 For the scholarly debate about validity claims, see Heath 1998.
- 12 The latter, namely “scholars such as Emery Roe (1994), Deborah Stone (1989), Frank Fischer and J. Forrester (1993), and Maarten Hajer (1995)” (Jones et al. 2014: 3) are accused of a “narrative relativity” by proponents of the Narrative Policy Framework (see Shanahan et al. 2018: 175; Jones and Radaelli 2015: 342) because this “brand of narrative scholarship [. . .] was [*sic*] primarily interpretative in the sense that it was [*sic*]

highly descriptive, generally rejected scientific standards of hypothesis testing and falsifiability, and thus lacked the clarity to be replicated and allow for generalization” (Jones et al. 2014: 3).

- 13 Even though we were not able to reconstruct storylines from the focus group discussions conducted in all countries, the subheadings of the following country chapters briefly summarise characteristic statements made by participants. Admittedly, other formulations could have been chosen for the subheadings of most of the country chapters.
- 14 This team consisted of Björn Egner, Inga Gaižauskaitė, Jan Kotýnek Krotký, Melina Lehning and Megan Fellows.
- 15 These were Björn Egner and Inga Gaižauskaitė.
- 16 It is important to note that we estimated that about half of the detected coder disagreements were related to “disagreement” about the length of a coded text rather than the code applied and thus simply solving them increased intercoder agreement to the acceptable level (according to Hennink 2014). Keeping in mind the purposes of analysis, this type of disagreement was usually solved by accepting a longer, more contextualised text. The remaining share of disagreements did relate to disagreements on the application of the code, and therefore was thoroughly discussed, and solved with the final intercoder consensus.

4 Finland

“We should not get help either if we’re in a shitty situation and we’ve put ourselves there”

Jonas Schauman

When compared to other European countries, the Nordic nations have typically concerned themselves less with the question of integration (Archer 2000). The welfare state and the high living standards that characterise the Nordic region have made Nordic people less eager to hand over policy-making powers to Brussels (Raunio 2011). National sovereignty as a concept has traditionally also been more dominant in the political discourse in the Nordic countries (Raunio 2011).

During the 1980s and 1990s, a bigger focus shifted to Europe due to both Finnish economic and security interests. The Finnish industry wanted to export more to the Western European markets, especially after the fall of its biggest export partner, the Soviet Union in 1991 (Raunio 2005: 383). The Finnish recession during the 1990s also played its part when the national currency *markka* had to be devaluated, which gave a boost to those in favour of joining the European Union (EU) (Raunio 2005: 383). There were also security concerns in Finland regarding the unstable political situation in Russia, which is believed to have played a central role both for elites and for ordinary citizens for wanting to join the EU (Raunio 2005: 383). The security aspect of pursuing membership in the EU differentiates Finland’s EU membership background from the other Nordic countries (Raunio 2005).¹

Finland acceded to the EU in 1995 after a referendum was held regarding the membership, in which 57 per cent voted in favour of joining. In addition to the aforementioned economic and security interests, another factor which drove for a Finnish EU membership in the context of the referendum was a strong will to be more closely integrated into the West (Ojanen and Raunio 2018: 39). The remaining 43 per cent who opposed the accession and voted against EU membership were primarily from rural areas, while the pro-EU membership votes came primarily from urban areas in the south and south-west of Finland (Benet 2000). One of the key reasons why people voted against accession to the EU arose from beliefs that the membership would impinge on Finland’s sovereignty. Another common suspicion was that it would increase bureaucracy and have a negative effect on the Finnish living standard and agriculture (Benet 2000: 94).

EU membership has been beneficial to Finland’s export-oriented economy (Nilsson Hakkala et al. 2019). For being a small country, Finland’s contribution to the common EU budget is noteworthy.² Since becoming an EU member, Finland has also developed into a net contributor from being a net recipient (Pointner 2005).

After joining the EU, Finland became an active member state that prompted for further integration. However, the political landscape regarding the EU in Finland changed dramatically in 2011 when the Finns Party – a right-wing and Eurosceptic populist party – received 19.1 per cent of the vote in the national elections, only 1.3 per cent less than the National Coalition Party that won the elections (Official Statistics of Finland 2011). Compared to the national elections in 2007, the Finns Party increased their vote share by a staggering 15 percentage points (Official Statistics of Finland 2011). This success has been explained in part as a development of growing popular sentiment wishing to affect public policies, and especially the discourse concerning European integration and immigration (Poyet and Raunio 2021: 823; Westinen 2014: 142). Some of the most prevalent issues for those who voted for the Finns Party in 2011 were the (at that time) EU bailouts of Southern European countries facing public debt problems and the increasing immigration due to the turmoil in the Middle East (Borg 2012: 246). In other words, the electoral success of the Finns Party is at least somewhat explained by protest voting.

During the first years, EU membership was characterised by a steady support from the Finnish people. However, the Eurozone crisis of 2009–2010 that hit the European economy hard resulted in more polarisation regarding the EU in Finland (Iso-Markku 2016: 3). This eventually led to the advance of the Finns Party and their electoral triumph in 2011. Nevertheless, during the past years, public support for the EU has again increased in Finland. According to annual surveys, support for the EU increased by 19 percentage points, from 37 to 56 per cent, between the years 2011 and 2019, reaching a new record high (Haavisto 2019). Meanwhile, the number of voices critical of EU membership decreased by 17 percentage points, from 30 to 13 per cent, hitting a new record low in 2019 (Haavisto 2019).

4.1 An overview about the country

4.1.1 *The political system*

Finland is a unitary state that comprises many self-governed municipalities. Besides foreign policy, which the popularly elected president leads in conjunction with the government, Finland is an effectively parliamentary regime, with a prime minister accountable to a unicameral parliament (the *eduskunta* in Finnish, *riksdag* in Swedish). Finland is known for its multiparty governments which are characterised by broad cooperation across the left-right dimension. Typically, no party wins more than 25 per cent of the total vote, with 28.3 per cent being the highest recorded vote share after the post-war period in Finland (Raunio 2021: 169). The so-called six-pack government in 2011 serves as a good example of Finland's highly fragmented party system, with only the two remaining parties in the opposition (Raunio 2016). Compared with many other EU member states, Finnish elections, at least from a historical perspective, tend to have relatively high levels of turnout. However, turnout in the parliamentary elections (among the Finns living in Finland) has decreased since 1962 from 85.1 per cent to 72.1 per cent in 2019 (Ministry of Justice Finland 2020).

4.1.2 Core features of population and economy

Finland has a population of 5.5 million inhabitants speaking two national languages, Finnish and Swedish. Finnish is the mother tongue of 86.9 per cent of the population in Finland and Swedish of 5.2 per cent (Official Statistics of Finland 2020). Finland is the 17th most populous country in the EU (Eurostat 2020a). In 2019, the average number of years spent in education in Finland was 13 years for females and 12.7 years for males (UNDP n.d.). Finland has one of the oldest populations in the EU; 22 per cent are over 65 years old, and this number is expected to rise to 29 per cent by 2060 (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2021). One of the primary factors contributing to Finland's ageing population are the so-called big cohorts who were born after the war against the Soviet Union, that is in the years between 1939 and 1944. It is well known in Finland that these cohorts will put pressure on the Finnish healthcare and economy (Schleutker 2013: 426). In addition to this, Finland has had a negative population growth since 2016 (Sorsa 2020: 15). Consequently, attention has been drawn to Finland's need for more migrants to cope with the increasing number of pensioners and a decreasing workforce (Heikkilä 2017: 152).

Attitudes towards immigration in Finland have traditionally been cautious (Kurronen 2021). In 2019, Finland had the eight-lowest number of arriving immigrants among the EU member states (Eurostat 2021a). A comparison of the number of arriving immigrants over a ten-year period shows an increase from 26,699 immigrants in 2009 to 32,758 immigrants in 2019 (Eurostat 2021a). The number of foreign-born inhabitants of Finland was recorded in 2019 as 6.83 per cent, an increase of 2.83 percentage points from 4 per cent over the same ten-year period (Eurostat 2021c).

Finland has always had a highly export-oriented economy, with around 40 per cent of its GDP resulting from exports of goods and services (Statista 2022). Finland's main export goods are chemicals, electronics, machinery, metals and forest industry products (Finnish Customs 2022). From an export perspective, Finland's integration in the EU has been particularly important, as it presented an opportunity to join the EU's internal market. The trade within the EU amounts to 55 per cent of the total Finnish exports, with Germany (14 per cent), Sweden (10 per cent) and the Netherlands (7 per cent) being the largest markets. In addition to that, about 70 per cent of imports come from EU countries; for example 17 per cent comes from Germany and Sweden and 9 per cent from the Netherlands (European Union n.d.). In 2019, Finland had a negative trade balance of €0.2 billion (Eurostat 2021f). Interestingly, the last time Finland had a positive trade balance was in 2010 (Eurostat 2021f).

In 2019 (pre-COVID-19), Finland's gross domestic product (GDP) increased from €182 billion to €240 billion between 2009 and 2019 (Eurostat 2021d). The Finnish GDP per capita in 2019 was €37,150, which was considerably higher than the EU average of €28,060 (Eurostat 2021e). According to data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Finland's general government gross debt (percentage of GDP) was 59.5 per cent in 2019 (IMF 2021). Over the ten-year period between 2009 and 2019, the general government gross debt (percentage of GDP) in Finland increased from 41.5 to 59.5 per cent (IMF 2021).

In 2019, the unemployment level in Finland was the same as the EU average (6.7 per cent). This level had decreased by 1.5 percentage points over a ten-year period, from 8.2 per cent in 2009 to 6.7 per cent in 2019 (Eurostat 2021g). During this time, the unemployment level was at its lowest in 2019 (6.7 per cent), while its highest was in 2015 (9.4 per cent; Eurostat 2021g). As one might expect, the unemployment level rose by 1.1 percentage points in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Eurostat 2021g).

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Finland is currently considered a net contributor within the EU. Under the last Multiannual Financial Framework of the EU (2014–2020), Finland received €10 billion and contributed €14.4 billion to the EU, representing a net contribution of €4.4 billion (European Commission n.d.).

4.2 Finland and European integration

Finland is the only Nordic country that has the Euro as a currency and is thus part of the Eurozone. As mentioned previously, Finland and the Nordic region have been associated with Euroscepticism and are less supportive of integration compared with other European countries (Archer 2000). This phenomenon has been explained at times by the affluence of the Nordic region, which makes the Nordic people more sceptical of transferring policy-making powers to the EU level (Raunio 2011). In comparison to other regions in Europe, the nation-state and its sovereignty have traditionally been more important to people in the Nordic countries (Raunio 2011).

Nevertheless, before the emergence of the Finns Party in politics (at least as a serious party with a strong political mandate), a consensus had emerged supporting a policy that aimed to consolidate Finland's place in the centre of the EU (Raunio 2012: 10). For example, Finnish governments supported measures and proposals which gave the European Commission and European Parliament (EP) more power (Raunio 2005: 382). In addition to this, Finland has supported further integration in the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) (Raunio 2005: 382). Similarly, Finland has advocated for a more profound and common foreign and security policy, as evident in its active participation in the development of a common EU crises management system (Palosaari 2011). To this end, Finland's objectives have been focused on promoting peace in the regions surrounding the EU and elsewhere, and it has therefore taken an active role in crisis management endeavours led by the EU, United Nations and in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Jokela 2020: 7).

However, after the Finns Party's entry into the political arena, a stronger emphasis on national interest can be noted in the Finnish EU discourse, alongside the concern regarding the role of smaller member states in EU governance (Raunio 2014: 3). As a result, the Finnish government was put under pressure in 2011 to safeguard national interests. This included government opposition to the idea of Bulgaria and Romania joining the Schengen area. Similarly, the government also pushed for stronger collaterals for the bailout payments to Greece (Raunio 2012: 23). Indeed, the 2015 government programme exhibited a strong focus on national interests and economic matters (Ojanen and Raunio 2018: 49, 53). The programme stated, for

example, that all countries in the Eurozone were responsible for their own economy (Ojanen and Raunio 2018: 49). A relatively recent illustration of Finland's EU economic standpoint was the national political dilemma regarding the EU stimulus package (called Next Generation EU) for coping with the economic turmoil that the COVID-19 pandemic had caused. The decision to approve the recovery package in parliament was protracted over days, with the decision requiring a two-thirds majority to be approved due to constitutional constraints. The Finns Party unsurprisingly opposed the recovery package while the National Coalition Party was divided, with many politicians voicing concerns that the package placed too much responsibility for the collective debt on the Northern European states.³ In the end, the package received a two-thirds majority and was approved. However, the Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and almost one-third of the National Coalition Party voted against it.

Concerning the general public, attitudes towards the EU have improved in Finland, and Finns are relating more positively to the EU. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, a new record high in positive attitudes was witnessed in 2019 (Haavisto 2019). The same study revealed that, at the same time, there was a new record low of those who were critical towards the EU (Haavisto 2019). A similar "Brexit effect" has likewise been noticed in other European countries; that is the public image of the EU has improved since the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU (European Parliament 2018).

As Annex 1 displays, the level of trust towards the EU and the EP is somewhat higher in Finland compared to the EU average. The majority of Finns (52 per cent) trust the EU and the EP. Generally, from a global comparison, Finland exhibits high levels of political trust, especially regarding trust in national institutions such as the parliament and the legal system (Torcal 2017: 423). Indeed, support for the Euro as a currency is 9 percentage points higher in Finland compared to the EU average. Although the Finns are somewhat less satisfied with how democracy works within the EU compared to the average EU citizen, 62 per cent of the Finns are optimistic about the future of the EU. About 44 per cent of Finns believe that their voices count in the EU and 75 per cent feel that they have a European citizenship.

As Annex 3 shows, 54 per cent of Finns believe that peace in Europe is a positive result of the EU, which is 7 percentage points higher than the EU average. A broad majority in Finland, 61 per cent, consider the free movement of people, goods and services a positive feature of the EU. The Euro as a currency is viewed positively by a large proportion of Finns (36 per cent), and it is much higher compared with the EU average (22 per cent). The common agricultural policy, however, is viewed more negatively in Finland and, at 3 per cent, is even lower than the already low EU average. As previously mentioned, votes against the Finnish EU membership in 1994 largely came from rural areas where agriculture is more predominant. Few Finns see "the economic power of the EU" as a positive result of European integration; agreement with this statement is 15 percentage points lower in Finland compared with the EU average. As pointed out earlier, Finland does not always agree with the economic policies of the EU. The Finns also value less "solidarity amongst the member states" compared with the EU average.

With a view to Annex 2, it becomes clear that Finns tend to agree with the average EU citizen on the importance of different issues in the EU. However, there are two issues that clearly stand out and which Finns view as more important. The first being the EU's influence in the world and the second being the state of member states' public finances. At the same time, the average EU citizen thinks that health-related issues are more important than the Finns seem to do.

4.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

4.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

The three Finnish groups had similar thoughts when they heard the words “European Union”, as “community”, “cooperation”, “free movement”, “trade” and the “Euro” were mentioned by several participants. The Euro was mentioned by many and was described as something “concrete” and as a “symbol of the EU.” In the focus groups, attitudes towards the EU were mostly positive, and EU membership was seen as something that had several positive aspects for Finland. The EU was described, for example, “as a beneficial community.” One participant mentioned “European community”, elaborating that “we somehow belong together, all the countries in Europe” (FIFG3_M4). However, some of the participants from the lower paid and unemployed group and one of the young adults had neutral attitudes towards the EU. Based on the occurrence of mostly positive attitudes in the Finnish focus group discussions and no directly negative attitudes, although some more neutral, we can argue that these attitudes reflect more recent surveys, which in 2019 showed a new record high regarding the support towards the EU in Finland.

When asked about the benefits of EU membership, the participants thought Finland had become more “Western European” and that the “Western culture has become stronger” (FIFG1_F4). Other benefits which the participants mentioned were that “you go further together” (FIFG3_F3) when you are a part of a collective and that you get “more opportunities” (FIFG1_F4) and that Finland had become “a more global player” (FIFG3_M2), that “Finland gets a bigger voice” (FIFG3_F1) and that “you are not on the outside and so on, the [political] influence is also important” (FIFG3_F3). This finding confirms what was highlighted in this chapter's introduction, namely, that one of drivers of a Finnish EU membership was a strong will among the Finnish society to be more closely integrated to the West. Travelling, moving and living in another EU country have also become easier according to the participants: “you can travel and move freely, those who travel and even those who travel because of work can do it a little freer” (FIFG2_F3). Other benefits which were mentioned were economic advantages and the common currency.

When asked about the negative effects of the EU, many participants thought that the Euro has not been a success and was critical of the Southern European countries. A participant stated that “[i]f some countries have some severe economic problems, there can be problems for all member states, so that can also be a negative thing” (FIFG2_M2). Overall, the *economic problems of other EU countries*

were brought up in all three groups as a disadvantage of Finnish EU membership. One participant argued that “[o]ur currency is very dependent on the other member states” and that “you may end up taking and carrying some other member states’ problems” (FIFG3_F1), while another claimed that the EMU “has made the [economic] recovery a little slower than it otherwise could have been” (FIFG3_M4). One participant further highlighted the “Protestant work ethic in Finland” (FIFG1_M1) as a reason for why, according to him, Finnish people always strive to “perform very well” and that it has “cost us quite dearly in the EU context and in the Euro cooperation” – which, as per his statements, does not apply for all countries in the EU. Another participant further elaborated that “we [Finns] are perhaps sticking to duty, we are conscientious, we actually ratify all directives [set by the EU] to the point and in detail” (FIFG1_M2). Other negative factors raised in the discussions included “structural changes”, which have had a negative effect on Finnish small-scale businesses and farmers. The “administration”/bureaucracy dimension of the EU was also criticised and seen as “a bit cumbersome” (FIFG1_F4). Other disadvantages which were mentioned included the perception that EU membership “may restrict state sovereignty when an EU law must be complied with” (FIFG3_M2) and other problems concerning legislation when the EU has “a certain view of things and Finland another” (FIFG2_M1). As mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, there were critical voices in Finland at the time of the EU referendum, relating to the possible effects of the membership on the Finnish sovereignty and how it could increase bureaucracy. Also, problems related to insufficient information about the EU and that “citizens don’t really know what is being decided and exactly what it is about” (FIFG3_F3) were mentioned.

4.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

When asked about how the EU should react in the face of natural disaster, there was a feeling of solidarity among the Finnish participants. One participant felt that “[t]his is something we need to do together” and that “[i]t’s something we help with” (FIFG1_F4). While another participant said, “I also think it is important that the burden of helping does not end up just in the nearby areas, that it should be distributed evenly” (FIFG3_F1). Another one said that “[Finland should] help when it is needed. And then if we ‘turn the cake over’⁴ if something happens to us [in Finland] then hopefully someone in the EU could also help us” (FIFG2_F3). While another participant said that “[o]ther EU countries should help if a country is struggling” (FIFG2_M1). As Annex 1 illustrates, the feeling of being European citizens is high in Finland (75 per cent). One could argue that this can be observed among the participants of the focus group discussions conducted in Finland, especially the willingness to help other Europeans in a natural disaster.

When asked if some EU countries should do more than others in the case of a natural disaster, a participant answered, “some EU countries always do more” (FIFG1_M1). Another participant added that the larger EU countries should do more “because they have better resources and larger economics and so on”

(FIFG1_F3), which means that it is seen as fairer that larger countries help more. A participant from another group was on the same page saying: “Anyone who has more should share more. Those who don’t have should get away more easily” and further elaborated: “Well, the big EU countries, those with a strong economy, should pay more” (FIFG2_M1). Other participants also stated that it would be fairer if larger EU countries would help more in a disaster while stressing that “[n]ot everyone has the same conditions to help” (FIFG3_F3). Here it became evident, especially among the high skilled group, that some participants felt that not all the large countries in the EU do enough, with a focus on the Southern European countries. Some participants thought that Finland is pulling a heavier load than it should while some countries “may not do their part as much as we do” (FIFG1_M2), which was seen as a lack of reciprocity. In other words, the participants believed that providing help should be fairly allocated between all EU member states.

There was a clear geographical aspect involved and a stronger feeling of solidarity for neighbouring countries when the participants discussed how Finland should react if a natural disaster hit another EU country. Some of the participants thought that if the affected country was nearby (e.g. Sweden), Finland should send help, because “it is so much easier to send help if it’s close” (FIFG2_M2), that it is easier to help Sweden than Spain if a natural disaster occurs. One participant said, “if it is Finland that is exposed, I would certainly think that Sweden, Denmark and also Norway even though they do not belong to the EU, that they would come and help Finland” (FIFG3_M2), while another one said, “I would say that how Finland acts depends on what happens, if it happens close to Finland, then faster” (FIFG3_M4). At the same time, participants argued that if the affected country was, for example, Germany or a Southern European country “maybe someone else is closer who can help” (FIFG1_F4). In this sense, the feeling of solidarity among the participants was stronger towards neighbouring countries. This participant, however, further elaborated that she thinks Finland will assist with things that they can help with and that “Finland is willing to do its part” (FIFG1_F4).

While discussing if Finland should pay for potential aid-related costs in another country affected by a natural disaster, the opinions varied among the groups. One young adult said, “I would say that it is the European Union that should bear the costs plus voluntary activities” (FIFG3_M2). The participant further elaborated, “So, it is the European Union that should stand for it [the cost], conclusion, the country will not stand for it” (FIFG3_M2). Another participant agreed with the statement: “I agree with [FIFG3_M2] that the European Union should stand for it, or if they cannot, it should be divided evenly between the member states” (FIFG3_F3). The reactions from those in the lower paid and unemployed group were similar, and the group had a consensus that it should be common funds from the EU covering the costs: “You must look at the situation first by using common funds” (FIFG2_F3). A young adult said, “I would also say that if you send something that it would be reasonable that it is not too expensive. Little help that will not generate a big cost is okay” (FIFG3_M4). In the high skilled group, the participants thought that Finland could cover the costs by themselves if the situation really required

it. One of the participants took the sinking of MS Estonia in 1994⁵ as an example and said:

[I]t has never been between these nations that cleared up this mess, so Finland, Sweden, and Estonia, have never discussed any money [. . .], and I think it is a non-issue that should not be discussed. And I hope that this is the spirit in [the] EU if there is a disaster of that magnitude.

(FIFG1_M1).

Such a statement clearly indicates a wish for a deep understanding of solidarity in a crisis.

However, there were mixed feelings of solidarity among the participants when they discussed their personal responsibility in a natural disaster. One participant said: “If I can help, I think I would” (FIFG3_F3). However, another said, “You should help if you can” (FIFG2_F3). And a third one clearly stated, “No, I have no responsibility to help personally” (FIFG3_M2). This position was shared by FIFG3_M4: “I would say that I don’t feel like I have any responsibility to help.” Other arguments were: “I pay enough taxes in this country and I trust that some of the tax money that I pay is used in such a way that I don’t have to think about that myself” (FIFG1_M1); while another participant said, “Some of our taxes go to some kind of crisis register that the state uses when needed. I don’t know if you have much else to do besides that as an individual citizen” (FIFG2_M2). Another participant stressed that “I would feel a calling [to help]” (FIFG1_M2). Others stated that they would help by financial means. In addition, one participant emphasised that

I also expect if there is a crisis or a disaster in Finland, I expect the same. That Finland gets the same help, that it is not just that we might help some countries that are otherwise economically, we could say, worse off than Finland, and if it were to happen in Finland, we would stand alone or perhaps [only] with the Nordic countries to help

(FIFG1_F4).

4.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a financial crisis

When the participants were asked how Finland should react if any financial or economic crisis such as the Eurozone crisis were to happen again, there was a distinct lack of solidarity, especially among the high skilled and the young adult group. One participant thought that “[i]f it heads towards the woods, let it fall” (FIFG1_M1) meaning if the situation is as bad as it was 2009–2010 for some countries, let them fall. One participant from the young adult group said, “to save the member states that are most vulnerable, it feels that at some stage it is not enough. You can’t sacrifice all the economies in the Euro area because some are doing really poorly” (FIFG3_F1), while another one said, “Finland may not be able to do much, and

then I agree with FIFG3_F1 that it is perhaps better to let some country sink than for everyone to sink” (FIFG3_F3).

In contrast to the two other focus groups, there was a feeling of solidarity in the lower paid and unemployed group when they discussed the financial crisis scenario. One participant thought that “Finland must help together with other countries, jointly” (FIFG2_M1). Another participant agreed with this statement and emphasised that “we must do our part as well, as, surely others would do if it were to apply to us” (FIFG2_F3), which expressed a reciprocal understanding of mutual support. The same participant later elaborated, “You can’t make any demands, but you wish you would get the same treatment that we could give if someone else is affected” (FIFG2_F3). Another participant expected solidarity from the EU if Finland was in a financial crisis: “I would hope that they follow the charters and contracts that exist [in the EU]” (FIFG2_M2).

However, when questioned about how other countries should react if Finland was badly affected by an economic crisis, opinions were generally divided. Indeed, many participants believed any action hinged on the underlying reasons for, and context of, the crisis, looking both at whether Finland helps another country or if Finland is the receiver of the help. Some of the participants from both the high skilled and the young adult group argued that they expected solidarity if an external trigger was behind the economic crisis: “But if the ECB [European Central Bank] or the European Union take decisions that will make everything go to hell, then it is also the EU’s responsibility to solve it” (FIFG3_M2). If the crisis was due to Finland’s own weak financial politics “then you stand your ground and then you have to stand for your own problems” (FIFG1_M1). They also stressed that it should apply to all countries “that if they have put themselves on the potty [in a tricky situation], they will also sort it out and not expect the rest of us to sort it out for them” (FIFG1_F4), while another participant stated that “we should not get help either if we’re in a shitty situation and we’ve put ourselves there” (FIFG3_F3). In simpler terms, the participants thought that if a crisis is self-inflicted, the country, including Finland, should bear responsibility for it.

One participant elaborated that “if those countries have put themselves in that shitty situation, then they can sink with the ship”, and later he argued that

Greece’s taxation system sucks very effectively – in a bad way. If then the least corrupt country in the world, Finland, which has an effective tax collection, should then come and help and pay for Greece because its system does not work, that is not okay. (FIFG3_M2)

The participant also highlighted: “If Finland has gone in for such an economic policy that puts us in a bad position, then the Finnish politicians and the Finnish people will eventually have to wake up” (FIFG3_M2) or “Yes, the same as for other countries. If you make a fool of yourself, you have to be ashamed or suffer for it” (FIFG2_M1).

Nevertheless, some of the participants in the lower paid and unemployed group also wished for support from the EU: “You can’t make any demands, but you wish

you would get the same treatment that we could give if someone else is affected” (FIFG2_F3), and (F1FG2_M1) stated: “You hope to get help from other EU countries and also then that you change your behaviour if you have gotten into such a situation.”

As with the two other groups, the Finnish lower paid and unemployed group thought that the underlying context of the crisis mattered. When asked if Finland’s help would differ depending on what country is affected by the economic crisis, one participant answered that it would matter “why [does] the country suffer, whether it is very self-inflicted or not” (FIFG2_M2). When asked to elaborate if the crisis is self-inflicted, the participant said, “Then there must be some form of punishment or compensation included in the picture if there is to be help” (FIFG2_M2). The rest of the group agreed with this statement that the extent of any assistance given by Finland should depend on the circumstances that caused the crisis. One participant elaborated, “I agree pretty much with FIFG2_M2. Of course, if it is then due to self-inflicted or corruption and such, you have to think a little about according to what requirements you can help” (FIFG2_M1).

This sentiment complements the Finnish “economic standpoint” as depicted earlier in the chapter. Based on the Finnish focus group discussions, it seems that many participants agree that EU countries are responsible for their own economy. The Eurobarometer data presented in the Annexes 2 and 3 also underlines this issue. Finns, for example, clearly think that “the state of member states’ public finances” is more important than the average EU citizen does. Moreover, Finns are far less likely to consider “the economic power of the EU” as a positive aspect of the EU when compared with the EU average. In other words, Finns are more sceptical.

4.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

Regarding the scenario dealing with social disparities, the participants’ opinions varied. Within the high skilled group, participants believed that the EU should have a common fund that would try to reduce the inequalities in society. One participant stated, for example, that “it is something we should work with within the EU and precisely to reduce differences between different people” (FIFG1_F4) – in the sense of being solidary within the EU. The participants further stressed that it is not sufficient to simply draw attention to inequality but to give them “the visibility they need to get” (FIFG1_M1). Another participant (FIFG1_F3) thought that the goal to strengthen equality should be as important for the EU as it is to strengthen the economic structure in disadvantage regions. The participants from the lower paid and unemployed group thought that it would be fairer if those who have more resources contributed more: “Those who have a lot should also pay more” (FIFG2_M1). Furthermore, it was argued that “[t]hey should be taxed much more harshly those who are very rich and, in this way, get to the increasing gaps between rich and poor” (FIFG2_M2). In addition, one participant further elaborated “Greater taxation on the very rich! There is no reason why an individual should be a billionaire” (FIFG2_M2). The young adults were more sceptical and stated, “All countries are at different

levels, so I do not know how you would set general limits, all countries will probably have to manage it themselves” (FIFG3_M4). One participant even said, “I also spontaneously think that each country should handle it themselves” (FIFG3_F3).

The participants from all three groups were sceptical towards an EU-wide system for dealing with unemployment. They explained their reasoning by highlighting the diverse societal structures and social safety nets in different member states, which would make the implementation of such a system very “difficult to deal with it in a uniform way” (FIFG1_M1). One participant from the young adult group said, “All countries are at different levels [of social inequalities]. So, I do not know how you would set general limits. All countries will probably have to manage it themselves” (FIFG3_M4). While another one from the group stated, “I also spontaneously think that each country should handle it themselves. Because it is still something that can be done within the country” (FIFG3_F3). Furthermore, one participant emphasised: “We have unemployment that is not so easy to deal with here either. So, in this case, perhaps it would be a reason to look after ourselves first, unfortunately” (FIFG2_F3). Another participant agreed: “Yes, I agree with that. To do something about your own country’s unemployment in the first place and not waste energy on any other country” (FIFG2_M1). Another participant thought that it would be fairer if countries with lower unemployment were to help more: “[L]et’s say that if a country already has its own problems with unemployment, I think you can’t put as much pressure on them to help others with their unemployment” (FIFG2_M4). This type of reasoning among Finns is similarly present in Annex 2, where 2 per cent of Finns regarded unemployment as an important issue in the EU, compared with 8 per cent by EU citizens in general.

4.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions in Finland

In general, many of the Finnish participants felt pride in the country’s contribution to the EU. However, many questioned if there is currently a fair and equal balance for those countries that contribute and were critical of countries seen as “constantly failing.” Some participants felt that it is unfair for “strong” countries, including Finland, to bear the burden while other countries continue to fail “due to a lack of effort.” Nevertheless, the participants remained committed to Finland’s EU membership and believed that Finland should continue to contribute. They viewed the Finnish EU membership as overall positive, but a majority also thought that at some point, countries that consistently fail must face consequences.

There were some key similarities in all three focus group discussions conducted in Finland. One clear consensus was the geographical aspect pertaining to a stronger feeling of solidarity with neighbouring countries (especially with the Nordic countries). Another similarity present among the group discussions was the perception that the extent to which Finland should help another EU country affected by an economic crisis is dependent on the underlining context. The amount of help would similarly differ depending on whether the crisis was self-inflicted or if it was caused by an external factor.

If the economic crisis was self-inflicted, both the high skilled and the group of young adults were prepared to let some countries fall for “the greater good” of the EU – which ultimately means that at a certain point in time, it should be said: enough is enough. The participants from the lower paid and unemployed group did not go that far, rather they argued that the countries in need should be somehow “punished” and should have to follow certain requirements if the crisis was self-inflicted: “Then there must be some form of punishment or compensation included in the picture if there is to be help. If it’s very corrupt things that have happened or similar [that have caused the crisis]” (FIG2_M2). In other words, there were some elements of deservingness embedded in the lower paid and unemployed group discussion regarding potential aid to countries that were seen as having caused harm to themselves due to a lack of necessary changes, such as addressing corruption. There was also an argument of conditionality, where necessary change was demanded in exchange for provided aid in order to prevent future failure and to guarantee improvements.

Overall, the statements and the reasoning of the high skilled group and the group of young adults were quite similar. Both groups had strong opinions and were very direct when they discussed the financial crisis scenario. The two groups were also quite critical towards Southern European countries. This was not the case for the lower paid and unemployed group. These participants instead mentioned the possibility that Finland could be negatively affected by other countries’ economic problems, which they saw as a disadvantage of EU membership. However, the discussion remained brief, and the subject was not discussed further in any more depth. However, all three groups emphasised that the same treatment should apply to Finland if it failed to act responsibly. At the same time, they stressed that Finland should receive assistance if the triggers of the crisis were external. Overall, the persons from the lower paid and unemployed group demonstrated a higher level of solidarity and a sense of cohesion within the EU compared with the two other groups.

Notes

- 1 Regarding a NATO membership, the Finnish public opinion had been somewhat cautious before the Russo-Ukrainian war since February 2022. The Russian invasion resulted in a rapid change in the Finnish public opinion towards NATO and a vast majority of the Finnish population started to support an accession (Weckman 2023). In May 2022 the Finnish parliament approved a proposal of a Finnish NATO membership. Finland joined NATO on 4 April 2023.
- 2 See <https://yle.fi/a/3-11033686> (Finland’s per-capita net payments to EU nearly doubled last year to €105, last access 27 October 2023).
- 3 See https://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finland_approves_eu_covid_recovery_package/11936765 (last access 27 September 2022).
- 4 This means turning a situation around and viewing it from a reversed perspective.
- 5 On 28 September 1994 the ferry MS Estonia sank while crossing the Baltic Sea. The tragedy caused over 800 deaths. The rescue operation that followed was mostly conducted in cooperation between Finland, Sweden and Estonia.

5 Germany

“We profit if the EU, if other countries are doing well”

Jared Sonnicksen and Melina Lehning

Germany holds a special place in the European Union (EU) for several reasons. The most obvious ones relate to the size of its population and economy, both being the largest within the EU. These factors are relevant for determining contributions owed to the EU budget but also representation and votes at EU level, for example seats in the European Parliament (EP) or voting weight in the Council of Ministers. However, while “size matters”, so does “history”, not least in the course of European integration. The path toward “ever closer union” began with a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 in the immediate wake of the horrendous devastation of the Second World War – its chief perpetrator being the defeated, then occupied, divided and soon re-founded Germany, or rather two German states in 1949. The incorporation of the nascent Federal Republic of Germany (“West Germany”) and its *Westintegration* were elemental to its own political and economic development. Related motives also guided the other five founding members of the ECSC (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands). The six countries aimed to secure nothing less than sustained economic stability and prosperity and also peace in Europe. This too underlines the special importance of Germany to the EU, and vice versa, the EU for Germany over time.

Fast forwarding to the present, European integration continues to figure into German politics and even its polity. There was a *déjà-vu* of common destiny three decades ago when German reunification (1990) was immediately followed by the European Communities’ founding of a European Union with the Treaty of Maastricht (1992). A general sense of responsibility towards the EU and for the European integration project persists by and large in Germany to this day. However, in short, both the EU and Germany have witnessed tremendous changes. They include meanwhile a profoundly deepened and widened EU for one and a reunified, largely consolidated Germany with a rather eminent standing on the European and even international stage for another. However, several crises of recent years have challenged cohesion within the EU in general and among its member states in particular. Moreover, German political and even citizen positions toward the EU, on the whole, appear to have become more complex, certainly when compared with the first decades of its membership in the European integration project.

5.1 An overview about the country

5.1.1 The political system

Like all EU member states, Germany has a free-market economy and a democratic political system underpinned by a constitution.¹ It comprises a *Bundesrepublik* or Federal Republic. Accordingly, the vertical dimension of the polity is organised federally, with a constitutionally enshrined division between the federal and 16 state (*Länder*) governments. The *Länder* have their own constitutions and also parliaments, governments and prime ministers as well as legislative competencies in policies such as education and regional development.

The republican form of government and the division of powers are constituted as a parliamentary democracy. It is headed by a chancellor (*Bundeskanzler/-in*) dependent on the confidence of federal parliament (*Bundestag*). Additionally, a president serves as head of state that is separately appointed (not popularly elected) and predominantly ceremonial.

The German Constitution, the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*), took effect in 1949, applying for the next four decades to “West Germany” only, while the separate East Germany formed as a socialist and unitary regime of the German Democratic Republic (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*, DDR). The *Grundgesetz* was originally and widely considered a provisional constitution to be replaced by a new one upon the end of Germany’s division. Article 146 even prescribed a constitutional convention for this event, though the original Article 23 also provided for the possibility of “accession of other parts of Germany.” The reunification in 1990 transpired ultimately via the latter mode, with the territory of the former DDR acceding as “new *Länder*” to the *Bundesrepublik*. This by consequence entailed the first post-Cold War “Eastern Enlargement” of the EU but it also made a large area of Germany, the “new *Länder*”, eligible for assistance under the EU cohesion policy. Incidentally, Article 23 of the Basic Law was soon amended into the *Europaartikel*, prescribing Germany’s commitment to European unification (Art. 23(1)) and the inclusion of both the parliament (*Bundestag*) and the *Länder* in deciding on European affairs (Art. 23(2)).

The arrangement of federalism and parliamentary democracy in Germany is noteworthy for understanding government and governing processes. It also bears relevance in the context of European integration, for how Germany’s participation in decision-making at EU level as well as the domestic implementation of EU legislation work (see, e.g. Kreppel 2011; Scharpf 1988). The federal government (chancellor and cabinet) is typically formed by coalitions and responsible to the federal parliament (*Bundestag*), its majority (coalition) in particular. However, the federal government and the parliament must also govern with the *Länder* in multiple areas of policy. Approximately half of federal legislation is subject to the approval of the Federal Council (*Bundesrat*), which consists of representatives of the *Länder* governments,² while the *Länder* are responsible for implementing a large share of federal legislation (see, e.g. Benz 2009: 104–118). German cooperative federalism with its distinctive *Politikverflechtung* (*Verflechtung* = lit. interlocking) involves

structural-functional interlinkage and “joint decision making” between levels of government (see Scharpf 1988; cf. also Kropp 2010). Incidentally, this Bundesrat model reveals striking institutional similarities to the EU (cf. also e.g. Börzel and Hosli 2003). For instance, akin to the Bundesrat, the EU Council of Ministers is not a second chamber proper beside the “first chamber”, the EP. It rather consists of representatives of member state governments who – among other functions – decide on EU legislation, while the member states, akin to the German Länder, are also responsible for implementing a large share of EU legislation.

The German political system is furthermore characterised by a multiparty system. It has long been moderately pluralistic, but with growing fluctuation and fragmentation in recent years (see, e.g. Decker 2018). In addition to societal pluralism, the existence of multiple significant parties also relates to the electoral system with its rules of proportional representation, which typically favours multipartyism anyway. The federal electoral system has remained largely the same (minus rather minor changes) for over six decades. However, the party system has experienced several major shifts, especially since German reunification. They range from changing patterns of support for established parties, for example a substantial decline in support for the two largest parties – the Christian Democrat Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), increased volatility paired with declining party identification, and the success of newcomer parties like the Greens as of the 1980s or the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS; called the Left Party, *Die Linke*, since 2005) after reunification (see, e.g. Abedi 2017; Poguntke 2014).³ The liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) has been another significant “smaller” party since the founding in 1949 to the present. Finally, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party formed in the wake of the Eurozone crisis. It was based at first on a fiscal conservative platform, but quickly transformed into a full-fledged Euro-sceptic and right-wing populist party now with representation in the Bundestag and at EU (in the EP) and Länder levels (see, e.g. Arzheimer 2015; Bieber et al. 2018; Niedermayer 2018).

Another institution, the Federal Constitutional Court (*Bundesverfassungsgericht*), also warrants brief attention. Given its large scope of judicial review powers, it serves a key role in Germany’s systems of constitutional rule of law and separation of powers. The Bundesverfassungsgericht has also been appealed to multiple times throughout the European integration history. It has reached multiple landmark decisions⁴ expressing, for example limits on the trajectory of European integration, the competences of the EU and even the judicial review power of the European Court of Justice; demands for more consultation of and co-determination by the Bundestag and Länder in EU decisions; and repeated claims that the grounding of EU democracy lies, not in EP elections, but ultimately in the constitutional-representative democracy of the member states (Dyevre 2011; Höpner et al. 2010; Höreth 2009: 170–174). In short, it appears that the development of the EU related jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court over time signals a shift away from its “European friendliness” of the early decades of European integration.

Finally, German fiscal federalism is also of interest in the EU context of institutionalised solidarity. The Länder in Germany have – compared with counterparts in

other federal systems like the United States, Canada and Switzerland – a considerably restricted scope of fiscal autonomy (Egner 2012: 90–120). The same applies, however, to the federal government too. The vast amount of tax revenues (e.g. income, value-added, capital gains, and corporate taxes), or about 70 to 75 per cent, are shared, and legislation on these taxes is decided jointly by the Bundestag and the Bundesrat (Art. 106 GG; see Conrath and Langenbacher 2013: 314–317). In addition, there is a scheme of equalisation payments among the Länder. Equalisation as redistributive balancing represents an organisational principle of German fiscal federalism in general. The allocation of fiscal responsibilities and proportions of revenues pursue together the constitutional goal of “equivalent living standards” (Art. 72 GG) and a fair distribution, in both horizontal (i.e. among Länder) and vertical (i.e. across levels) perspectives.

Reform pressures on the German federal system have increased in multiple ways since reunification but also in connection with Europeanisation and globalisation processes as well as increased public debt (for overview, see, e.g. Benz 2005: 206f.). They have provoked especially more fiscally well-off Länder to call for shifting fiscal federalism towards more fiscal autonomy (see, e.g. Braun 2007). Additionally, the need to comply with the Euro-convergence or “Maastricht criteria” for example on balanced budgets and public debt placed financial planning and public debt monitoring on the reform agenda (Heinz 2016; Kropp 2010: 92ff.). In response, reforms to the German federal system in the last decade have introduced, for instance, constitutional “debt brakes” (*Schuldenbremse*) and a “Stability Council” (*Stabilitätsrat*) as cross-level system of joint expenditure oversight and planning, as well as modifications to fiscal equalisation by abolishing the formal *horizontal* equalisation, though it was integrated into the vertical equalisation from the federal government to the Länder (Benz and Sonnicksen 2018; Heinz 2016; Kropp 2010: 92ff.; Kropp and Behnke 2016). Consequently, the German federal system and its fiscal federal arrangement remain highly predisposed to multilateral cooperation and joint decision-making, but with changes prompted especially by fiscal pressures and EU legal requirements.

5.1.2 Core features of population and economy

Among the EU member states, Germany has the largest population with around 84 million inhabitants. The population has remained rather constant, having grown slightly since reunification on the whole. Demographic changes common to all EU member states also affect Germany such as an ageing society, with a declining fertility rate (ca. 1.5 children per woman) and percentage of youth. Thus, the population size could only be maintained at bottom line by increased life expectancy and through immigration. For instance, in 2021, a total of approximately 1.3 million people immigrated to Germany, while only approximately 1 million people emigrated (Destatis 2022). Slightly more than one-fourth of the population (approximately 21 million persons) has an immigration background, around one-half of which are German citizens (approximately 11 million) and one-half non-citizens (approximately 10 million; Destatis 2020). The population is rather

evenly distributed across the country, though with increased urbanisation in recent decades, while North Rhine-Westphalia is the most populated Land, with over 18 million inhabitants, and the capital Berlin, with over 3.5 million, the largest city.

The country exhibits by international comparison high levels of human development (e.g. education, health) and standard of living, as well as low inequality, though the latter has grown in recent years (see, e.g. CIA 2021; OECD 2021). These features of the population or society at large relate not just to its advanced economic position. Germany also has a long-established welfare state regime that, despite being a federal country, involves – as illustrated prior – extensive redistributive measures of public finance (see also e.g. Hepp and von Hagen 2012). Hence, redistributive measures by social welfare policies and between regions through fiscal equalisation make up significant features of the German political economic landscape.

Regarding the economy, Germany's gross domestic product (GDP) is also the largest among the EU member states and among the five largest worldwide. In 2019, it amounted to about €3,474 billion, with a GDP per capita of about €35,950 (Eurostat 2021d, 2021e), while 2020 ended a ten-year streak of back-to-back growth, that is since the economic downturn in 2008–2009. In general, the economic system is highly diversified. As with other European countries and advanced industrialised economies since the 1970s, Germany has witnessed substantial changes in its economy and labour market. They are linked with macro trends like post-industrialisation, globalisation and Europeanisation, and in response, there have been adaptations to the social welfare system such as flexibilisation, and reforms promoting competitiveness and economic liberalisation (see, e.g. Jackson and Sorge 2012; Keman 2010). At the same time, while services – albeit broadly conceived – have expanded to an over two-thirds share, the industrial and production sector continues to make up more than 20 per cent of the entire economy (see, e.g. OECD 2021). The relatively sizeable secondary sector of the economy persists, underpinned by not only large industrial corporations but also small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This ties into another salient feature of the German economy, namely its export orientation. In 2022, Germany's export reached an amount of €1,594 billion and its import €1,505 billion, yielding a positive foreign trade balance of €88 billion. The main trading partners are the United States, France, the Netherlands and China (see Destatis 2023). More than half of Germany's foreign trade (55 per cent) is made within the EU with a positive foreign trade balance of €186 billion in 2022. Generally, Germany is viewed as a country which is strong in exports and thus enjoys intense integration with the economies of other European countries and also the United States and other partners around the world, particularly China.

Under the last Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of the EU, that is in the period from 2014 to 2020, Germany contributed €197 billion to the EU budget. Having only received €80 billion from the EU during this period, Germany constituted one of the net contributors to the Community budget – together with France (€152 billion), Italy (€114 billion) and, before Brexit, the United Kingdom (€119 billion; see European Commission n.d.).

5.2 Germany and European integration

The well-known “permissive consensus” (Lindberg and Scheingold 1971), the diffuse support of the population and the broad consensus among political elites, generally applied to all member states during the first decades of the European integration project. However, it had special relevance in the case of Germany. For most of its history, European integration enjoyed broad support across the spectrum of established political parties and the populace at large in Germany. What is more, as mentioned earlier, integration in “Western” institutions and organisations had pivotal significance after the Second World War, and the *Westbindung* (“western alliance”) especially for the defeated and occupied Germany and, as of 1949, its newly formed Federal Republic (cf. also Granieri 2003). The European integration project represented thus not only a dramatic break with the past (Patel 2011) but also a fundamental opportunity for the political, economic and even societal reconstruction of Germany.

The Federal Republic’s policies as well as political preferences toward “Europe” still varied already in the first decades up to reunification under the different governments: for instance with regard to focus (e.g. on economic, political and/or at times security integration) or intensity of engagement with both the European level and other member states (see Loth 1994; 1996: esp. 48–90; Böttger and Jopp 2021; Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet 2021). Driving these different approaches or focuses were various factors, from external ones like international political developments stemming from the East-West/Cold War conflict or shifts in the global economy such as the oil crisis of the early 1970s, to rather internal ones like changes in the party heading the government and their coalition partners. In addition to harbouring several kinds of *Europapolitik*, there existed in parallel different European political *Leitbilder*, wider visions or goals of the purpose and ends of European integration: these spanned from functional oriented views to aspirations of European federation (Schneider 1992), from “rational-purpose based association” to European “superstate” (Giering 1997: 182ff.). On the whole though, German governments reiterated their commitment to European community as well as their efforts to provide renewed impetus or *rélances* to European integration.

With the creation of the EU (in 1992), the trajectory of its competences expanded, especially related to the common market, as well as the scope of areas of EU cooperation, soon followed by several waves of membership enlargement (in the years 1995, 2004, 2007, 2013). In contrast to the prior decades of European integration, in which the community was considerably less active and visible, criticism of the EU as an elite affair and as overly distant from the citizens became increasingly common, also reflected in growing success of Eurosceptic and even anti-EU-integration parties (see, e.g. Haller 2008). Similar trends emerged in Germany, though the lack of right-wing party success largely persisted, at least until recently. Again, for a long time, there were hardly any notable critical voices in the public debate in Germany concerning EU membership, the development of European integration or even individual policies – such as the perceived ineffectiveness of the Common

Agricultural Policy or the resistance against a currency union. German citizens' attitudes toward European integration were characterised more by loose support or "benevolent indifference" (Freudlsperger and Jachtenfuchs 2021: 124). This pattern changed over the years among both elites and citizenry at large. Nevertheless, there is a generally more positive attitude and trust toward the EU and its institutions compared to the EU average (see Annex 1 of this book).

As in other countries of the European Communities pre-Maastricht (1992), on the other hand, the permissive consensus and/or benevolent indifference was reflected likewise in European election results and especially voter turnout. This "second order" character attributed to the elections to the EP from the outset (Reif and Schmitt 1980) appears to remain applicable on the whole, also in Germany. Although EU political issues play a meanwhile stronger role, voter turnout continues to be comparatively low, patterns echoed in the German case as well (see, e.g. Clark and Rohrschneider 2009; Koepke and Ringe 2006; also European Parliament 2021a).

The political positions toward the EU since German reunification have become, in a sense, more complex or rather more "complicating", certainly for the EU itself, for intricate political, social and economic reasons (see, e.g. Bulmer and Paterson 2010; Freudlsperger and Jachtenfuchs 2021; Green et al. 2012). With its economic strength and overall political position, German governments have become more openly assertive of own interests – and in this regard perhaps more "normal" – but also less pro-supranational, even spearheading the "new intergovernmentalism" (Bickerton et al. 2015) that unfolded in EU crises of recent.

Explicitly anti-EU stances and parties, ones that receive significant electoral support no less, appeared in the wake of the Euro crisis and subsequently the wave of refugees in 2015. These events, and public contestation on these issues, did not cause alone, but certainly helped spur the emergence and strengthening of a right-wing populist, Eurosceptic party, the Alternative for Germany (see Section 5.1.1). In the most recent federal elections (2021), the party gained just over 10 per cent. Moreover, it has gained representation throughout the country, with seats in almost all Länder parliaments but is particularly strong in the eastern part of the country. However, EU critical voices have also emerged on the left side of the political spectrum in Germany in recent years, too (e.g. Jörke 2019; Streeck 2017; Wagenknecht 2021: 185–189). Their major points of critique include the loss of democratic self-determination which is seen as resulting from the transfer of political decision-making powers to Brussels and the dominance of neo-liberal ideas in the EU multilevel system. Nevertheless, the "European-political harmony" in Germany, as Knelangen (2021) compactly summarises, appears not to have vanished but rather has become more polarised, more sensitive to European political trends, and diversified, with diffuse support for the EU continuing at rather large levels but varying on specific issues at different times (see also Annex 3 of this book).

With regard to the current public opinion in Germany on the EU, it can be summarised that historically the EU has played a significant role for Germany. Critical voices have become louder, especially as a result of the Eurozone crisis.

Nevertheless, almost 60 per cent of the people see themselves as Germans and Europeans, while only 22 per cent describe themselves exclusively as Germans (Eurobarometer 2021a).

5.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

5.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

The commonalities shared between the three groups started with the positive attitude towards European integration by emphasising that it is a “solidary community” (DEFG3_M4), in which “[with] all the member states, one could do a lot together” (DEFG2_M3). It became clear that in all three focus groups, a positive image of Europe and especially the EU prevails. Terms such as “community”, “free travel”, “security” or “peace” were associated with the EU in all groups. One participant from the high skilled group emphasised an own personal identification in this context by saying “I’ve always seen myself as part of a larger whole and not limited to Germany” (DEFG1_M1), though the differences within the EU were also pointed out. One person emphasised that “if there would not be the EU now, you would have actually no control over these things” (DEFG2_F2). A young participant in the lower paid and unemployed group added to this idea by underlining,

it would probably be even worse for one or the other member state in the area of wages and so on and that it is now easier for the countries to settle certain industries or to have certain things produced there, which otherwise could not have been produced there due to customs duties or whatever.

(DEFG2_M3)

The participants in all three groups also agreed that a special role can be attributed to Germany, as it is a driving force above all economically but also politically. For example, one participant from the young adult group emphasised that “[p]robably it is selfish but one is doing well in the EU, especially as a German” (DEFG3_M4). A participant from the high skilled group went even so far as to state that “I do not believe that Germany has faced any disadvantages as a result of its membership” (DEFG1_M3).

Only one student in the group of young adults raised the “question of democracy in the EU”, which he characterised as,

relatively intransparent with the parliaments, with the Commission, with the EU Council, everything there, with the institutions, ECJ [European Court of Justice] and European Central Bank. Accordingly, so the EU level can then impose regulations and directives on the nation states, who have elected democratic governments that then cannot realise their actually democratically determined objectives.

(DEFG3_M1)

Furthermore, the same participant stated,

that the EU above all also massively drives social inequality, which [at the end has to be addressed] at the national level, not at the EU level. At the EU level, rather agricultural policy, etc. is negotiated. And accordingly, it is not only an inequality between the countries, but also a class issue.

(DEFG3_M1)

Pointing to the freedom of movement of people in the EU, the participant identified even a class bias:

[P]reviously employed people suffer from it [i.e. the free movement of workers] and people who have a lot of money can, thanks to the free movement of people, invest [. . .] their capital in apartments in other countries and thereby make profits, which they could not do before.

(DEFG3_M1)

In total, the widely shared positive attitude towards European integration and also the aforementioned sceptical position mirror what the previous sections described regarding attitudes towards European integration and debates on the EU and its institutions in Germany. The general perception of the EU among participants reflected the broad consensus on an idea and perception of the EU as a project or safeguard for peace and exchange, among others, and also several less favourable and critical views. Several participants mentioned “bureaucracy” also as a general association they had with the EU, with one even referring to the “bureaucratic beast” (DEFG1_M3).

However, ultimately the issue of solidarity among the members of the EU was seen in all three groups from a kind of pragmatic standpoint. Practicability, cost-benefit trade-offs and rule-following were recurring and notably salient themes. For instance, this pragmatic-solidaric sentiment, that is that the costs of EU membership are “worth it”, is summarised in the following short statement: “The huge export market [of the EU] outweighs the net payer status many times over” (DEFG1_M3), or “I actually wanted to say rather, we would profit from it [assisting others] if the EU, if other countries are doing well” (DEFG3_F3). These considerations come strikingly, moreover, to the fore in the context of discussion on financial aid and assistance in economic crises, where conditionality and the necessity of rule-following – not only as a matter of fairness but also, again, effectiveness in order to guarantee that assistance actually works – were recurrently mentioned points that also met with consensus. This pattern poses a stark contrast to the unconditional support expected in natural and similar disasters.

5.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

In the first scenario, which covers the case of a natural disaster, the participants of the three focus groups showed an almost congruent attitude: there is no question

that the member states support each other in the case of a natural disaster. There is almost a national responsibility to help, especially for Germany, as emphasised by a participant from the group of lower paid and unemployed people: “because my first answer was of course also a bit from the perspective of ‘yes’, of course, we as Germany have to help the other EU country” (DEFG2_M5). A participant from the high skilled group (DEFG1_M2) also compared the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, stating that,

the Corona example with the patients who were flown out is quite nice, because it also shows how Europe has moved in this direction; that something like this is simply possible without there being any large-scale dissenting voices or that one simply thinks that it is somehow – I think most people felt this way – a matter of course that one tries to do something among European countries.

One participant from the same group emphasised the community spirit and said: “And I would see that in the same way that helping out is not just a matter of one nation, but that one also sees oneself as a community of states” (DEFG1_M1).

However, this idea also reaches its limits, as aid should not be provided without further ado. On the one hand, because not every country can provide the same means and resources as Germany and “others probably don’t get as far as we do. [. . .] Limitation is in the possibilities one has” (DEFG1_M3). One participant from the group of young adults described this as follows:

[I]f a climate disaster were to occur in Germany, as is now the case in Ahr Valley, for example, then perhaps [. . .] not poorer people, poorer countries would have to be supporters, because Germany is not dependent on it. So, you should support each other or especially the poorer; richer countries support the poorer countries.

(DEFG3_M6)

On the other hand, expressing doubt that a few countries could be solely responsible for all the others, one participant added that therefore “it also depends a bit on where this disaster occurred” (DEFG1_M6). In addition, the question of deservingness was raised – and thereby the questions whether an emergency situation is self-inflicted or somehow enabled on account of own prior (non-)actions. This notion was not considered applicable to the case of a natural disaster for the most part (i.e. by nearly all participants of all groups) but rather in respect to the other scenarios. Congruent with this reasoning, the appropriateness of and need for solidarity and assistance in a natural disaster were not called into question.

Germany was seen by the participants of all three groups more as a member state that provides help instead of needing it. This likely has an impact on expectations of reciprocity. Reciprocity was expected by the participants in the focus group discussion conducted in Germany in cases of natural disasters, but not when discussing the other scenarios. For instance, when even asked to consider hypothetically a scenario of need like in economic crises, Germany was mostly considered unlikely

if not ineligible. One participant of the group of lower paid and unemployed people emphasised that mutual help should be a matter of course here as well, because

the question implies a little bit, if bigger countries or bigger economies like Germany have to give more than a smaller one like San Marino. And then I say; “Yes, of course that is the case.” So, everyone should give what they can. And look at the individual case. That is also a certain responsibility, of course.
(DEFG2_M5)

Whereas another participant of the same group expressed concerns that,

in principle I see things similar as with the natural disaster that one should definitely help. But I must say if now Hungary would go bankrupt tomorrow, we would now transfer 100 billion, then without conditions, I would not necessarily have a good feeling about it and would not sit cheering in front of the TV.

(DEFG2_M3)

Accordingly, participants tended to differentiate conditions of mutual aid, reflecting on the one hand on the position of Germany, and the circumstances and situation eliciting hardship or potential need for assistance on the other.

5.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in times of a financial crisis

The different attitudes, especially with regard to the question of deservingness, were particularly expressed in the second scenario, which involved a financial or economic crisis. At least some participants in the high skilled group were not only rather pragmatic when it came to financial support for financially and economically weaker member states. They also articulated a clear instrumental attitude to the issue of solidarity among the members of the EU. This was expressed in the following statement of a manager of a globally positioned company: “you don’t let a customer go bankrupt if he can continue to lay golden eggs” (DEFG1_M3).

However, the participants tended to reflect and question whether solidarity and support can be expected or requested from actors who have caused or contributed to their own misfortune or hardship. In other words, as argued by one participant: “if it’s a major economic crisis, the question is, what caused it? [. . .] What is the reason for it?” (DEFG1_M5). And the same participant continued by saying: “An economic crisis [. . .] doesn’t just happen out of the blue and hit an EU country overnight; it has a very long history” (DEFG1_M5). A participant of the group of lower paid and unemployed people phrased the issue differently but addressed the same point by saying:

It is always very interesting that there is the search for someone to blame. So, in the case of a natural disaster, regardless of the fact that it may have

something to do with climate change or whatever, there are people affected, affected states that need to be helped. And what I also noticed, when it comes to financial things, that then very often people say yes, but they have messed it up themselves and so to speak they are themselves to blame for this situation. And that thus the willingness to help is smaller.

(DEFG2_F2)

On the other hand, participants in this focus group agreed that assistance in the case of a natural disaster should be offered unconditionally, whereas assistance – if given at all – in the cases of financial or economic crises and social and regional disparities should be tied to rules which the beneficiaries have to follow. In this way, conditionality should ensure that the support is used properly by the beneficiaries. Moreover, it was seen – by and large – as fair that those who caused the misery, misfortune or hardship and receive support from others have to follow rules for using the support.

The notion of fairness along with reciprocity – though again, not explicitly mentioned as such – took a more present position at this point, especially among the lower paid and unemployed group. For example, one participant pointed out that “it is quite simple. What if I now expect something from others, then I cannot say ‘no, I would not do it in return’. So, as you do to me, so I do to you” (DEFG2_M4).

Thus, there appeared to be hardly any doubt that Germany should help, as it is also more financially well off than many other European countries. However, one participant from the young adults made clear that this support would not necessarily be reciprocal: “I could imagine that [. . .] when it comes to provide Germany with concrete assistance, [i.e.] a state that is considered very strong and a stable state, then perhaps it is seen more critically by the other EU states” (DEFG3_F2).⁵

The young adults expressed that the basic ideas of the EU (among which they also count solidarity as well as fundamental and human rights) should be more strongly reflected in the actions of politicians: “So, somehow more sustainable aid that also reaches citizens directly” (DEFG3_F3). In addition, it was also frequently emphasised that “we” (the Germans) are doing comparatively well, but that the idea of a humanitarian community should be strengthened in the EU as well. One participant emphasised this idea of values as ideals that should be more strengthened and applied:

When it comes to finances, when it comes to economic cooperation, but also the point of closing off the external borders. That is also an ideal. Yes, you actually give yourself the ideal that for all Europeans these borders are open, freedom to travel, it is very easy to work or live for every EU citizen in another EU country. But then with the people who live outside the EU borders, also still in Europe and then also beyond, those, one gives not always the same right or one does not treat them in the same way.

(DEFG3_M5)

Hence, one can surmise much overlap vis-à-vis an obligation to provide assistance in cases of need, also induced by economic crises, to other EU member states. On the other hand, the reasons for this and especially the conditions of such provision were variably argued. At the same time, quite differentiated reasonings become apparent. Among the groups and participants, they were not just based on a general notion of solidarity but variably linked with expectations of fairness and reciprocity.

5.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

In the third scenario, and like in the high skilled group, social welfare and employment assistance were met with restraint also in the lower paid and unemployed group on account of practical reasons. A recurring point in this regard was reference to the EU member states as being simply too different in order to build a common social welfare system or regime. Illustrating this more pragmatic point, one participant emphasised that “the countries differ so much in detail, also in their social systems, in taxes and so on.” The same person argued that “in the current situation, I don’t think it’s realistic to create a balance that satisfies everyone. [. . .] That we have to be careful that we don’t feel like the moral high authority” (DEFG3_M4). The impression of being seen as the moral authority is echoed by the statement of another participant that “we as an economically strong nation within the EU can raise these funds and because I also think that you can then also help poorer countries within the EU to stand more on their own feet” (DEFG3_M5). A participant from the lower paid and unemployed group summarised the issue of practicability as hindrance in the context of EU-wide welfare assistance by stating: “But I also believe that there must be very individual solutions and you can’t have this one programme and then simply apply it to different states” (DEFG2_F2). Just as (if not more) interesting is thus what the participants in the different groups are *not* arguing. References to democracy or justice are lacking, whether as issues that could stand in the way of or rather demand an introduction of such cross-member state or EU-wide welfare assistance.

In the high skilled group, one participant submitted the idea that “it’s important that there is definitely support within the European Union. I also think it’s important to act in solidarity. But on the other hand, I also think that the principle of proportionality is always important” (DEFG1_F4).

Moreover, problems with creating EU-wide welfare or unemployment schemes were localised mainly at the national level – as demonstrated, for example, by the following statement: “I can’t imagine that the EU can do that, because unemployment has reasons that lie in the economic power, in what is perhaps produced in the country, in the education system [. . .]” (DEFG1_M5).

Particularly among young adults, it was clear that there is a desire for more action and responsibility on the part of the EU – as argued by one of them:

I would first start by ensuring that there is a uniform tax system. That there are no tax havens within the European Union and other countries that enforce

higher taxes. [. . .] That you just levy these taxes and thereby build a European welfare state and also try to redistribute money. And accordingly, also redistribute within the countries, but also redistribute between the countries.
(DEFG3_M1)

Thus, interestingly, while not rejected outright, the most common pattern in responses to the scenario of established EU-wide welfare and social benefit systems referred mainly to organisational difficulties rather than principled considerations.

5.3.5 *Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Germany*

In all focus groups, commonalities could be detected in responses of their participants to the presented scenarios. In the discussions on the different scenarios, solidarity was clearly linked to responsibility for the causes of an obvious need for assistance: Whereas a person, a region or a country was not considered responsible by and large for natural disasters, in the other scenarios – that is related to a financial or economic crises and social and regional disparities – a general consensus was rather different.

More solidarity and cooperation were expected in all groups in international affairs. Interestingly, this applied to the issues of defence as well as general foreign policy issues, even though these specific topics were not explicitly prompted by the moderator. The focus groups, moreover, exhibited a broad consensus towards the need for Europe to act as a more cohesive unit in these affairs, also in a global context. In short, there was a strikingly clear tenor for joint European action. Problems should no longer be thought of and tackled on a purely national basis, albeit it remains necessary to always take national peculiarities into account. Nevertheless, there were some noticeable differences between the three groups.

Compared to the other groups, the high skilled group placed more focus on institutional realities regulated by EU legislation and hurdles posed by bureaucracy. Here, participants – not completely, but largely – refrained from expressing the abstract principles of solidarity and fairness (as outlined in Chapter 2 and particularly in Section 2.4), though reciprocity – while never mentioned as such – did appear to play a recurring role at least in implicit fashion. In the lower paid and unemployed group, the need to help in Europe in many situations met with far-reaching consensus, though also – again here in the case of disasters – at times mutual aid and assistance were perceived as a matter of general, even universal principle. Solidarity was a topic that was alluded to at multiple points and at times even explicitly mentioned, as was a sense of reciprocity (though again, this principle was not explicitly expressed in any of the discussions). For instance, there was repeated expression of the sentiment that one does to others as one would like done to oneself and vice versa. In the context of economic crisis, one participant said that,

what I expect from others, I can also expect from myself. I can't just say, "well, they're not doing well, I'm doing everything better, I can do everything."

And then I go on living like this myself. [. . .] Then we must also accept that others also say to us: “We must save there or economise.”

(DEFG2_M1)

Another participant added: “So it is quite simple. What if I now expect something from others, then I cannot say ‘No, I do that but not in return’. So, as you do to me, so I do to you” (DEFG2_M4). Accordingly, such responses reveal not only a sense of solidarity. They also have a linkage to both reciprocity and fairness – that is, of equality in terms of treatment and rules for one, coupled with an anticipatory dimension (i.e. the expectation of equal application of the rules, that one *will* do to others as others *should* do unto oneself, etc.), for another.

Participants of the lower paid and unemployed group saw – stronger than the other two groups – a large responsibility on part of Germany to maintain or practice solidarity and provide assistance, not least and precisely because Germany is well off. Indeed, the term solidarity was comparably the most salient in this focus group discussion. It was emphasised that, from a German perspective, people are less affected by crises than in other EU member states, and the participants appeared to see themselves as less affected because Germany is economically stable (“strong state”). Germany is basically in a position to provide help, though this focus group likewise made comparatively more reference to the necessity of rules and conditions attached to providing economic and financial assistance in particular; indeed, the community of solidarity and especially fairness appears to imply rules and the assurance that they are followed. At the same time, the capacity and willingness to provide aid by Germany to other member states – in parts for idealistic, yet for seemingly widely pragmatic reasons – are linked with the broader perception of benefits provided by membership in the wider EU. This sentiment of advantages to being part of the EU was shared or certainly clearly expressed, in turn, by virtually all participants in the different focus groups. Fairness, reciprocity and solidarity are thus clearly held to be important. In relation to other member states in need, conditions can and should be set and rules expected to be followed; it becomes apparent that the German participants also expect a commitment on their part when they receive assistance.

Notes

- 1 This section sketches a compact overview of the political system of Germany. For more comprehensive surveys, see, for example Conradt and Langenbacher (2013), Kropp (2010), Marschall (2018), von Beyme (2010).
- 2 The Bundesrat is not a second chamber proper (though it de facto serves as one), as it has no elected, co-opted or otherwise appointed members. Instead, Länder-level premiers, cabinet members or their delegates exercise votes of their respective Land in the Bundesrat, which are weighted (ranging from three to six) depending on the population of the Land. See for comprehensive and comparative perspective, for example Hueglin and Fenna (2015: 205–237).
- 3 While the German political system is federal, and party strengths differ across the Länder, the party system is not particularly regionalised. One major exception is the Christian Social Union (CSU), the ‘sister party’ to the CDU based in Bavaria. Another regional

exception is the South-Schleswigian Voter's Association (SSW), which represents the Danish and Frisian minority in the state of Schleswig-Holstein.

- 4 For example, the "Solange I" (1974) and "Solange II" (1985) decisions (*solange* meaning "as long as"; that is, the German Constitutional Court commits to review EU law "as long as" conflicts with German constitutional basic rights are possible) as well as the "Maastricht" (1993) and "Lisbon" (2009) decisions regarding compatibility between Community law and the German Basic Law, and between the Treaty revisions and the Grundgesetz respectively, or decisions on cases brought to the Court against Euro "bail-out" measures and reforms in response to the Euro crisis. As common thread among these cases, the Constitutional Court has repeatedly underlined the necessity for the government to inform, consult with and acquire the approval of the parliament (Bundestag) and Länder for European treaty negotiations and changes.
- 5 Incidentally however, it is interesting to note that, after the unification of the two German states, the "new Länder" were actually included in the support of the EU structural funds without hesitation – and to a significant financial extent (see Section 5.1.1).

6 The Netherlands

A “small frog country”, but also the
“best boy in class”?

Jildou Teerenstra

As a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and signatory of the 1957 Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community (EEC), the Netherlands played an active role in the formation of the European Union (EU). The Dutch, therefore, also believe themselves to be shapers of the European integration process. They have thus found their self-image of being grand supporters of European integration. Nonetheless, the Dutch participation in the European integration project reveals a different picture. It shows (as will be demonstrated in more detail in Section 6.2) that the Netherlands was *relatively* supportive of the European project compared to other member states. However, the country has seen also a rise in Euroscepticism (Segers 2019).

6.1 An overview of the country

6.1.1 *The political system*

Regarding the political structure, the Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy with a prime minister as the head of government and a king as the head of state. Ministers and state secretaries oversee the executive branch. The Dutch parliament has two houses: the Senate and the House of Representatives. They closely monitor the government and are responsible, together with the government, for making laws.

At the subnational level, there are 12 provinces and 344 municipalities. In addition to this, the Netherlands is divided into 21 water authorities responsible for water management; they are overseen by a board of dyke wardens and water boards. The Kingdom of the Netherlands also has six foreign countries and territories in the Caribbean. However, these countries and territories are not EU members (Rijksoverheid 2022).

The political system of the Netherlands is based on a historical system of pillarisation: catholic, protestant, liberal-conservative and socialist. Indeed, Dutch society used to be based on these pillars, with people joining sports clubs or political parties within “their” pillar. However, the Netherlands has secularised the pillarisation tradition since the 1960s. Although it is now known as the Dutch “polder model”, the fundamental idea of giving smaller constituent groups significant power has

persisted (Hoetjes 2018). This “polder model” can be seen as a consensus model based on the Dutch consultation culture (de Beer and Keune 2018). Nowadays, political parties are no longer categorised according to this principle. Nevertheless, one can still see some heritage of this system, such as a kind of pragmatism deriving from a Calvinistic legacy that still influences the Dutch stance in life, influencing the national identity and political culture (Vollaard 2006). The country’s party system consists of three political “families” that make up the Dutch political landscape: The Labour Party (PvdA) for the socialist left, the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) for Christian Democrats and the conservative Liberals (VVD) for liberals. These three major political forces compete with smaller, ideologically more radical, or populist parties. As a result, none of the parties are close to achieving a parliamentary majority, and coalitions always control the government. Quite frequently, these are “oversized” coalitions, containing more parties than mathematically required to complete a parliamentary majority (Andeweg 2005).

The liberal-conservative party, the VVD, marks the most significant part of the political landscape in the Netherlands. The far-right Eurosceptic party (PVV) is the third largest party. Though, none of the other bigger parties wish to form a coalition with the PVV. However, this does not necessarily mean that many Dutch people have voted for a Eurosceptic view of the EU. Two other far-right parties that share the Eurosceptic view are the Democratic Forum and the party born from the Democratic Forum, JA21 (Otjes 2021).

6.1.2 Core features of population and economy

In terms of square kilometres, the Netherlands is a small country, but it is after Malta the most densely populated country in the EU (Andeweg 2005). The population in the Netherlands has steadily grown from around 10 million in 1950 to approximately 17 million in 2020. However, the yearly population growth rate has gone down, from 1.25 per cent to 0.22 per cent during the same period. The median age is 43.3 years, with a life expectancy of 82.8 years (Worldometer 2022b). The size of the population makes it the seventh biggest within the EU, with Germany at the top and Romania just before the Netherlands (Worldometer 2022a). Of all the countries considered in this book, the Netherlands is the country with the third highest rate of foreign-born population (13.3 per cent), just behind only Germany and Spain, with 17.9 and 13.9 per cent, respectively (IOM 2022). There has been a rise in the foreign-born population by almost 3 percentage points from 2009 to 2019. There are also more people immigrating than emigrating (IOM 2022).

The Netherlands is ranked fourth in the World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index and is one of Europe’s most competitive economies (Hoppe et al. 2021). Therefore, it is no surprise that the country had the highest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita among the considered countries in 2009 and 2019, with €38,160 and €41,980, respectively (Eurostat 2021e).

Up until mid-March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck the Netherlands, the Dutch economy had been continuously growing throughout 2019. In this year alone, the GDP grew by 1.8 percentage points. Despite being a little lower

than in previous years, this rise was nevertheless the sixth consecutive year in which the economy grew, which was more than in all other European countries, except for Denmark, Ireland and Luxemburg.

The unemployment rate fell to 3.3 per cent between the beginning of 2014, when the Dutch financial-economic crisis was at its worst with an unemployment rate of 7.8 per cent, and 2019 (Hoppe et al. 2021). After a rise in unemployment at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the number of unemployed in the Netherlands reached a new record low in 2021. On average, about 408,000 people were unemployed, approximately 57,000 fewer than in 2020. The unemployment rate dropped from 4.8 per cent in 2020 to 4.2 per cent in 2021 (CBS 2021).

Since the start of the European sovereign debt crisis, the Dutch government has slowly improved the country's financial condition. In 2017, the budget deficit turned into a surplus. In 2019, the public debt stood at 48.6 per cent of the GDP, far below the EU target threshold of 60 per cent. The public debt climbed slightly to 49.5 per cent in the first quarter of 2020 (CBS 2020), and in 2021 the general government gross debt of the Netherlands even rose to 58.1 per cent of the GDP (IMF 2021), that is by about 10 percentage points since 2019. However, the demand for Dutch state bonds surged, giving the government access to relatively low-cost loans. These low-cost loans enabled the government to pursue an expansionary fiscal policy that it could justify politically as an investment in the Dutch economy's future earning capability (Hoppe et al. 2021).

From 2014 to 2019, the Netherlands received €17 billion from the EU budget, but the country contributed €52 billion. The balance, therefore, was a negative of €35 billion for the Netherlands (Dutch Court of Audit 2020).

6.2 The Netherlands and European integration

After the Second World War, the Netherlands, weary of the long-standing tensions between France and Germany, felt compelled to join political forces with them in the ECSC, an arrangement made in the hope of preventing future conflict between European nations. Similarly, with the EEC, they joined with serious reservations, fearing that it would devolve into a French-dominated protectionist scheme if they did not (Schout and Wiersma 2013). Therefore, it seemed reasonable to join, so they could also influence the process, and their values would not be thwarted by the domination of big countries (Rood 2010). This shows that support for European integration was initially born out of necessity, rather than faith in the project.

Although people in the Netherlands were previously one of the most supportive populations among the member states of the EU (Lubbers 2008), the connection between the Netherlands and the EU has always been one of pragmatism. The Netherlands would like to see the EU strengthened but not centralised and, therefore, significantly supports the Euro and free trade agreements, all part of the official narrative of economic rationalism. However, the country has a deep-seated apprehension over the possibility of a politicised Europe (Schout 2019); thus a fear of centralising political power prevails. Because of this fear, a rule-based approach

to European integration is central to the conventional Dutch EU narrative of economic success and security (Schout 2018).

This anxiety and emerging Euroscepticism came forward in the no-vote of the Dutch citizens in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty for the EU (Bes-selink 2006). As a result, the Dutch citizens low “permissive consensus” or “polder model” attitude disappeared (Lubbers and Jaspers 2011; Van Dorp and Harryvan 2012). The “permissive consensus” has led to a peculiar relationship between Dutch politicians and the topic of the EU in their political agendas. At first, because of the “permissive consensus” attitude of the Dutch citizen, the Dutch politicians had enough room to make their decisions about the EU. However, support for the integration process has become weaker, and therefore, the parties have shown less attention to Europe in their election process for fear of backlash. As a result, a more antagonistic stance towards the EU has become the leading attitude of Dutch politics towards the European integration process (Van Dorp and Harryvan 2012).

The Dutch EU narrative appeared clear until 2005, when the Netherlands blocked the Constitutional Treaty. However, this does not mean that the Netherlands would like to follow the United Kingdom’s path by going out of the EU. There is no desire for a “Nexit” in the Netherlands, with most Dutch citizens actually wanting to stay in the EU (Goldberg et al. 2021). However, most of these people wish for a slightly reformed EU (Goldberg et al. 2021: 232). The overall positive stance leads to the belief that Dutch citizens have a grounded opinion about the EU and its role.

The traditional commitment to pillar one integration is maintained: full support is given to economic and monetary integration (single market, European Monetary Union, convergence criteria and the stability pact), as well as a more efficient and reformed Common Agricultural Policy and a stronger EU environmental policy. The Dutch, however, take a more low-key approach to social matters. For example, the Dutch government is hesitant to harmonise social security legislation across the EU if it would jeopardise the Dutch competitive position regarding productivity or manufacturing costs (Hoetjes 2018).

The post-2008 era brought even more European challenges, with the financial crises and massive influx of refugees as top contenders for the collective issues facing the bloc. For the Netherlands, this meant that populist and Eurosceptic voices got more room to create a negative view of the EU. In the elections of 2012, Geert Wilders, with his political party PVV, gained many supporters (Schout and Wiersma 2013). The PVV went from 4 per cent of the total votes in 2006 to 8 per cent of the total votes in 2012, making it the third biggest party of the Second Chamber in 2012. At the same time, it also lost many seats in parliament in comparison to the elections of 2010, so a bit of nuance is necessary (CBS 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). This increase in PVV voters, nonetheless, expressed a critical approach toward the EU and the role of the Netherlands in the European project. The PVV bases their critical approach mainly on the argument that the Netherlands is one of the highest net contributors to the EU budget (van Kessel 2017).

Indeed, the Netherlands is one of the EU’s top contributors with regard to their GDP per capita. According to the Netherlands’ Court of Auditors, the Netherlands

is the highest net payer within the Multi Financial Framework of the EU. This is different from official EU figures, based on total GDP, which suggest that Germany would be the highest net payer. However, looking at the GDP per capita, the Netherlands' contribution is higher than Germany's. The Netherlands has been giving more money to the EU than it receives back in grants and other financial instruments since the 1990s. Of course, studies have shown that the Netherlands also greatly benefits from the single market for exporting its goods. Furthermore, the GDP would decline by 15.7 per cent if the trade barriers were reintroduced. Additionally, there are non-monetary benefits of the single market, such as resolving cross-border problems, data roaming and studying abroad (Dutch Court of Audit 2020).

Mark Rutte, the long-term Dutch prime minister, has faced a strong response from Dutch citizens, who have long complained about the Netherlands being one of the EU's top net payers. Rutte was under a lot of pressure concerning the COVID-19 funds to take a conservative stance and preserve the "national interest" ahead of a 2021 election where far-right Eurosceptic parties were prominent contenders. Concerns over a further surge in Euroscepticism prompted the Dutch government to work relentlessly to reach an agreement in Brussels that addressed the concerns of their voters (see Heinelt and Münch 2022). During the Recovery Fund negotiations, member states attempted to reach a settlement that satisfied both the Dutch government and the governments of particular south and east European member states. The compromise boosted the fund's loan component. In addition, it resulted in an agreement that the Netherlands would receive a higher discount on its annual EU financial contribution and more say over the recovery fund's use of subsidies (Mariano and Schneider 2022). The contestation from the Dutch citizens shows that a national approach would be preferred and that if the Netherlands contributes their finances, clear rules must be set.

Therefore, solidarity comes with obligations, according to the public debate in the Netherlands. The Dutch understand the importance of cross-border solidarity, provided those other countries are as dedicated to national reforms as the Netherlands is. As Rutte has stated numerous times, the Dutch agree to be net contributors and are willing to assist other countries as well as accept deeper integration. However, with the caveat that if governments fail to reform, it should be possible to expel them from the Eurozone or punish those who refuse to assist in resettling refugees (Schout 2018). This statement suggests that pro-EU sentiment coexists with concerns that other member states have not yet converged sufficiently and will turn to the EU for assistance rather than putting their house in order.

Following Brexit, the fundamental question of whether the EU is a sound system – whether it is a high-quality political-administrative system or a convoluted political system with insufficiently constructed checks and balances – has emerged in the Dutch narrative as well (Schout 2018). Additionally, another point of anxiety is the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU. In the Netherlands, the importance of the United Kingdom has been always emphasised in balancing the French-German axis and in keeping Germany on the side of liberalisation, especially regarding transatlantic cooperation and the nature of the EU's internal market. As a result,

there is the fear that Brexit may strengthen France's position vis-à-vis Germany – and, in turn, Italy's and Spain's (Schout and Wiersma 2013). As a result, a pragmatic strategy has been formulated to preserve Dutch influence through flexible coalitions (Schout 2018).

Furthermore, there are some problems regarding the composition of the Eurogroup, as traditional allies of the Netherlands – such as Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom – remain outside of the Eurozone. According to the public debate in the Netherlands, countries such as Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal have different views on the state's role and different perspectives on EU budgets (Schout and Wiersma 2013).

On the other hand, as Eurobarometer data shows, the Netherlands has been and continues to be one of the most pro-EU countries and a strong backer of the Euro. This is because Dutch citizens recognise the value of the EU as the Netherlands is a tiny, open and economically advanced trading country that ranks in the top five in terms of the most competitive countries (Schout 2018). As Rutte said: “the Netherlands depends on the EU for its economic progress, security and global influence” (Tweede Kamer 2017).

When looking deeper into the attitude of Dutch citizens towards the EU, their opinions were revealed in the Eurobarometer Winter 2021–2022 survey. Regarding attitudes toward the EU, the Dutch population highly support the Euro, at a rate of 83 per cent. Secondly, 74 per cent feel like they have European citizenship. Thirdly, they are very optimistic about the EU's future, with a percentage of 70 (see Annex 1). This means that overall, the Dutch public feel positive about the EU and EU citizenship. The highest importance, however, is given to an economic aspect of European integration, the Euro.

When asked “What are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?” Dutch citizens view the environment and climate change as the most important, with a score of 50 per cent. This was by far the highest score on this subject from all the other countries covered by the study. Close behind the environment is immigration, with 33 per cent of importance. The influence of the EU in the world is a solid third, with 23 per cent (see Annex 2).

When asked the question, “Which are the most positive results of the EU?”, the Dutch citizens view, next to peace among the member states of the EU (51 per cent), the free movement of people, goods and services within the EU as the most important with a percentage above 60. Solidarity among member states does not play such a prominent role and occupies the fifth position of important issues with 21 per cent, which is almost the same as the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world. Additionally, 25 per cent of the respondents see the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world as a positive result of European integration (see Annex 3).

6.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

Before going into the details of the Dutch focus groups, it must be noted that the focus group discussions in the Netherlands were conducted after the start of the

Russia's war in Ukraine. Therefore, this war was often mentioned in all the Dutch focus groups since it was an important current topic.

6.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

In all focus group discussions, cooperation and collaboration were seen as beneficial sides of the EU. This is expressed in the following statement of a participant: "If other countries cannot keep up, they will never be able to contribute as much. So, if we help each other a little we will all make progress" (NLFG1_M4). Another element of the discussions was how some participants framed the relationship between the Netherlands and the EU mainly in economic terms. This idea was mostly present in the high skilled group and the least in the group of young adults. For the high skilled group, the achievements of the EU are mainly based on the common market and how this has led to stability and peace for many years. Additionally, it was argued that the Netherlands used to be much less wealthy and owes its current welfare to the EU – as brought to the point by one of the participants: "Well, if we weren't members of the EU, we wouldn't be living in this extreme prosperity as we have been doing for years and also are used to" (NLFG1_M3).

The young adult group similarly asserted that EU membership benefits the Netherlands. They were, however, critical of the relationship between the Netherlands and the EU. Here, they felt like there is not enough information given in the Netherlands on how the EU institutions work and how people can participate and make themselves heard. According to the young adults, the EU is doing many good things, but it lacks visibility, and Dutch people do not know exactly what the EU does for the Netherlands.

Most critiques of the EU were expressed in the lower paid and unemployed group. Here, the main focus was on subsidiarity. They expressed many negative statements about the Netherlands always being the first to help and to give money. Furthermore, there was a sentiment in this group that reciprocity in terms of financial support among the member states is not possible – as one participant emphasised that the Netherlands pays for countries such as Greece and Italy because they cannot afford it themselves (NLFG2_F4). And another participant added:

Oh, they have no money [Greece, Italy, Bulgaria], we pay for them. Our money goes there. [. . .] The economy of those countries is not stable enough for a country like the Netherlands or a country like Germany if they get into a crisis to help us back up economically.

(NLFG2_M1)

Another sentiment reported by the group was the Netherlands' tendency to dither in the event of a crisis such as the discussed disasters, instead allowing other countries to lead the response. This argument was also raised in the high skilled group, although with more contestation. Some participants in this group stated that the Netherlands is always late to help, and when they must, they are very stingy with how much help and money they are willing to offer to the country in need. It was

also mentioned that they are worried that this stingy approach has led to a terrible image of the Netherlands in the EU – as expressed by NLFG1_M4:

I think in the Netherlands we underestimate how negative our financial image is abroad, in the other EU countries. I think we have the feeling that we do the most by far and I think that if you ask in Italy or in Greece or in Spain, they really look at you like [draws a strange face].

This shows that there is a contradicting vision of how the Netherlands should provide help, especially regarding money. Despite a call for solidarity in the high skilled group, subsidiarity prevails. A quote from the lower paid and unemployed group shows this clearly: “Well, take our housing shortage, what does Germany want to do about that? What does Italy want to do about that?” (NLFG2_F3), meaning that “fits all solutions” do not work in each country.

Other negative aspects or non-benefits of European integration through joining the EU are attributed to purported migration problems, especially in the lower paid and unemployed group. Here, the position was that the Netherlands is used as a money pot.

No, we don’t have to be in front. We are a pinhead on the whole world map, and it is very striking that everybody can find the Netherlands, and if you ask for another country, they say: “Yes, I don’t know.” And then I think: “Why do they find the Netherlands, because of this [makes hand gesture for money]” (NLFG2_F3).

6.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions on solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

In the discussion on solidarity in the case of a natural disaster, the notion of working together came to the forefront in all groups but was especially strong in the group of young adults. One of the participants argued that there should be more cooperation in the EU – especially because some countries are more likely than others to know how to solve a problem, showing a focus on practicability. For the Netherlands, this would be knowledge of how to manage river floods – as one young adult emphasised: “it’s better to solve this [flooding] together, so that it is not one country that is very flooded and another one is less. Preventing together is better than stopping at the border, while all three countries are affected” (NLFG3_F4).

The same participant went further and added:

I think that far-reaching European integration, so to speak, is really necessary for the challenges of the future. If you think about things like climate change and so on. [. . .] I mean, just organise it on a European level and make sure everyone has enough energy and stores the waste together. [. . .] If you already form such a block, then make use of each other’s strengths and knowledge and potential, so to speak.

(NLFG3_F4)

Members of both the group of lower paid and unemployed and the high skilled group stated that it is crucial to be an expert in the matter if help is needed, especially regarding natural disasters. For example, as the Netherlands does not really experience earthquakes, participants wondered how it could help in case of such disasters.

But of course, it is also the case that it is the countries with the most expertise about what is going on at the time, that they react first. If there is an earthquake somewhere, we can send the Dutch, but they have less expertise than, say, the Greeks. [. . .] A flood disaster, we know all about that. I mean, it just depends on what kind of disaster it is, for who should go first. But you have to do that together, that has to be coordinated.

(NLFG1_M5)

They also mentioned the importance, and greater feasibility, of neighbouring countries in helping others. These countries are the closest and, therefore, the best choices to get help quickly – beyond financial support.

For members of the high skilled group, the ability of a country to support was seen as essential. Again, this shows a practicability approach to support in the case of natural disasters.

Although it was emphasised that if the Netherlands helps, all EU countries should help, it was argued that not every country can give the same, especially concerning finances. The participants did state that the Netherlands should not be the only one that pays; the costs should be divided on a European level – as expressed by one participant: “I do think that we should send people there, or let people who want to go there, go there. About the costs, yes, I think we should all bear those together within the European Union” (NLFG1_F2). Participants even argued for a scheme for cost distribution:

Within this common-sense approach to financially supporting countries in a natural disaster scenario, any support should be proportional to financial capacity, with the Netherlands paying more than countries with fewer people and less financial strength. One country is much richer than another country. I do think that to some extent you can assume that a country that has a lot more economic capacity will do a bit more than a country that has, I do not know, Malta or something like that, which has very little money. You just have to do what you can, I think.

(NLFG1_M4)

The availability of means necessary to help others was also an important issue in the lower paid and unemployed group, especially regarding the question of sending doctors. Members of this group argued that there already is a shortage of healthcare workers in the Netherlands, so how would the Netherlands be able to help another country with healthcare workers they do not have in the case of a natural disaster?

Ah yes, with that the fire brigade or the doctors must go there. Um, in principle, yes, but I believe that we as the Netherlands are now entering a bit of a

crisis with the medical care ourselves and then even more manpower will have to go. I don't think that's good. Here in the Netherlands, they haven't even got it straightened out yet and then something happens and maybe half of them have to go there. I think that's going too far. But we do have to send some.

(NLFG2_F3)

The young adult group also mentioned that the Netherlands should always send money or materials and that the Netherlands has not been a country that has been unwilling to help with natural disasters in other countries.

I think that if we look at what the Netherlands has done over the years, say with its, for its surrounding countries, then I think that the Netherlands would at least do something? The Netherlands would send aid and helpers. I think that if there is a really big fire, so to speak, that they will send out the helicopters and the vehicles because it is something, in my opinion, that we have done over the years. We are not a country that leans back in that area.

(NLFG3_F3)

Overall, the findings show that the participants feel like the Netherlands should always help, especially in regard to practicability. They were more divided on what this help should entail, but if they would have the means and knowledge, they would be willing to help. For the young adults and high skilled groups, it is based on expertise and closeness to the country. For the lower paid and unemployed, it is more a question of the availability of materials, personnel and finances.

6.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions on solidarity in a time of a financial crisis

Although the comments on the presented scenario differed across the three groups, an overall understanding of solidarity in the sense of reciprocity dominated. It was agreed that the Netherlands is solidary, but the Dutch expect the same treatment back, and this mutual help process needs to be as fair as possible. Therefore, rules for fair reciprocal support among member states should be established by the EU.

I think that it is a good thing. I do think it is important to help each other in times like these [. . .], it is just a matter of attaching strict rules to it, so you don't just keep throwing money at it or just help people out more and more. But in the end, I do think it's best if everyone gets out of it together.

(NLFG3_F1)

For the lower paid and unemployed, it was also important that the Netherlands should first look at its own economy to see if they still have the ability to help other countries. This was summarised by one of the participants as follows: "if we emerge in a very negative way from the economic crisis or the Euro crisis, then we won't be able to send help to other countries just like that because the Netherlands will have to rebuild itself first and then look further" (NLFG2_M1).

The young adults agreed that countries should first look at their own economies and put everything in order before helping any other countries. They also mentioned that economic crises are structural problems and that throwing money at the issue is not enough. Therefore, the EU should draw up a plan with everybody to see how to solve the crisis – as argued by one of them.

I think that financial support is not enough, because it is a structural problem, [. . .] I think it would be much more valuable if everyone put their heads together and simply drew up a plan together of how we are going to do this. Instead of throwing so many millions at them and them throwing so many millions at us again.

(NLFG3_F3)

What came forward in the high skilled group's discussion was a strong notion of reciprocity; that is that solidarity means that you should help other countries so that they can help you as well if you have problems. While the Netherlands was mostly considered as a giver in solidarity scenarios, it could also be a receiver under certain conditions – as made clear by the following quotation:

I think that, of course, it's also a scenario in which, for once, things go really badly here. Well, our economy is certainly not doing too well at the moment either, we are already assuming that, if countries have to be supported, it will be other countries, preferably Greece in our minds. But that could also be us. I do think that solidarity is important. I think we often forget that the Netherlands is one of the larger economies within the EU. Yes, there's Germany and France, but the Netherlands is at the top of the list, so of course, you can expect something from them. And we benefit a lot from those other countries.

(NLFG1_M4)

The scenario of an economic crisis was the most difficult one in all focus group discussions conducted in the Netherlands for the participants to give answers to the questions asked. This scenario took up the least amount of time in all Dutch focus group discussions.

6.3.4 *Findings from the focus group discussions on the EU response to social disparities*

In this scenario, opinions differed among the three groups about what the EU's response should be. Nonetheless, what came forward again is that all focus groups mainly approached the scenario with an emphasis given to subsidiarity. Members of the lower paid and unemployed group had the most differing opinion on solidarity, fairness and reciprocity in the discussion about support in the case of inequality. The argument in this group was that the country in need should try to come up with solutions before asking for help from the EU or other member states. This applies to the Netherlands and other EU countries. Otherwise, it was argued, countries

become lazy: “Or well, lazy. At least then the country thinks, well, the EU will solve that. We don’t have to do anything. That is not how it works. You have to try and solve the problem yourself first” (NLFG2_F3).

In the same vein, the participants thought that people should be proud that their government can solve a crisis independently. Additionally, the opinion was prevailing in this group that the Netherlands is too charitable.

Well, what I do think is that we shouldn’t immediately jump on top of it and say: “Now we’re going to do this to help.” For example, it is indeed necessary to see how things are going and whether, for example, a mistake could have been made. And that the country itself can put things right, not that we immediately jump on top with this must change and that must change because everyone does something from time to time that is not in line with what is expected of them. However, the arrangement should indeed be that we can support each other in this, but that the country itself can also take a few steps first.

(NLFG2_M1)

Nonetheless, when the country says it cannot do it on its own anymore, the EU should help. Since it is better for the economy of all member states that the country is helped. Also, in the discussion of the group of lower paid and unemployed people in all scenarios, it was emphasised that the type of help should depend on the context in which the problem has emerged.

The young adults mentioned that the EU is already undertaking a lot to combat unemployment. This is a part of subsidiarity, to say that EU support or solutions are already there. For instance, one participant pointed out that unemployment would be reduced not only by the freedom of labour mobility within the EU (by “shuffling people around the EU”) but also by

larger infrastructure projects. These are [. . .] also things that can provide jobs. So, I think the EU could play a role in that, or is playing a role already, in helping an economy get going, by financing things, by giving loans so that people can find work again and so that countries if they use the money well, can also help their own economy get going and thereby helping people finding a job.

(NLFG3_F1)

However, another participant opposed a heavy focus on financial support to combat regional and social disparities by arguing that she had “the impression that Europe is more about money and the economy and economic growth than about me as a European” (NLFG3_F4).

The high skilled group mentioned that the Netherlands should contribute to fighting unemployment in other EU countries, but it should not be the only one to do so – as emphasised by NLFG1_F2:

I do think that the Netherlands should contribute, but only if all the European Union countries are cooperating in this, then we should do so, too. However,

if it should cost us extra, then it should cost all of us. It should not be that the Netherlands as the only country [and] it should [not] lead the way in this [reducing unemployment in other EU countries].

This remark sparked a debate on the image of the Netherlands abroad, with some participants concerned that despite the belief that the Netherlands gives away a lot, it does not necessarily contribute (much) more than other countries do, thus ultimately projecting a negative image. This self-perception of the Netherlands was related to a protestant morality and a feeling of superiority in the Netherlands. However, it was at the same time admitted that Dutch people are not doing what they preach to others – as argued by NLF1_M3:

But look, because we are so strict in doctrine and always want to teach a lesson to such countries as France, Italy and Spain and Greece, about how they live on credit and we don't, and therefore we pay that credit up to a certain extent, which is not quite true. Yes, then of course those people are completely, utterly stressed by that. We [the Dutch] have a very negative image: we present ourselves to be the pastor, but in the meantime, we are just the merchant.¹ And if we can earn a few cents, we're going to do it. The South of Europe have great difficulty with that double standard that the Netherlands has had for years.

6.3.5 *Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in the Netherlands*

When looking at the different levels from which support can or should be expected, the level mentioned the least is the personal level. This applies to all groups. Only in the scenario of natural disasters, the individual level was mentioned by participants.

The level that was mentioned the most in all the Dutch groups was the national level, which indicates a support of the subsidiarity arguments – as expressed by the following statement: “I think that the European Union should first let that country solve a large part of the problem itself. Unless it is no longer possible [. . .] that they then step in to do that” (NLF2_F3). When asked about the responsibility to act and who should come up with solutions, the answer was the government, or as was said by participants of the high skilled group: “The Hague” (the seat of the Dutch government): “Yes, they should arrange that in The Hague, I think. [. . .] Yes, I do not think that we as individuals can contribute to that, but we can do it from The Hague” (NLF1_F2).

The role of the EU and other member states was less precise than the role of the Dutch government but still mentioned quite frequently. When a problem concerns more countries, or it is greater than what a country can handle, it should be addressed at the EU level.

Another key finding is the apparent contradiction in the perception of the Netherlands being a small- or medium-sized country. This goes hand in hand with

the perspective that the Netherlands should not always try to be the “best boy in class”,² even though the Netherlands is only a “small frog country”³ that should not have to give as much as it does. This means that the Netherlands is seen as a small country when it needs to give (the most) money to the EU – as expressed in the following statements:

I think, yes, the Netherlands, the smallest country, [. . .] must always raise the most.

(NLFG2_F3)

I mean the only thing you hear is that there are certain rules, and that money goes to certain countries and that we contribute a lot to everything, and we are the best boy in the class; we must be at the forefront of everything with the rules. I think that the Netherlands does not always have to be the best boy in the class.

(NLFG2_F4)

On the other hand, this smallness is also used in the sense that the Netherlands cannot do it alone and needs other countries to stay prosperous and secure:

Yes, I think it [belonging to the EU] is very beneficial. I think that economically speaking it is also quite profitable to take part in, so you are enclosing certain security. You can see that now with the war, you are one united front, so you are not on your own as a small frog country.

(NLFG3_F3)

However, the Netherlands is not a small country; it is medium sized in terms of population and strong regarding its economic prosperity – as confirmed by one participant:

But also in terms of population we are in the upper half of the EU. There are many countries that are much smaller than us. And this feeling is there because we call ourselves a small frog country. But we are not. In terms of inhabitants, we really are in the top half and in terms of economy, we most definitely are.

(NLFG1_M4)

The Netherlands wants to have influence, and it can because it is quite large in terms of economy and population. However, when it comes to money, the Netherlands is seen as a small country that does “too much” for other countries.

When considering the differences among the three groups, the following can be summarised: In general, all participants of the high skilled group were optimistic about the Netherlands being in the EU, some even very positive. They agreed on many benefits, particularly surrounding the economic aspects of the EU and the welfare the EU has given the Netherlands. There were also some negative aspects

mentioned regarding the EU, such as the unreliability of the EU concerning candidate countries. Brussels was also mentioned as where representatives of member states meet, but also in the sense of the EU being far away from the citizens. No one was overly negative, and when a negative aspect was mentioned, it was always accompanied by a positive factor.

The overall stance of the lower paid and unemployed group towards the EU was less favourable than that of the high skilled group. The participants immediately started talking about the problems the EU member states have in working together, how difficult it is to be on the same page, the many rules, how expensive it is to be in the EU, how the Netherlands must always be the best boy in the class and how far the EU is from the citizens. Nonetheless, some positive things were mentioned, mainly surrounding the free movement within the EU.

In the group of young adults, the overall opinion of the EU was critically positive. The participants agreed that there are many benefits to being a part of the EU and that the Netherlands would not be what it is now without it. However, what transpired was that not many people know precisely what the EU is and what the role of the Netherlands is in the EU. Moreover, it was emphasised that not enough attention is given to the EU in Dutch education, meaning less solidarity is felt toward other EU countries, as some people do not even know which countries are in the EU. In general, this group wished for more cooperation between EU member states than is happening now. They pointed out that every member state has strengths and knowledge that should be shared.

A focal point in the discussions conducted in the Netherlands was subsidiarity. The Dutch participants feel that help should be given. However, the country needing help should try to fix their problems themselves first. If help can be given because the country cannot do it independently, things like practicability and conditionality come forward. Does the Netherlands have the means and knowledge necessary to help? If so, the Netherlands will help under certain conditions, especially if the Netherlands gets the same help in return. Nonetheless, because the Netherlands is also “small” and cannot do everything independently, convergence comes forward because, in the end, it is still important to collaborate.

Notes

- 1 That is a common metaphor in the Netherlands about conflicting interests. The merchant stands for the pursuit of profit and prosperity, and the pastor for morality.
- 2 A common metaphor for following and respecting the rules in political contexts.
- 3 A popular way of describing the Netherlands (see Section 3.4). On the one hand, it refers to the cold-bloodedness of frogs and means that the Dutch have a cold-blooded nature. On the other hand, this metaphor is used to say that the Netherlands is small.

7 Greece

“What it should be? It should be everybody giving and everybody helping”

Petros Karpathiou

Greece is located at the southern and eastern edge of the European Union (EU), a country found in the middle of three continents, inevitably with great contradictions. The year 2021 marked both the 200th anniversary of independence from the Ottoman Empire and the 40th anniversary of Greece’s accession to the European Communities. Both events sealed the country’s Western course. The first marked the secession from the Eastern world while the second ushered in active participation in the Western one.

The 20th century was one of reconstruction and great development for most European countries. In the case of Greece, a series of bloody events marks the first half of the century, including the participation in both world wars and the eruption of a Civil War soon after Second World War. Nevertheless, the greatest transformation the country has experienced in its recent history came on 24 July 1974 after the fall of the totalitarian regime of the “Junta”, which had deposed the elected government in 1967.

Towards the end of its rule, the regime’s political power was already in decline due to generalised social discontent. The most conspicuous event of social resistance was the student uprising at the Athens Polytechnic which culminated in bloodshed on the morning of 17 November 1973. The final blow for the totalitarian military regime came on 20 July 1974 with the Turkish invasion of Cyprus five days after the attempted coup on the island, which was allegedly fuelled by the Greek Junta. Almost two months later, on 14 August 1974, Greece’s new government decided to withdraw from North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO’s) military command, as a sign of protest against the invasion of Cyprus.

After this series of events, Greece entered a new phase that came to be known in political history as the period of *Metapolitefsi* (“regime change”), where many important political figures returned to Greece, and which is marked by the restoration of the constitution and subsequent democracy. On 8 December 1974, a referendum was held for establishing a new political system. In the end, Greece reverted to democracy, more specifically to a unitary parliamentary republic, restoring the position of the country on the European and international stage. The new government also immediately began to pursue integration into the European Communities.

7.1 An overview about the country

7.1.2 *The political system*

After the fall of the totalitarian “regime of the Colonels” in 1974, and the holding of the referendum on the restoration, the political system of Greece was transformed into a unitary parliamentary republic. The head of state is the president, who is elected by the Greek parliament for a five-year term of office. Legislative power is exercised by the Greek parliament, which is formed following national elections. The executive power is exercised by the government, which consists of the Council of Ministers, composed of the prime minister and the ministers. The government is essentially the sole leading body governing the state since the president does not participate in political decision-making. The third and final power, the judicial power, is exercised by courts, which are divided into administrative, civil, and criminal courts.

The last decades have seen Greece try out various different models of administrative organisation, with the current administrative model, a result of the Kleisthenis I Programme, in operation since 1 September 2019. In accordance with this model, the country is divided into seven decentralised administrative units of the central government, 13 regions and 332 municipalities, which in turn are divided into 4,783 submunicipal units. Despite the different models that have been implemented over the years, Greece continues to be an intensely centralised state (Hlepas and Getimis 2011).

7.1.2 *Core features of population and economy*

As of 2019, Greece had 10.7 million inhabitants (Eurostat 2021b), with a population that is seemingly highly homogenous. In the last population census, which took place in 2011, out of 10.8 million citizens, 10.1 million were citizens of EU member states and more specifically 9.9 million were Greek citizens (ELSTAT 2011).

During the decade of the economic crisis, the migration from Greece increased nearly two-and-a-half-fold since the 2000s. According to data from the Hellenic Statistical Authority, in the first decade since 2000, the average number of people leaving the country each year was about 41,184, but this number grew during the next decade, reaching an average of 101,982.

On the other hand, Greece also receives large numbers of immigrants, as it is located at the important geopolitical crossroads between Europe, Africa and Asia. From 2010 to 2014, an average of 59,142 migrants arrived per year, but this number increased substantially over the next five years with an average of 108,501 people (ELSTAT 2019: 7).

The economy of Greece, in 2019, the gross domestic product (GDP), amounted to €183 billion (Eurostat 2021a). The resulting GDP per capita is €17,780, which is far below the average of the EU. Greece’s GDP hit its highest level in 2008, but then declined during the years of the financial crisis, and although it was slowly recovering after 2016, in 2020, it declined again severely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Greece has had a negative trade balance for at least the last 20 years. During the 2010 decade and the strict austerity programmes, the negative balance was more or less €20 billion every year, while it exceeded €40 billion in some years before the economic crises. More specifically, in 2019, exports amounted to €32 billion and imports to €55 billion, with the negative balance being €23 billion in 2021 (Bank of Greece 2021).

Unemployment has long plagued the Greek society and economy, although in recent years, there has been a downward trend. Despite this, Greece's unemployment rate continues to be among the highest in European rankings. A rapid increase in unemployment started in 2009, in parallel with the economic crisis. At that time, the overall unemployment rate was 9.6 per cent, it then peaked four years later in 2013 at 27.8 per cent and has been declining ever since, reaching 17.9 per cent in 2019 (Eurostat 2021g).

Youth unemployment is also a particularly significant figure, an indicator that could be said to expose several dysfunctions of the Greek productive model. More specifically, in 2019, unemployment in the most productive part of society, the 15–24 age group, reached 37.5 per cent, the highest in all EU countries (Eurostat 2021g).

For a variety of reasons, ranging from geographical to socioeconomic, the last 15 years has seen Greece entangled in all major crises faced by the EU. Although Greece has the slowest recovery from the Eurozone crisis of the late 2000s and was affected severely by the migration crisis of 2015, it seems that Greek respondents tend to have largely the same political concerns as respondents in other EU member states. This claim is also reflected in the Eurobarometer data (see Annex 2). Although the concerns of Greek and European citizens seem to converge for the most part, there are significant differences in two respects. Major discrepancies appear in the areas of environmental problems and climate change. Greek citizens seem to consider the problems of the natural environment to be less important, ranking them only seventh in contrast to EU citizens, who rank this as the number one issue. The second biggest difference compared to the EU average concerns the issue of health, which 38 per cent of Greeks declare as among the two most important issues, against only 21 per cent in the EU.

7.2 Greece and European integration

Like with many EU member states, Greece's involvement with European integration goes back many decades. For example, the Greek application for association with the fledgling European Economic Community (EEC) was submitted in June 1959. Its application resulted in the signing of the Greece-EEC Association Agreement in June 1961, the first Association Agreement concluded by the EEC. However, in the Greek case, the procedure was interrupted by the *coup d'état* of the Junta and was set again in motion after its fall. The application for full membership was then submitted on 12 June 1975 by prime minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, and the accession took place on 1 January 1981, making Greece the tenth member of the union.

On 19 October 1980, just 70 days before Greece's accession to the EEC, the government of Georgios Rallis decided to fully restore the country's participation in NATO (Chourchoulis and Kourkouvelas 2012).

For more than 30 years following its second presidency of the European Council in 1988, Greece has shown strong commitment to the agenda of the EU and its political, cultural, and economic cohesion and expansion. Moreover, in the country's interior political arena, the European idea has a strong presence, while Eurosceptic voices wavered from weak to nonexistent in official political platforms today. Since the national elections of 2019, the Greek parliament is profoundly pro-European. More specifically, four of the six political parties, Nea Dimokratia, Syriza, KINAL-PASOK and MERA25, strongly support Greece's European vocation and hold 275 out of a total of 300 seats (Pagoulatos 2021).

Greece, being a relatively newly established state and seeking stability after 150 years of experiencing almost continuous unrest in the social, political field, as well as economic precarity, sought to find its identity in the West.

As Karamanlis famously proclaimed on the day of signing Greece's accession to the European Communities, "we belong to the West." Since then, the country carried out a series of reforms in order to better fit the European profile. Accordingly, it can be said that for Greece, accession to the European Communities meant much more than the participation in the free market and its benefits. It was a course towards modernisation, not least because much of the European funding the country received was accompanied by reform commitments. Greece as a state tried to find its place in the changing context of the global economy, often using external influences as opportunities for political, economic and social transformation. This transformation was a central aspiration of the country during its accession to the European Communities and later to the Eurozone. Europeanisation "reinforced expectations of a process of reconstruction of the Greek state. It provided economic and institutional benefits and incentives" (Spanou 2021: 22).

The Europeanisation of Greece fundamentally altered the country's political and economic life. A typical example was the effort of the PASOK government in the early 2000s to push through the "Kapodistrias" reform. This reform was the first substantial attempt to decentralise the Greek administration and was met with strong opposition from both administrative and political staff. There were disagreements even within the ruling party (Hlepas and Getimis 2011). The reforms for the decentralisation of the Greek political system were carried out by the PASOK governments as a programmatic policy but most, if not all, of these reforms were introduced in response to the impact of EU membership (Ioakimidis 2000).

Greek desire for modernisation through EU membership; notwithstanding, it seems that Europeanisation has been unsuccessful in bringing about the envisaged reform effects. This became particularly evident when Greece was hit severely by the Eurozone crisis. Given the conditionality attached to bailout measures, the country's reform course was seen without alternatives for overcoming the crisis and the survival of the Greek economy itself. Taking a leap ten years later, it seems that particularly problems in the Greek administrative system have not been resolved. This may have been because (a) the reform agenda formulated as a

response to the Eurozone crisis was too excessive, (b) the orientation of the reform agenda was quantitative rather than qualitative, and (c) finally, margins for change were exhausted (as argued by Spanou 2021: 309–312).

Moreover, it would appear that through the years of multiple crises, the trust of the Greek citizens in both the Greek and European institutions has collapsed. Notably, only 11 per cent of the population say in the Eurobarometer survey that they trust the political parties, while 25 per cent tend to trust the government (Eurobarometer 2022). About 39 per cent of respondents say they trust the EU, which is the lowest score of all countries included in the study (see Annex 1). In the past, that was not always the case. At the beginning of the economic crisis, Greek people's trust in European institutions tended to be above the average of the EU member states (e.g. Clements et al. 2014). In fact, in terms of trust, Greeks scored 60 per cent for the European Parliament (EP) and 58 per cent for the European Commission, while the EU average was 50 per cent and 46 per cent, respectively (Eurobarometer 2009). Moreover, the distrust of Greeks towards both the national and the European political system is reflected in the high abstention rates in elections. In particular, according to national data, the turnout in the 2019 national elections in Greece reached only 57.8 per cent, while the turnout for the EP election in the same year was 58.7 per cent (Greek Ministry of Interior 2019). The Eurobarometer data for Greece also shows some interesting results regarding the EU's outputs. Free movement of people, goods, and services within the EU and peace among the member states are the most positive results of the EU in the perception of Greek respondents. Besides, among all the country cases, Greece scores the highest at "solidarity among member states of the EU" as an achievement of the EU. On the other hand, Greece scores lowest among all country cases when it comes to "social welfare", "protection of the environment" and "human well-being" as perceived benefits of European integration (see Annex 3). The view of Greeks on these issues might score low because public health and welfare programmes were severely degraded in the years of the economic crisis, while in recent years, Greece has been plagued by frequent natural disasters. Finally, the largest positive deviation from the European average is responses to the statement that European integration increases "[t]he political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world", with 15 percentage points. This difference could be attributed to Greece's economic and political stature, which, as the second poorest EU member state, is nevertheless diplomatically enhanced by its membership to a bloc of advanced countries.

7.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

7.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

Participants' answers to the question of which were the first three words that come to mind when the EU is mentioned were quite varied. The young adults seemed to choose more neutral or even negative words – such as "grant", "elite", "oppression" (ELFG3_F5), "refugee (crisis)", "memorandum" (ELFG3_M2), "borders", "loans", "politics" (ELFG3_F4). The lower paid and unemployed participants

chose words with more positive connotations, for example “free movement of people and goods” or “family”, “support”, “funding schemes” (ELFG2_M3), but several of them emphasised challenges, for example “France vs. Germany” or “consolidation of the EU vs. nation states” (ELFG2_M1). It is quite interesting that one participant (ELFG2_M3) used the term “family” for the EU. Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that the majority of the high skilled group participants elected to use largely positive descriptions in what they associated with the EU, for example “security”, “modernisation”, “Euro [as a common currency]” (ELFG1_M2), “free movement, free studies, human rights” (ELFG1_M4), “mutual aid” (ELFG1_F6), even from those who were highly critical of the European integration project in the discussion afterwards.

To the question “How would you describe your overall position, attitude or feeling towards the EU?”, all but one of the young adults’ answers ranged from critical to negative, for example “frustration” (ELFG3_F6), “disappointment”, “the attitude that the EU has towards countries outside Europe” (ELFG3_M2), “greater inequality between the states” (ELFG3_F6). Their reasoning was mainly based on the way the EU handles migrants and refugees, but also on how Greece was treated during the years of the economic crisis. From the group of lower paid and unemployed participants, only one (ELFG2_M3) responded and explained the disagreement with the economic and monetary policy, while acknowledging the EU’s support for Greece on issues such as migration. The participants of the high skilled group were generally more positive towards the EU. While some of them made critical remarks on the EU’s policies and attitudes towards third countries, all without exception recognised the necessity of its existence, both for Greece and for other European countries.

When asked if Greece’s membership in the EU was beneficial, participants answered positively and praised the “green” and digital modernisation of the country as well as the free movement of people. Participants in the group of lower paid and unemployed people emphasised, in a positive sense, Greece’s access to international markets and both economic and geopolitical securities.

On the question whether EU membership had also disadvantages for Greece, young adults mainly pointed to the change of the production model of the country, in particular policies that dismantled the agricultural sector and consequently led to dependence on the EU and other EU member states. Regarding this question, lower paid and unemployed participants highlighted the introduction of the Euro as the biggest disadvantage, and one participant in this group emphasised: “No citizen of Greece was asked to change their currency” (ELFG2_M3). The answers of the participants in the high skilled group did not differ much. They argued that “we had to modernise and to get on the same level as industrialised countries. However, that flattened us economically [because Greece became at the end] predominantly a land of agriculture and livestock” (ELFG1_F5). Furthermore, the participants of the high skilled group placed particular emphasis on the values that characterise, from their perspective, the EU – namely openness, free movement of persons and security – as summarised by one participant by stating: “[the EU] gives you a sense of protection, much greater as an ordinary citizen [of a single state]. Citizens have benefitted because they have in their hands a very strong passport” (ELFG1_M4).

In contrast, the young adults gave more attention to domains where they feel the EU fails to live up to such values and thus reflected critically on the economic crisis and refugee issue. Nevertheless, it seems that this group not having experienced the years before the economic crisis so intensely perceive that they live in a “community” with particular rights and high living standards. This was typically expressed in the following way: “I really feel privileged and that has a negative side, knowing people from other continents who do not have the same rights as me” (ELFG3_F1).

Although all three groups had an overall positive view of the EU, which will be analysed in detail below, there were also critical reflections. Furthermore, it is particularly interesting that some results of the Eurobarometer survey seem to be confirmed and some do not. Interestingly, members of the high skilled group seem to have a more “positive image of the EU” than members of the group of young adults. Moreover, participants do not seem to have the lowest “trust in the EU” (Annex 1) when they compare it with national institutions.

7.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

In the example of a natural disaster, participants from all focus groups unanimously agreed that the EU should provide help. In the very beginning, participants from the high skilled group agreed that the help should come mostly as financial aid and human power as articulated by the following statement: “Surely in the beginning there should be humanitarian aid from the whole Union to that country, with completely altruistic motives” (ELFG1_F5). However, they quickly shifted to also demanding a proactive response from the EU. This was concluded in the following way: “for me that would probably be the most essential thing. Not what happens in the case of a natural disaster, but at a level of awareness that I think should be much more pronounced within the EU” (ELFG1_M4). Furthermore, almost all participants of this group stressed the need to share experience and know-how between EU countries so that member states are prepared for such emergencies. One participant summarised it in the following proverb: “Give a man a fish to fill him up, teach a man to fish so he’ll never go hungry again” (ELFG1_M4).

The responses of the young adults were similar. However, the young people’s thinking was revolving around resources rather than expertise. One participant, using the relatively recent example of the wildfire in Mati (Attica/Greece), explains that “maybe the immediate help is not part of the EU, but mainly that we need to provide money so that a disaster doesn’t happen again” (ELFG3_F5). Another issue put in perspective was that if the EU has the technical means, then “the problem should be eliminated within a few days” (as stated by ELFG3_F1).

The responses of the participants in the lower paid and unemployed group were different in comparison to the other two groups due to the argument that the EU should provide material support to national crisis management teams. Additionally, there should be a European team to support the national ones when needed and, finally, that there should be a European task force to support the member states.

The participants of the high skilled group were of different opinions when the responsibility for aid shifted from the EU to the member states. Some participants

took the view that “if the EU response is sufficient, I don’t know if the other member states need to take action” (ELFG1_M8), while others had the view that “the member states should be prepared at any time to offer their assistance to strengthen a culture of mutual aid” (ELFG1_F5). One participant likewise talked about reciprocity and the culture of cooperation that could be built by helping other countries by stating they should “offer [support] to another state, which may be on the other side of the EU, which I may have no connection with. [This] is a culture that needs to be developed. It only develops through giving” (ELFG1_M4).

In the same scenario, participants from the lower paid and unemployed group argued that states should support each other even if they are not part of the EU and put material costs in the background. However, in respect to EU member states, participants in this group argued that mutual aid works like a chain: “There is a chain, if something cracks in the chain and breaks, the game is lost” (ELFG2_M3). The answer to the question “who should cover the costs” was also unanimous. All participants rallied around the phrase: “As a first step you send [help], and the money or what will be needed anyway, [the question ‘who should cover the costs’] comes second” (ELFG2_M4).

Young adults also moved along similar lines, asserting that the response in times of natural disaster is solidary support. One participant stated that “there is no need for countries to get involved in bureaucratic procedures and to look at what they will gain if they help” (ELFG3_M3). All participants in this group agreed with this position and one participant even went a step further, explaining that due to climate change, natural disasters will become more frequent, and countries are called upon to “learn from each other, I mean learn techniques, learn ways of coping, to bypass this bureaucracy that our country [has], which is dysfunctional in our country” (ELFG3_F6).

In response to the question whether “some European countries should help more than others”, participants in all three groups were divided along two positions. On the one hand, the view was supported that each country should give as much help as possible, as one participant stated: “I think that whatever the situation is, the country should help because, especially in a natural disaster, we are talking about human lives” (ELFG2_M4). On the other hand, it was argued that help should be proportional to the economy, population and infrastructure of each country. However, it was also stated that “countries that are economically stronger should help more” (ELFG3_M2).

On the question of whether Greece should help, the responses of the young adults could be summarised in the response of one participant who claimed that

I think Greece should also help and even [if] the country is not so positive about it, at least it could think selfishly and think that by helping another country, it ensures in some way the support of other countries in case there is a disaster in Greece. So, looking at it either from one way, of solidarity, or from the way of interest, we should help.

(ELFG3_F1)

Regarding the coverage of the cost of helping another member state, participants argued that it should be covered, even if only partially, by the EU. If this is not possible, then the costs should be covered by Greece, but the offer of assistance should be used in the future in order to “claim some advantage from the EU for this stance or do it for PR [public relation] reasons” (ELFG3_F1).

When the participants in the three groups were asked if they felt they had a personal responsibility to help, the answer was negative in terms of actual help on the ground level, as they could do more harm in the absence of expertise. Furthermore, it was argued that engagement of individual persons would be risky in that “[it is] dangerous [. . .] to put something that is ultimately state responsibility, social responsibility or whatever, at the level of individual responsibility” (ELFG1_M8) and, therefore, allowing the state to draw back. Instead, “[b]eing an active citizen [means] pushing the state to take its [. . .] collective responsibility. I think that the narrative has reversed, that individuals themselves are more responsible for things that the state has to take over” (ELFG1_F3).

Two of the participants of the group of lower paid and unemployed people, both working as healthcare professionals, explained that they would go to offer their help, even voluntarily, in the case of a natural disaster in another European country. The prerequisite for this, however, was that their jobs in Greece were guaranteed – as stated below:

I see it as a personal responsibility, and yes, if they said “You go, and when you come back, your job is not lost” I wouldn’t be interested in being compensated and for the time I would go to help, I would go without thinking about it, as long as I know that after I come back, I can have my job and pick up where I left off.
(ELFG2_F2)

7.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in times of a financial crisis

The discussion that developed about the scenario of a financial or economic crisis in the group of high skilled participants showed two central arguments. The first asserted that Greece does not have the economic capacity to help another country, as it is not yet economically stable. However, it was argued that Greece could certainly help with sharing its experience and expertise. The second tenet was that Greece has an obligation to help financially as much as it can, since it has received aid in the past even from poorer countries. A similar position was expressed by a participant from the lower paid and unemployed group, while the others supported the position that Greece should help by whatever means it has at its disposal. The position that Greece does not have the economic capacity to help another country was also supported by participants in the group of young adults.

When asked how the other member states should react if Greece was hit harder by the economic crisis, participants from all three focus groups unanimously agreed that they would like the rest of the EU countries to help.

When asked whether any financial assistance to Greece should be accompanied by rules, all respondents were in agreement. This was accompanied by a question as to how the specific characteristics of each country and how the (conditionality) should be adapted. The same issue was articulated by a participant from the lower paid and unemployed group, arguing that “obviously when there is some borrowing, it’s not a question of whether we want it or not. Obviously there will be some conditions. It’s a question of who they target and who the burden falls on in practice” (ELFG2_M1). The other participants in the lower paid and unemployed group agreed with this statement. However, with the Greek people’s temperament in mind, it was emphasised: “[W]e are probably a bit of an undisciplined people, and we need someone to put us in line” (ELFG2_F2).

Participants in the young adult group argued that aid to any European country should ideally not differ and “shouldn’t [reflect] interest [of particular member states] because that negates the concept of solidarity. I mean looking at the interest that a country is pursuing, it completely nullifies this action [of help]” (ELFG3_F4).

In the lower paid and unemployed group, where the discussion of these questions became more intense, two things were observed. On the one hand, there was a distrust of Greek politicians, a trend that was observed in all groups. In this respect the participant argued:

The one who should be worried is not the citizen of the country in question, whether it’s Greece, Slovakia, France, or Italy. The one who should be worried is the politician who is in the government and gets the loan.

(ELFG2_M3)

On the other hand, there was anger about interventions into internal (domestic) affairs – as it was typically expressed in the following statement: “Yes, to lend us money [is ok, but] to get into the internal affairs of the country is too much” (ELFG2_M3).

The majority of young adults did not agree that financial aid should be accompanied by rules, except one participant who argued that “I will say that clearly there should be rules in financial support because without rules we probably won’t get the expected results” (ELFG3_F6).

7.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

The high skilled participants were largely in favour of combatting social and regional disparities, however with a touch of irony, since they considered it practically an impossibility – as expressed as follows: “I don’t know whether it is feasible to have it, but of course I would like it” (by ELFG1_F5).

The discussion then opened up about a pan-European unemployment scheme. All participants were in favour of such a scheme but recognised the potential difficulties of establishing it. Furthermore, the quality of work to be offered to

unemployed was stressed by stating that “there should be an investment in businesses that does not actually force people to take miserable jobs just to reduce the unemployment rate” (ELFG1_F3). The lower paid and unemployed participants unanimously agreed that this is a plan that should be funded collectively by all member states, and the contribution should be proportional according to each country’s GDP.

Similarly, young adults were positively disposed towards the creation of such a European programme that would address inequalities and also raised the issue of different needs across the countries. However, when the question of unemployment was broached, young adults argued that Greece could not help directly as it is plagued by high unemployment. Nevertheless, one participant argued that unemployment in Greece is, regardless of the existence of an EU-wide scheme for unemployment, indirectly positively affected by the free movement of people in the EU: “[unemployment in Greece] basically forces you in some way to go to another country that has a demand for labour and fill the employment gap that exists there in some way” (ELFG3_F6).

7.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Greece

In conclusion, it seems that all three focus group discussions conducted in Greece largely lend credence to the findings of the Eurobarometer surveys (presented in Annexes 1–3 and briefly reflected in Section 7.2). The comments of the participants confirm in particular that Greeks do have more trust in European institutions than in national ones.

From the participants’ statements and reflections, two different perspectives of future development of the country can be extracted. The first shows a “we can do it” attitude, that is an attitude that is hopeful of opportunities for change. The EU and its institutions are considered relevant not only for the further modernisation of the country but also as safeguards for using this opportunity against the corrupt national elites. This is interesting because EU policies – particularly during the economic crisis – are often seen as harsh. The second perspective expresses a “we can’t” attitude stemming from disappointments about EU membership and a feeling, or even deep-seated conviction, that nothing can be changed because one’s hands are tied by Europeanisation and globalisation. This results not only in resignation but also in images of the EU, which are expressed in the following: “the EU and its states are [part of] a system which is based on unemployment. I mean, surely there must be unemployed people so that jobs can be recycled to serve, let’s say, capital” (ELFG3_M3). “I think the EU is an economic model and actually inequalities help it economically. They have created these classes so that German companies, for example, can use cheap labour from Greece” (ELFG1_F3).

Nevertheless, solidarity was somewhat strongly supported as an idea among the participants of all three focus groups discussions conducted in Greece. Lower paid or unemployed as well as high skilled participants were even willing to volunteer in time of need. The majority of the participants from all three focus groups underlined that in case of a new economic crisis, Greece has the obligation to help another country in any way it could, without profiting from it.

8 Portugal

“We are living at the expense of European funds but these funds have been misused”

João Moniz

The long road towards Portugal’s economic and political integration with the European Union (EU) took many twists and turns along the narrow pathways of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship and the open fields of the post-revolutionary in 1974. The country successfully joined what was at the time the European Economic Community (EEC) in the context of the Southern Enlargement, which began in 1981 with the accession of Greece and culminating in 1986 with the accession of the two Iberian countries, Portugal and Spain. The prolonged period of negotiations began in 1974 after the fall of the right-wing *Estado Novo* dictatorship (see Chaves 2013). According to Costa Pinto and Teixeira (2003), the European Commission and the European Council were available and willing to start the process of negotiation of Portugal’s accession as long as the moderate political forces managed to consolidate a position in favour of a European-style pluralist and liberal democracy. The formal process began in 1976, when the Socialist government, led by Mario Soares, applied for accession and would end ten years after.

Portugal’s participation in the EU integration project has enjoyed widespread consensus, at both the elite and mass levels. For the Portuguese political elite, the prospect of a fully integrated Portugal was seen as the ideal opportunity to consolidate democracy and to leave the country’s colonial past behind (Manuel 2010; Moreira et al. 2010; Costa Pinto and Teixeira 2003). For the Portuguese public, participation in the EU project has been consistently seen as largely beneficial for the country, but support for the EU is not an issue that mobilises or indeed engages the average Portuguese citizen (Freire et al. 2014; Lisi 2020; Magalhães 2012). Still, after more than 30 years of EU membership, and despite this level of support for integration, Portugal remains a laggard member state when it comes to convergence with the rest of the EU’s economy and development (for competing explanations, see Lains 2019; Rodrigues et al. 2016; Royo 2013).

8.1 An overview about the country

8.1.2 *The political system*

With the fall of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship in 1974, the subsequent revolutionary period that followed, and the signing of the Constitution in 1976, Portugal

re-established a European-style representative democracy. Portugal features a semi-presidential political system, wherein executive power is exercised by the prime minister who is accountable to parliament, while the directly elected president acts as a head of state with significant powers: for example, the president enacts and publishes the laws and can activate the dissolution of parliament.

For elections to parliament, the unicameral *Assembleia da República*, the Constitution enshrines a system of proportional representation with closed lists divided into 22 electoral districts of wide-ranging magnitudes.¹ This electoral system has effectively produced a bipartisan party system dominated by the social democratic Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista/PS*) and the liberal-conservative Social Democratic Party (*Partido Social Democrata/PSD*) (see Fernandes 2023). These two parties have shared governmental responsibilities throughout the democratic period. Nevertheless, there are other relevant political parties in Portugal, some of which have been in government in the past, such as the conservative Social Democratic Centre Party (*Centro Democrático Social/CDS-PP*). Despite not having formally participated in governmental duties, the radical left and Eurosceptic Portuguese Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Português/PCP*), and since 1999, the Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda/BE*), play a pivotal role in the Portuguese party system, having recently supported a minority PS government in parliament during the 2015–2019 legislature; this unprecedented arrangement was dubbed “the contraption” (see Fernandes et al. 2018; Jalali et al. 2020 for an overview). After the 2019 general elections, this arrangement came to an end when these parties failed to secure renewed agreements due to persisting programmatic differences between the PS and the left-wing parties on key areas of economic policy, as well as a new political balance of power in parliament favouring the PS (Jalali et al. 2020). The remaining relevant parties are the environmentalist and animalist People–Animals–Nature (*Pessoas-Animais-Natureza/PAN*) and two recent arrivals on the right, namely, the radical-right populist party Enough! (*Chega!/CH*) and the Liberal Initiative (*Iniciativa Liberal/IL*).

Administratively, the Portuguese Republic is predominantly organised at two levels: the national and the local. Indeed, unlike many of its EU counterparts, Portugal lacks a popularly elected intermediate layer of government at the regional level. However, the country has two autonomous regions, in the Azores and Madeira archipelagos, which enjoy considerable political and administrative autonomy. This aspect of the Portuguese political system, combined with the restricted competencies attributed to the local sphere and subsequent meagre share of government expenditures allocated to municipalities, makes the country one of the most centralised states of the EU (Magone 2011).

8.1.2 Core features of population and economy

Before the COVID-19 pandemic landed on Portuguese shores, the country’s economy was growing by 2.7 per cent in 2019, above the EU’s average (Eurostat 2021d). In the decade before, the Portuguese economy demonstrated steady growth: gross domestic product (GDP) in 2019 was €214 billion (Eurostat 2021b) while, a decade

before, it was €175 billion. Regarding GDP per capita, the growth was less marked. In 2009, it was €16,710 and, a decade later, it was €18,670 (Eurostat 2021e). As of 2019, the share of GDP that the Portuguese public debt represented was 116.6 per cent (IMF 2021) and 112.9 per cent for private debt in the non-financial sector (PORDATA 2021b), making it one of the most indebted member states of the EU. The combination of these factors makes the Portuguese economy vulnerable to exogenous shocks and highly dependent on the policies of the European Central Bank (ECB).

The decade between 2009 and 2019 also saw a decrease in the rate of unemployment, from 11.2 per cent in 2009 to 6.7 per cent in 2019 (Eurostat 2021f). However, it warrants mentioning that this was not a linear trend. Indeed, between 2011 and 2015,² the average unemployment rate was 15.0 per cent, peaking at 17.2 per cent in 2013. From 2014 to 2019, this metric saw a steady yearly decrease until 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country.

In 2019, Portugal's exports amounted to €94 billion, a value that has been increasing steadily throughout the years (PORDATA 2021a). Its main trading partners were and still are all EU member states, particularly its neighbour Spain, France, but also Germany and the United Kingdom. According to the National Institute for Statistics in 2019, the main trading goods coming out of the Portuguese economy were vehicles and other transport materials, machines and devices and base metals (INE 2020). Despite the successful efforts to increase exports, Portugal's foreign trade balance remains tenuous. In 2019, it was €1.6 billion, with vehicles and other transport material, machines and devices, and mineral fuels being the three main imports. Nevertheless, the Portuguese trade balance remains firmly planted on the negative side of the scale: in 2019, it stood at €20 billion.

Despite the fleeting economic successes in recent years, Portugal has been living under the shadow of a looming demographic problem. According to the latest census data, the country is experiencing a downward trend in population – since 2011 Portugal has lost 2 per cent of its population. At present, Portugal has fewer than 10 million inhabitants (INE 2022), making it a mid-sized state in the context of the EU. The most likely explanation for this trend is a combination of factors such as an ageing population and the patterns of migration to and from the country.

Portugal has been described as a country of emigrants, with a long and complex history of emigration flows (see Pires 2019). The last decade has not witnessed significant changes in this pattern. In 2009, the total number of emigrants was 16,899, and in 2019, it had increased to 28,219, reaching 54,786 in 2013 during the economic crisis (Eurostat 2021a). As of 2020, the most significant migratory outflows from the country are all within Europe, with the most notable destination being the United Kingdom, followed by countries such as Spain, France, Switzerland and Germany (Pires et al. 2020). On the opposite side of the phenomenon, in 2009, the total number of immigrants was 32,307, and ten years later, the number has risen to 72,725 (Eurostat 2021a), with arrivals mainly from Brazil and other Portuguese-speaking countries, and to a lesser degree, from Western European countries such as the United Kingdom and France, as well as from Eastern European countries like Romania and Ukraine. Between 2009 and 2019, Portugal also saw the share of foreign-born population rise from 8.08 to 9.33 per cent.

A relevant feature of the Portuguese demography is the historical tendency towards an asymmetrical distribution of the population over the territory, with a highly populated littoral and a sparsely populated interior (see Carvalho 2018; Fernandes and Seixas 2018). Indeed, a cursory look at the population shifts by municipality in the latest wave of the census (see INE 2022) provides a grim picture. Depopulation has affected interior and rural areas, while some municipalities of the littoral saw increases in the population. This internal migration, coupled with an ageing of the population, which is felt also more intensely in the rural areas of the interior, is a significant challenge. The trend is particularly worrisome when considering its effects on the loss of human resources in these regions, and subsequent devaluation of their economic and social fabric, thus straining these already impoverished territories even further.

Having surveyed the mains aspects of Portugal's political system and economy, the next section will discuss the country's relationship with the European integration project.

8.2 Portugal and European integration

Despite Portugal's participation in other international organisations such as the European Free Trade Association and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, during the *Estado Novo* period, Salazar's authoritarian regime always viewed the developments around the growing EEC with suspicion. The main concerns of the Portuguese dictator towards any kind of participation in a project of political integration at the European level were the likelihood of international interference with the country's colonial holdings in Africa, the likelihood of interference with the country's commercial relationship with the United Kingdom and the possibility that political integration could lead to the erosion of Salazar's dictatorial hold over Portuguese society (Chaves 2013; Costa Pinto and Teixeira 2003). As such, the refusal to participate in a political and economic integration at the European level remained an enduring aspect of the regimes' external policy. In the regime's external relations, absolute priority over relations with the European centre was to be given to the Atlantic and the country's colonial holdings (Ferreira 1993).

The death of Salazar and the subsequent succession of Marcello Caetano as president of the Council of Ministers in 1968 did not significantly change the external outlook of the dictatorship. However, the protracted and bloody anti-colonial liberation struggles in Portugal's colonies, as well as rising international and domestic pressures to decolonise and to open up the country, began to crack the regime's hard-line external policy. From these developments emerged a so-called Europeanist fraction within the regime's more liberal and technocratic elite, which would come to play a key role in the post-revolutionary period (Costa Pinto and Teixeira 2003). Still, this policy towards political integration at the European level was to endure until the end of the *Estado Novo* regime.

The fall of the authoritarian regime in a bloodless military coup in 1974 marked not only a rapid transition to democracy. It also ushered in the end of the protracted overseas conflict and of the so-called African vocation in Portugal's external and

economic policy, as well as opening possibilities for the country towards integration at the European level, what Costa Pinto and Teixeira (2003: 19) called the “withdrawal from Africa to Europe.”

At the time when Portugal formally joined the EEC in 1986, the moderate and Europeanist fraction of the post-Carnation Revolution political elite saw integration at the European level as a window of opportunity to shed the country’s colonial legacy (Manuel 2010; Lobo et al. 2016) to gain international legitimacy and to consolidate the new democratic order (Moreira et al. 2010). This fraction would play a pivotal role in the three main government parties in Portugal: the PS, the PSD and the CDS-PP. However, this move in favour of Portugal’s integration at the European level was not without controversies in the context of the country’s transition to democracy following the Carnation Revolution in 1974. According to Lobo et al. (2016), adherence to European integration was clearly a political project of the moderate political parties, at both the right and the left, of the nascent political elite of the country, while the more radical left wing of the transition, headed by the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), rejected accession to the EEC. This tendency of left-wing Euroscepticism was later reinforced by the arrival of the radical left party BE and endures to this day.

However, Portugal’s accession to the European integration project has always been an elite-driven affair with little to no input from citizens and organised civil society (Moreira et al. 2010). Unlike in several other EU member states, the Portuguese citizenry was not consulted through referenda as to whether they would like to join the project, or even regarding the ratification of EU treaties.

Despite this, Portuguese public opinion has generally been favourable towards integration and the EU, even if not enthusiastically so. Annex 1 provides a summary of the most relevant indicators. Indeed, in the last round of the Eurobarometer survey (from Autumn 2021/Spring 2022), respondents in Portugal exhibited higher-than-average trust in the EU and the European Parliament (EP), higher satisfaction with democracy in the EU, more optimism about the future of the Union, higher support for the single currency, more attachment to the idea of EU citizenship and a more positive image of the EU. However, when it comes to political efficacy of the EU’s institutions, the Portuguese citizenry displays more ambivalent attitudes. While the Portuguese are content with the EU’s outputs overall, they may tend to still see the EU’s policy-making process as something distant that happens “in Brussels”, where their input is restricted. Indeed, the positive attitudes of Portuguese citizens took a downwards turn during the Eurozone crisis but have since returned to pre-crisis levels (see Freire et al. 2014; Lisi 2020).

The support for integration displayed by Portuguese public opinion nonetheless comes with a caveat. As evident in Annex 4, when solicited to actively participate in the integration process through election to the EP, most of the Portuguese abstain despite calling for greater Europeanisation. The historical trend in Portugal is towards less participation in these elections.³ This is at odds with the data reported in Annex 1, which shows that a substantial portion of the Portuguese citizenry has positive views about their capacity to influence political outcomes at the EU level. Still, this trend towards lower turnout does not diverge from the overall picture in other member states. However, in Portugal, it is more intense, and unlike

the rest of Europe, the country did not witness an increase in turnout in the 2019 elections (European Parliament 2021a). This turn of affairs has led some scholars to classify the positive attitudes of the Portuguese public towards the EU as instrumental rather than affective in character (Lobo 2003; Costa Pinto and Lobo 2004; Magalhães 2012). That is to say that support for the EU is based on the perception that membership in the Union comes with economic benefits rather than on an attachment to the political dimensions of EU membership.

This instrumental attitude towards the EU might be explained by Portugal's economic, political and institutional position in the EU. A significant landmark in the country's relationship with the EU was undoubtedly the adoption of the Euro in 1999, although the effects produced by this decision have been adverse in the long term for the Portuguese economy, ushering in a period of prolonged economic stagnation (Rodrigues and Reis 2012). Nevertheless, as Annex 3 shows, as of 2021–2022, the Portuguese public considers free movement of people, goods and services within the EU, peace among member states, and the creation of the Euro to be the EU's highest achievements.

Moreover, according to the European Commission's (2020) figures, between 2014 and 2020, Portugal received a total of €29,587 billion from the EU, while its contributions to the EU's budget were €12,682 billion. This places Portugal squarely on the side of the EU's beneficiaries with a balance of €16,906 billion. It is, therefore, not so difficult to see why EU membership is generally processed through an instrumentalist prism.

Portugal's institutional fit with the EU, as measured by the European Commission's transposition deficit, has been narrowing across time between the national and EU level. This index, which measures the difference between the number of single market directives at EU level and those adopted by the member states, was 2.9 below the EU average in 2004 and still 0.5 below the EU average in 2019 (European Commission 2021). Despite this effort towards approximation and Europeanisation, during the Eurozone crisis, the country fell under the stringent purview of the European institutions which oversaw a drastic austerity programme together with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), leading to dire consequences for the country's social and economic fabric. Nevertheless, in the last few years, Portugal began to converge with the EU again. The specific combination of these factors in the Portuguese context sheds light on the apparently positive, albeit instrumental, attitude of the Portuguese public opinion towards the EU.

8.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

8.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

When questioned about the first three thoughts that came to mind when the EU was mentioned, answers from the three discussion groups varied. Participants referred to concrete policies and institutions such as the Euro, the Schengen area, the free circulation of goods and services, access to financial help from the structural funds, as well as problems facing the EU such as immigration and the issues of external border control. Alongside the concrete aspects of EU membership, participants

similarly raised ambivalent issues, such as the idea brought up by both the lower paid and unemployed and the young adult group that the EU is distant from the daily lives of citizens and that it is difficult for ordinary people either to know, or to influence, EU decision-making.

However, broadly speaking, the participants focused more on the question of values. For instance, some participants thought of the EU as a source of security “some kind cushion that can help us in case there’s a problem” (PTFG2_F3); stability; equality; unity between countries; human rights: “the European Union has gone further than probably the whole of the countries in the continent [. . .] after the Second World War regarding human rights” (PTFG1_M4); and community, with one of the participants of the high skilled group referring to a “dream of equality and justice” (PTFG1_F3). Another participant explicitly mentioned ideas of community and aid between countries, which he described as “if some countries are falling [down], other help them not to fall” (PTFG1_M2), implicitly alluding to the concepts of reciprocity and cohesion. Concurrently, a participant from the lower paid and unemployed group pointed out that this mutual aid is made more difficult because of the variety and diversity of the countries that form the EU, with some countries adopting a more Eurosceptic position, which makes coordination even more difficult. Indeed, one of the young adult participants described the EU as being “idyllic but imperfect” (PTFG3_F1), arguing that the EU has many inequalities between countries that are yet to be addressed. This thought is reinforced by an idea that appeared in both the lower paid and unemployed and the young adult groups, namely that countries such as Germany and France are taking advantage of the EU at the detriment of other less-developed countries like Portugal.

The overall position of the participants towards the EU was positive, mirroring the data in larger opinion polls (see Section 8.2), albeit critical in some instances. One of the participants declared that she liked “being a European citizen” (PTFG1_F7) because the EU granted stability and security to citizens. However, such positive positions were nuanced and contextualised. For example, one participant echoed the passage from Africa to Europe described earlier (in Section 8.2), stressing that joining the EU was the only perspective for Portugal after decolonisation: “Portugal was at the end of a cul-de-sac, and it was either totally isolated, alone, or had to enter the European Union” (PTFG1_M4). According to the same participant, an instrumental logic applied to the adoption of the Euro. However, “we are living at the expense of European funds” (PTFG1_M4), which due to a mixture of incompetence and corruption, Portugal has not been able to use for development. This position was reinforced by another participant who argued that Portugal had received a lot of funds from the EU, but these funds had been misused, “it’s not going to education; it’s not going to healthcare. It goes to someone’s pockets, doesn’t it” (PTFG1_F1). This reasoning inevitably led to the conclusion that it was necessary to establish stricter mechanisms to monitor the use of EU funds to avoid misuse, a viewpoint shared by a significant number of participants of both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed groups.

Another view echoed by participants pointed to this idea of a degradation of standards in Europe. Although the high skilled group did not articulate a sustained

critique of the EU, they nonetheless declared that this is a “Europe of paradoxes” (PTFG1_F3) and that “it’s all the sphere of ideas, but there is little action from the EU” (PTFG1_F6). Some of the participants in all groups drew attention to the inequalities and lack of cohesion that exist between the countries, a “large imbalance here within a community, within something that should be united or one” (PTFG1_M2). In fact, this understanding of the EU as being ridden with inequalities, both between countries and between people, was one of the main through lines cutting across all the three focus groups and all the proposed scenarios as will be discussed later. Participants of the group of young adults and the lower paid and unemployed group also added that the EU lacks transparency.

8.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural

When confronted with a hypothetical natural disaster and its humanitarian consequences, participants of all groups unanimously agreed that help should be provided to the affected country, be it financial resources or direct humanitarian aid. The same principle was extended to the EU. “I think the European Union has at least the moral obligation to support in these situations” (PTFG1_F6), said one of the participants. However, some of the participants also indicated that different countries in the EU have different resources and capacity. As such, help should be organised according to principles of proportionality. The same participant who stated that the EU has a moral obligation to help in circumstances of natural disaster declared: “I think every country gives what it has” (PTFG1_F6). She continued with “Portugal is not comfortable in this issue. There are other countries that are richer. They can contribute with more financial support” (PTFG1_F6); essentially, some countries can and should contribute more than others. Thus, while the principle of solidarity is asserted, it nonetheless comes with provisos associated with the unequal wealth and capacity of each member state.

When the lower paid and unemployed participants were asked if they were willing to accept higher costs to assure mutual aid in natural disaster contexts, the overwhelming majority rejected the proposal arguing that their economic condition was not conducive to bearing higher costs of living, even if this meant higher security: “How am I going to contribute? Am I going to contribute and stop putting food on the table or stop paying the electricity bill” (PTFG2_F4) said one of the members of the group. Indeed, one of the participants pointed to the negative effects of austerity on Portugal’s ability to tackle natural disasters on its own territory, such as wildfires: “I think a lot has been taken away from us: the forest rangers. [. . .] [T]hey wanted to cut back on expenses but forgot about preventions” (PTFG2_F4). This “they” remained unspecified, however. Another participant from the lower paid and unemployed group suggested in response that natural disaster aid could be funded by higher contributions from “countries that make tax competition, like the Netherlands” (PTFG2_M2), once again referring to this idea that appeared in the focus group discussions that some countries are taking unfair advantages vis-à-vis others.

Specifically, in the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed groups, this scenario prompted an interesting reaction. Some of the participants defended the need for written agreements between countries to organise aid in cases of natural disaster, in order to ensure proportionality of outputs, with one of the participants going so far as to stress that these principles of proportionality should be enshrined in writing because “from the moment it is not written there can be countries [. . .] which will, shall we say, escape from that community responsibility” (PTFG1_M4). The lower paid and unemployed group repeated some of these concerns regarding assurances that every country would do its part, without fully articulating the issue in terms of written agreements. Some participants from this group nonetheless stressed the need for more planning and coordination between member states. These shared concerns with assurances and obligations are yet another manifestation of the same general attitude of mistrust prevalent in the Portuguese focus group discussions which had already been displayed on the question of mismanagement of EU funds.

When considering the young adult group, they did not diverge significantly from the other groups on issues of solidarity with affected countries – “inaction is not an option” (PTFG3_F6), while stressing the value of proportionality when it comes to the contributions of each country. However, during the discussion, there emerged a distinctive reasoning grounded in feelings of mistrust, namely the notion that there is a double standard regarding aid in the EU, wherein some countries, depending on certain criteria, for example wealth of the member state and its political influence within the EU, are favoured over others; “the factor of which country is affected would most likely influence what kind of aid it would be given and how soon it would be handed out” (PTFG3_M2).

8.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in times of a financial crisis

The second scenario proposed by the topic guide probed the focus group participants on how Portugal should react in the advent of a financial or economic crisis in the EU. While the scenario prompted general feelings of solidarity in all the groups, it gave the opportunity to some participants to revisit the problems of trustworthiness referred to earlier. The participants in the high skilled group argued that support should be well regulated and that investment should go to “what really matters” (PTFG1_F7). Another participant of this group evoked the principle of fairness. If external aid were to be given to other countries because of economic misfortunes, “the rules should be same for everyone. [. . .] What happened to us and Greece, for others it would have to be the same” (PTFG1_M2). Conversely, one of the participants of the lower paid and unemployed group mobilised the value of reciprocity arguing that “I think we should help, if, for example, they owed us something” (PTFG2_F4). For this participant, the solution could be to “create integration policies to welcome these people [immigrants from other EU countries] [. . .]. We would get a return with more taxes; we would boost our economy and we would help them, too” (PTFG2_F4).

Through this frame of reference based on trustworthiness and deservingness, in both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed groups, the discussion quickly changed direction as participants started to discuss Portugal's recent handling of the economic crisis instead of the scenario proposed in strict sense. For one of the participants, Portugal cannot be "asking the other countries [to help us], that by our mistakes, which they [the EU] are tired of saying that we are on a bad path" (PTFG1_M4). This stance was echoed in the lower paid and unemployed group "we also put ourselves in this position" (PTFG2_M2). The same participant of the high skilled group similarly made a distinction between aid in the context of a catastrophe and aid in the context of an economic crisis of one's own making, and other participants reinforced this idea; "it's always the same countries helping out, and it's always the same countries behaving badly" (PTFG1_F1), clearly evoking a north-south, creditor-debtor divide in the EU. Nevertheless, this reasoning was not entirely consensual in the high skilled group since some participants highlighted the EU's and Troika's role in Portugal's economic situation. Still, most of the interventions were variations on the theme of Portugal's incompetence in managing its own affairs. One participant blamed the country's problems on lack of mobilisation and apathy of the electorate, which, according to her, deliberately chooses to abstain from voting, thus perpetuating the situation that the country finds itself in. Another participant gave a more essentialist argument stating that "at the bottom of this is a cultural problem" (PTFG1_M4).

This kind of reasoning was absent from the discussion of the group of young adults. In general, the discussion in this group was free of this reckoning with the past. The group was unanimously willing to offer help to other countries affected by an economic crisis; "what Portugal is supposed to do is cooperate with the European Union, [. . .] as they did with us when the resolution of the crisis we had in 2008" (PTFG3_F6). "We should cooperate with the EU so as not to leave the country on its own" said another of the young adults (PTFG3_F3). However, some of the young adults argued that aid or support should be relative to what each country can bear: "I also think that aid should be proportionate [. . .] to what the country can provide to others" (PTFG3_F3).

One can argue that the general consensus emerging from both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed group is that of top-down charity relation between unequal actors, wherein the receiver of aid has a moral duty to prove deservingness, hence the insistence of many participants from both of these groups on the need for tighter regulation around the use of EU's structural funds. The underlying idea, shared by both high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed participants, seems to be that the more industrious, diligent and competent EU member states perceive Portugal as being untrustworthy due to past institutional misfunctions, and thus, undeserving of aid in the case of an economic crisis.

Still on the theme of solidarity in economic crisis, participants were asked if they were willing to accept conditionalities in exchange for financial aid to their country. The majority of participants from all three groups showed willingness to accept conditions in the abstract but stressed that there should be flexibility to negotiate them and that countries should always be given options. As a participant

in the lower paid and unemployed group pointed out “I am not shocked by the issue in any way of imposing rules or receiving rules. The problem is what kind of rules they are” (PTFG2_M2). A participant in the group of young adults stated that “there should be flexibility in the negotiation” (PTFG3_F1). Overall, while not explicitly mobilising the concept of fairness, most participants implicitly acknowledged it as a precondition for solidarity in the context of a putative economic crisis. Nonetheless, it must be noted that this implicit notion of fairness articulated by the young adults is two sided. Fairness should be expected from both the recipients of aid and from the givers of such aid since the conditionalities should not be imposed unilaterally. This idea was evident in the numerous references made by young adults to the need for mutual agreement on such conditionalities, so as to avoid the negative consequences of the recent past – a clear reference to the prevailing idea that austerity policies were imposed on the Portuguese government by the Troika. In the words of one of the young participants,

I agree that there are conditions because obviously we are receiving help and support, and this does not come without some kind of guarantee. However, I think that the country should also impose its limits, that is, not to submit to everything and not to lose a little bit of its sovereignty.

(PTFG3_F3)

8.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

As reported earlier, one of the threads running through all the focus group discussions conducted in Portugal was the fact that there are still paralysing inequalities within the EU. So, it is not surprising that when asked about what should be their country’s and the EU’s role in mitigating inequalities, the participants were generally in favour of such measures: “this is one of the objectives for which the European Union was formed” (PTFG3_F1). However, on the particulars of how this principle would be executed, opinions were divided between those in favour of subsidiarity and those who prefer a more Europeanised response, and it must be stressed that these differences were not aligned with specific sociodemographic groups but rather cut across such groups.

For instance, one of the participants from the lower paid and unemployed group highlighted the value of subsidiarity, arguing that before moving to some sort of EU-wide solution, each country should be “cleaning [their] own house from the inside” (PTFG2_F4). National leaders are more aware of their countries’ requirements and thus, better positioned to solve inequalities. If this were to fail, only then should there be an EU response. Participants from the group of young adults displayed similar sentiments albeit from a more Europeanised perspective. For them, it is incumbent upon each country to establish their own plan of action to reduce inequalities. “I think it’s much more interesting for countries to make a plan of their needs” (PTFG3_M5). According to the young adults, these national plans would be brought up to the EU level to be negotiated and funded. In a more pessimistic

perspective, a participant from the high skilled group elaborated on this by arguing that social equality is almost impossible to accomplish in the EU since “there is still an independence [autonomy] between countries” (PTFG1_M4). According to him, this leads to that situation wherein Portugal misuses the funds of the EU. This conclusion was reinforced by another high skilled participant who rejected the idea that funds should be used to solve the problem, because “the funds usually don’t go where they should go” (PTFG1_M2); the notions that EU funds are misappropriated at the member state level and that Portugal has somehow missed the boat of EU integration because of its own mismanagement and/or incompetence once again emerge. Still, as mentioned earlier, the opinions were not unanimous since some of the participants from both the lower paid and unemployed and the high skilled group advocated for a stronger EU-level approach to the issue by bringing up the possibility of an EU-wide minimum wage and tax harmonisation within the EU to solve social disparities across the member states.

Continuing on this topic of tackling socioeconomic inequalities, participants were further asked about their views on the relevance of an EU-wide unemployment scheme. Similar to the issue of inequality, views were mixed. A group of participants, from both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed group, argued that such an EU-wide system of unemployment benefits would be impractical given the regional disparities and inequalities within the EU. A participant from the high skilled group said:

I am not against it, on the one hand, but on the other, I mean, we here earn 700 Euro a month. I am paying or helping to pay the unemployment benefit of someone who is in Luxembourg, which is a fortune compared to us [. . .] there is a lot of inequality here. (PTFG1_M2)

One from the lower paid and unemployed group and another from the high skilled group pointed out that emigration already serves as a solution to this problem, albeit from distinct perspectives. The participant from the lower paid and unemployed group declared that Portugal already contributes by providing labour to other countries in the form of emigration, while the participant from the high skilled group pointed out that since the right of free movement exists in the Schengen area, there was no need for an EU-wide system of unemployment assistance.

8.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Portugal

Many of the participants stressed the idea that the EU was a source of security, in both the sense of safety from harm and economic security. A recurrent image brought up by the participants was of the EU as a group of countries that help each other in times of hardship, with some participants underlining that it was for this very reason that this supranational structure was created in the first place. However, throughout the discussions, this conception of the EU was intertwined with a common theme that the EU is ripe with persistent inequalities between countries and citizens. This focus on the spatial economic disparities and inequalities within the EU was a persistent thread throughout all the discussed scenarios and for all sociodemographic groups.

Still, the participants of all groups demonstrated solidarity towards other member states in cases of natural disaster or even economic crisis. Many stressed that solidarity should take into account proportionality and the context of each countries' economic development; that is, given Portugal's economic position, the country should not be expected to show the same level of commitment compared to more economically developed member states such as Germany or France. In fact, participants demonstrated difficulties imagining themselves as the givers of aid during the discussed scenarios provided by the used topic guide, often regressing to the position of hopeless beneficiaries of the solidarity of other member states, curiously mimicking the country's status as a net beneficiary within the EU's system of redistribution of financial resources.

Another important notion that emerged regarding solidarity between member states related to the distribution of economic aid and how this should be undertaken with significant mechanisms of supervision and regulation in place to ensure that the resources are used adequately. Indeed, the discussion about redistribution and solidarity in times of crisis, in both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed groups, solicited an opportunity to reckon with Portugal's recent past. More often than not, participants from these two groups would resort to a storyline (see Section 14.1) wherein the country had misused the opportunities provided by the EU's structural funds due to corruption and incompetence. The themes evoked by this storyline, that is squandering the good faith of other countries, were used to justify ideas of supervision and regulation of solidarity. While they recognise an obligation of solidarity towards those in need, these participants stressed a particular kind of reciprocal relationship, where the recipient is seen as obligated to use the support in a dutiful manner. In a way, the shown attitude displayed are more akin to one-sided charity than solidarity between peers.

Notes

- 1 The largest electoral district is Lisbon, which elects 48 members of parliament, and the smallest is Portalegre, which elects two. The size of each district is determined by population.
- 2 During this period, the country was under the supervision of the so-called Troika (the IMF, the European Commission, and the ECB) following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on Specific Economic Policy Conditionality in May 2011. This document was signed following the request for a cash loan of €78 billion aiming to balance public accounts as a consequence of the financial crisis in 2010.
- 3 It must be noted that this trend is not just for EU elections. Indeed, with the exception of the 2022 general election which saw an increase in turnout, the trend has been towards declining turnout in all elections.

9 Spain

“A second-class country lagging behind Europe”: “The better Europe does, the better Spain will do”

Ricardo Dacosta

During the time that the first steps towards European integration were being taken in Europe, the existence of a non-democratic and fascist-inspired regime in Spain since 1939 kept the country on the side lines of this project. The persistence of this regime well into the 1970s delayed Spain’s entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) until 1986. Despite a relatively long transitional period following Franco’s death in 1975, integration into Europe was already popularly associated with the possibility of consolidating democracy in Spain (Closa 1995). It is also true that Franco had already intended to join the EEC at least since 1962, when Spain formally applied for membership.

This request could be seen as incompatible with the authoritarian and isolationist character of the first half of Franco’s rule, but it is coherent with the technocratic and “openness” approach adopted by the regime from the mid-1950s. It also fits into a long-standing Spanish imaginary extending at least back into the late 19th century that saw in Europe a way out of the country’s lagging modernisation (Cavallaro 2019; Jerez et al. 2010). This imaginary seems to have been lent some credence, insofar as, after joining the EEC, Spain experienced more than two decades of consecutive economic growth and has managed to place itself among the continent’s most developed countries (Medeiros 2016: 2).

With more than €170 billion having been invested in the country so far, European Union (EU) funds and EU cohesion policy have undoubtedly been decisive for Spain in helping the country improve its socioeconomic and development indicators, which, in the 1980s, were far behind European averages (Medeiros 2016: 2). Today, Spain still remains a net beneficiary of the EU budget, but the gap between the country’s contributions and revenues has been gradually narrowing. In fact, between 2014 and 2020, Spain was the country with the lowest spending from EU sources as percentage of gross national income (1.04 per cent) among those still net recipients among the countries selected for the study (European Commission 2020).

The effects of the economic crisis of 2008, along with the austerity measures promoted by the Troika, had partly damaged the EU’s image among Spanish citizens (Ayala 2012). But recent Eurobarometer data suggests that the European project maintains significant levels of support and trust among Spaniards. In the following section, more details on some of the most important elements are provided to elucidate Spain’s current situation and its place in the EU.

9.1 An overview about the country

9.1.1 *The political system*

Since the current Constitution was approved in 1978, the government has been organised as a parliamentary constitutional monarchy, with the King, currently Felipe II, serving as the head of the state, and a prime minister as head of government – called President of the Government in Spain – elected by and responsible to the parliament.

The territorial organisation of the country, despite the Constitution's allusion to a unitary model (e.g. “the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation”, Preliminary Title, Sec. 2 of the Constitution of Spain), interestingly has some federal features (see, e.g. Moreno 2013). This is because the country is divided into 17 so-called *Comunidades Autónomas* (Autonomous Communities), which have wide administrative competences, even in areas as important as education, health and police. Among them Andalucía (8.5 million), Catalonia (7.8 million), Madrid (6.8 million) and the Valencian Community (5 million) are the most populated ones. These four communities together make up nearly 60 per cent of the Spanish population. The other 13 autonomous communities are each above three million people.

9.1.2 *Core features of population and economy*

After France, Spain is the second largest country in the EU by land area, with more than 505,000 km². It has important land borders with Portugal to the west and France to the northeast, but also with the Principality of Andorra and with the British overseas territory of Gibraltar at the southeast of the country, over which both countries have historical territorial disputes. Additionally, Spain shares land borders with Morocco in its enclaves in Africa, the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla. At the same time, it has an extensive coastline on the Mediterranean to the east and southeast, and on the Atlantic Ocean and the Cantabrian Sea to the north, northwest and southwest. These characteristics have positioned Spain as one of the main actors in the European Neighbourhood Policy and give the country substantial influence in Europe's agenda towards the Mediterranean and northern Africa region (Wolff 2007: 110–113). At the same time, the country's close historical, cultural, economic and linguistic bonds with Latin America – a region of 650 million inhabitants and the EU's fifth most important commercial partner (European Parliament 2019) – has positioned Spain as a “springboard country” between Europe and this continent (Prabhudesai et al. 2017).

Spain is the fourth largest country by population in the European Union (47 million people) after Germany, France and Italy. Gauging by the distribution of the main cities, the population in Spain is concentrated mainly in Madrid, the coasts of the Mediterranean Sea and the coasts in the northeast of the peninsula, while the centre of the territory, the so-called *Meseta Central* (central plateau), has a rather sparse and scattered population. This is also one of the main demographic challenges of Spain, as the trend points to an increasingly ageing rural population and a

depopulation of these areas in favour of the coasts and large cities. In fact, this phenomenon, commonly referred to as *la España vaciada* (“the emptied Spain”), has lately started to feature on the political agenda and has consequently been reflected into the party system. This can be seen with the entry of small parties from the more sparsely populated provinces of Teruel and Soria into the national parliament (*Teruel Existe*, “Teruel Exists”) in 2019 and Castilla y Leon’s regional parliament (*Soria Ya*, “Soria Now”) in 2022, with representation of the periphery at the heart of its programmatic platform (Pazos-Vidal 2022: 4–6).

With regard to the economy, despite having the fourth largest gross domestic product (GDP) in the EU (€1,246 billion in 2019; Eurostat 2021d), Spain is still below the EU average GDP per capita: €25,180 versus €28,060 (Eurostat 2021e). There are, however, important differences in the territorial distribution of production inside Spain as well. For instance, some autonomous communities such as Madrid, the Basque Country, Navarra, Catalonia and Aragon have the highest GDP per capita rates, with Madrid leading the way with more than €35,000 (INE 2019a). Except for Madrid, which is located at the geographical centre of the country, the other four autonomous communities are located at the north and northeast. On the other hand, the lowest GDP per capita rates are found in the south of the country. For instance, Extremadura, Andalucía and Castilla-La Mancha, along with the overseas territories of Ceuta and Melilla in Africa, have rates far below the national average; Melilla and Extremadura have the lowest with around €18,500 (i.e. the half of Madrid; INE 2019a). This difference between regions implies a solidarity-based distribution of funding both from the national budget and from the EU cohesion policy towards the regions with the lowest income, a scheme which is not without criticism (especially in Catalonia).

The Spanish economy is not particularly focused on exports, though the country is the sixth largest exporter in the EU (World Bank 2019), with around €300 billion in exports and €330 billion imports in 2019. About 65.6 per cent of Spanish exports went to the EU and 53.8 per cent of the imports originate there (INE 2019b). Therefore, while the overall trade balance is negative for Spain, the trade balance with the EU is positive.

Three out of four workers in the country are employed in the service sector, while 20 per cent are in the industry (including construction) and around 4 per cent in agriculture. The labour market is characterised by its high level of temporary employment, with 24.2 per cent of the contracts being temporary, the highest rate in the EU (Eurostat 2020b).

It is also important to mention that, along with Greece, Italy, Ireland and Portugal, Spain was one of the most adversely affected countries in the economic and financial crisis that broke out in 2008. In the ensuing years, Spain’s public debt soared to unprecedented levels in recent history, reaching rates of over 100 per cent of GDP. In 2019, public debt stood at 95.5 per cent, but after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, it climbed back to over 120 per cent of GDP in 2021 (IMF 2021). These numbers place Spain as the third most indebted among the studied countries, behind Greece and Portugal.

9.2 Spain and European integration

Already during the dictatorship, Europe was popularly associated with the possibility of democratisation and the modernisation of the country (López 2014: 76–77). After Franco’s death in 1975, this crystallised in a strong Europeanist feeling among most political parties across the entire ideological spectrum of the time: from the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) – which inaugurated, together with its French and Italian counterparts, the “Eurocommunist” current – to the moderate “political families” inside the regime, finally led by the Union of the Democratic Centre, headed by Adolfo Suárez, the Spanish prime minister between 1976 and 1981 (Casado 2014).

After the accession of Spain to the EU in 1986, the country became one of the largest recipients from EU funds in general and the EU cohesion policy in particular. This facilitated important improvements in infrastructures, industry, wages and general economic growth over the next 20 years (Medeiros 2016). All of these trends may explain, to an extent, the persistence of this traditional Euro-optimism in Spanish society and among political actors.

The financial crisis of 2008, and its ensuing recession technically lasting until 2014, undoubtedly hit Spain hard, with some of the effects still being felt to this day. The austerity measures suggested, or directly imposed, by the Troika seem to have eroded the relationship between the Spanish society and European institutions. During the first years of the crisis, severe criticism of EU policies and demands for reforms of the European institutions (including even the possibility of leaving the Eurozone) were lodged by the left-wing parties United Left and the newly created Podemos. However, similar to the case of Syriza in Greece, these positions were quickly nuanced by the parties, which started positioning themselves as pro-European but critical of the EU institutions’ recent policies (Porta et al. 2017) and actually calling for the deepening and democratisation of European integration.

Based on data available from before the COVID-19 pandemic, the “Europeaness” seems to be still strong in Spain, and Eurosceptic positions are relatively rare and non-significant both among parties and in society (Real-Dato and Sojka 2020).

The overwhelming majority of Spanish citizens feel European in one way or another. For instance, looking at the Winter 2021–2022 Eurobarometer data, Spain has the third highest rate of feeling of European citizenship among countries included in the study, after Portugal and Germany (Eurobarometer 2022). Previous rounds of Eurobarometer surveys also placed Spain among the first countries in this regard (see Eurobarometer 2019). Along with Germany, Spain has the highest rates for “European and [Nationality]” plus “European only” identity of all studied EU member states. It is also striking that the share of Spaniards who feel “Spanish only” is almost half of the average across the EU and is the lowest among the studied countries.

Nevertheless, these high rates of European identity contrast with responses to questions focused on the trust in, and assessment of, EU institutions. In the same

2021–22 survey, only 40 per cent of Spaniards declared to have a positive overall image of the EU, which is slightly below the EU average, and only higher than in Slovakia and Greece among the countries studied in this book (Eurobarometer 2022). Furthermore, among these countries, Spain features the third lowest rates of trust in the EU (45 per cent) after Greece and Slovakia, and the lowest trust in the European Parliament (40 per cent) among all studied countries (Eurobarometer 2022). However, both the European Union and the European Parliament have higher rates of trust than the Spanish Government (24 per cent, the third lowest after Slovakia and Latvia) and the Spanish Parliament (19 per cent, the second lowest along with Latvia, and after Lithuania; see Eurobarometer 2022).

Along with Estonia, Spain presents the lowest rate of “totally agree” (5 per cent) among all EU countries to the statement “(Our country) could better face the future outside the EU” and has some of the lowest rates of agreement (20 per cent, adding “totally agree” + “tend to agree”) (Eurobarometer 2022). Additionally, Spain shows the highest rate of agreement with the statement “More decisions should be taken at EU level” (76 per cent) among the countries included in the study (Eurobarometer 2022).

Along the same lines, 48 per cent of Spaniards places themselves “in favour of EU but not in the way it is working at the present”, which is the third highest rate among all European Union countries after Greece and Luxembourg. At the same time, only 2 per cent of Spaniards are opposed to the idea of the EU in general, which is the lowest rate in the EU along with Portugal and Cyprus (European Parliament 2021b). Looking at opinions towards the EU, there appears to be a trend observable in Spanish society that shows significant differences in opinion depending on the age, years of education, income and (to an extent) region. For example, there seems to be a clear negative correlation between age and opinion towards the EU (the older the person is, the worse the opinion towards the EU) and a positive association between the years of education and the social class of the individual with his/her opinion of the EU (the more years of education and the higher the income, the higher the level of positive opinion towards the EU). Interestingly, with respect to the regions of Spain, some differences in opinions towards the EU can also be observed. The most significant being the particularly positive position towards the EU from Madrid and the central part of the country and a more negative position present in the eastern part of the country (especially in Catalonia).

Positive evaluation of the results of European integration is apparently focused on the economic and social welfare dimensions (such as trade and access to cohesion funds), while Spaniards seem somehow less enthusiastic than the EU average about political aspects such as peace, influence in the world and some social and economic policies and programmes (see Annex 3).

As a synthesis of the results collected in Eurobarometer for Spain, we could say that they show a highly Europeanist society, but at the same time, a critical one regarding the European institutions or the way in which the EU has lately been functioning.

9.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

9.3.1 *Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU*

All three focus group discussions conducted in Spain reflect the picture seen in the survey data presented previously: there is a consensus about the positive impact that being part of the EU has had for Spain. This is especially relevant when regarding the economic development achieved during the first decades after Spain's accession, while at the same time, there is a degree of criticism relating to the functioning of the EU.

During the ice-breaking phase of the focus group discussions, the participants were asked to list the first three words or thoughts that come to mind upon hearing "European Union." Present in most of the answers was economic considerations, which was most prevalent in the high skilled group and the lower paid and unemployed group. In these two groups, most participants mentioned two or even three words directly related to economic issues, with "Euro", "economy", "stability" and "economic aid" being the most frequent words. Conversely, the answers in the group of young adults were more varied and primarily focused on integration issues and the relationship between member countries. Some of the words used by these participants were "community", "equality", "coordination", "cooperation", "conflict of interests", "fragmentation", "integration", "respect" and "pluralism", among others.

The following questions in the ice-breaking phase dealt with the general feelings that the EU arouses in the participants. In this regard, there seems to be a shared idea of a Spain lagging behind after four decades of dictatorship but blooming after its accession to the EU. More precisely, they seem to find a clear relationship between the country's recent economic development and the huge amount of EU funds invested in the country, especially in core infrastructures such as highways – as expressed in the following statement.

Spain, which in the end was coming out of a dictatorship, was lagging behind. I think that without European integration and without the support of the cohesion funds [. . .] half of the infrastructure in Spain [would not have been built]: highways, roads, aids for health centres.

(ESFG1_F3)

This notion of Spain owing much of its current welfare to the help received from the EU in the past gained a lot of traction in all focus groups. It was also utilised as an argument and consideration that Spain (as well as other countries that had similarly benefitted from the EU in the past) should now contribute to the less-developed countries of the EU and also to economically advanced member states in the case of special need, as will be seen in the following sections of this chapter. In this sense, solidarity is to some extent perceived as a compulsory component of European integration. However, some negative aspects of integration into the EU, especially related to the economy, were spontaneously highlighted by participants

in all of the focus groups, for instance, the perception of remarkable inequalities among EU member states. Here the idea emerged that within the EU, there are some “winning countries” or “first-class countries” (as some participants defined it), among which Spain is not included. One participant from the young adult group stated the following in this respect:

When you are part of something, there are always positive and negative things, and in this case in the European Union there are winning countries, we could say. In economic terms, [there are] countries with very strong economies and countries with not so strong economies, with quite different production models that have not really converged. So, there is a conflict of interests within the same union.

(ESFG3_F6)

Another participant added:

It seems to me that there are first-class countries and second-class countries. And it is even promoted that Germany is the best, it is the number one, and [. . .] Spain, Italy, Portugal, we are the last, we are the worst, the poorest, and the ones that lag behind Europe.

(ESFG3_F1)

This idea of Spain as a “second-class” country in the EU was also present in the high skilled group, when two participants were discussing about how the EU would act in case Spain needs financial help:

[I]t is usually specific countries that always need help. So, I wouldn't be surprised if they [EU] would start to raise objections if, all of a sudden, we [Spain] were the ones who needed it.

(ESFG1_M1)

I also remember, when they were saying the news about the “PIGS” [Portugal, Italy, Greece, Spain], among which Spain was included, one felt [. . .] a little bit like saying “damn!”

(ESFG1_F5)

In the same vein, one concern that emerged in all three focus groups was other EU countries' image of Spain. As illustrated by the above quotes, many participants consider that Spain is often perceived as a country that is behind the rest of the EU, that is constantly in need of help from the others and that has “nothing else to offer besides the beaches and the good weather.” Some participants consider that this negative image of Spain abroad also seems to have permeated Spaniards' self-perception, to such extent that some people in Spain sometimes do not think of themselves as being part of Europe. In the focus group of lower paid and unemployed

participants, this notion was well depicted using the common Spanish idiom that says that “Europe starts from the Pyrenees upwards”:

I think that from the Pyrenees down Spain is Mediterranean, and then we would be more similar to Africa or the Greeks than to the Germans or the British. And, of course, we have no industry, our economy is precarious and we live on tourism.

(ESFG2_F4)

When discussing the disadvantages for Spain in joining the EU, participants of all three focus groups referred to the common currency. Although it was also mentioned as an asset for making business and travel between countries easier, participants also noticed that there was a pointed increase in costs of living since the Euro entered into circulation and that this did not come with a corresponding raise in salaries – as, for instance, expressed in the following statement:

I think it is true that it [the raising of prices] was contained there for a few months at the beginning, but a year later [. . .] we had lost purchasing power with the change to the Euro, because everything went up. And I remember that there was also [. . .] a change in the products: they cost the same but the packaging was smaller, or the packaging was the same but inside there was less product.

(ESFG1_F4)

A common theme across all three focus groups was their rather cynical impression of Spanish politicians at all levels of government, who, on the one hand, use the EU as a scapegoat for domestic Spanish issues while also avoiding implementation of certain policies due to constraints set by EU regulations. However, on the other hand, they allegedly claim achievements reached through EU funds or policies for themselves – as argued in the following:

The conscience of a national state and of the European Union has been configured as something that is there, above us, and it is the one we blame for our faults. National politics has tended to use the European Union when things don't go well: “This is not going well [because of] European policy.” Or: “This worked out well for us? Well, this [is our achievement].”

(ESFG3_F3)

Finally, when asked about how they perceive the future of the EU and the challenges they see, most of the participants declared themselves optimistic regarding the future of the EU and hoped that integration will deepen. At the same time, Eurosceptic parties and movements across Europe were mentioned in all three focus group discussions as one of the most critical challenges for the EU, which was, for example, expressed in the following statement.

Well, I also think that we have to pay attention to movements such as Brexit, such as the rise of the ultra-right, and Marine Le Pen who was very close [to

winning the elections] in France. And I think Europe has to rethink how it's going to deal with future movements that are starting to succeed in the rest of Europe.

(ESFG3_F4)

In summary, participants of the high skilled group seem to have the most positive view towards the EU and generally emphasised the benefits of being part of the EU. Opinions towards the EU from participants in the lower paid and unemployed group were more divergent. One of the participants had a particularly positive view about the EU, while another was quite sceptical. The rest tended towards a more optimistic position but were nevertheless also quite critical with the EU. In general, most participants of this focus group discussions seem to perceive membership in the EU as positive for Spain, but they find that Spain's position in the EU is not entirely fair or beneficial in relation to more developed economies.

The EU was also identified by some participants as a root cause of some of the country's problems (for instance, the perpetuation of an economic model dependent on tourism to the detriment of the national industry), but they saw no perspectives how to change these problems: "They have taken it away from us. We had shipyards, we had mines, and it's all gone [. . .], they [the government and the European Union] have been dismantling the whole industry" (ESFG2_M1).

In turn, participants of the young adult group seem very well-informed about the EU and its different mechanisms, generally having positive vision of the European integration. The discussion in this focus group was centred on both technical aspects (such as specific current policies of the EU) and "ethical" and "moral" considerations about the EU.

9.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

Turning now to the discussed scenario in which one EU member state or Spain itself would need help from EU institutions or other EU member states, there was an overall agreement in all three groups that solidarity and mutual help is to be expected. In general, these expectations are based on the idea of reciprocity, with the understanding that one helps because others will also help you back when you need it. This notion of reciprocity was nicely summarised in the following statement:

As an affected country, what you expect is help from others, right? Because that is what we say, "give and take." Well, at other times we have given more, we have been able to give more, and when you need help [then] you expect that the rest of the states can help you. That is one of the advantages, I think, of [being part of] the European Union.

(ESFG1_F5)

In the case of natural disaster, technical or logistical considerations are mentioned as criteria to decide which countries should contribute more (e.g. how close the

countries are to the place where the disaster occurred or which technical means, such as fire-fighting planes, are available).

In the event of natural disasters, participants find that placing conditions on beneficiary countries is not necessary for most of the cases, as natural disasters, most of the time, happen without responsible party to blame for it. However, one should ask for actions to prevent natural disasters from happening if possible – as argued, for example, by ESFG1_M1:

It is true that normally you cannot put it in terms of: “If you have more floods you have to pay more”, because that is too simplistic. However, it does open the door to [. . .] the European Union saying: “Well, okay, to be eligible for this fund you have to implement a series of risk prevention policies.”

There were only some calls for individual participation in providing help in cases of natural disasters when they happen somewhere close. However, in general, the question raised was: “What can I do as an individual?” (as expressed, e.g., by ESFG1_F5). In this scenario, mutual help among EU countries and action from EU institutions was not only expected by most of the participants, but it was also seen as a fundamental reason for the existence of the EU, as mentioned by ESFG3_M2 and seconded by other participants:

I think that if the European Union exists, it is for these things, as far as it is possible. And if the other countries do not involve [themselves] in the security of the citizens of this [affected] country, I mean within the European Union, then why would we have the European Union? It is as easy as that.

Following the same trend, participants in all three focus group discussions, including the ones more sceptic towards the EU, considered that Spain should also act and contribute if another EU member is affected by natural disasters, regardless of any other consideration apart from the already mentioned logistical aspects (distance from the affected region and availability of means).

9.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a financial crisis

In the case of a financial or economic crisis, participants consider that contributions to affected countries should be made proportionally, according to the economic capabilities of each country.

[I]t would be fairer to say that countries that are weaker economically may not contribute as much. Logical. In the end it is the same as in income [taxes], one pays more taxes the higher the income one has. It is fairer that whoever can contribute more should contribute more.

(ESFG1_F5)

In such cases, formulating conditions for the help of EU and other countries seems reasonable for most of the focus group participants, although the priority is to help the country in need, above all other considerations. For example, one participant in the focus group with lower paid and unemployed people proposed the following analogy after being asked if Spain should help other EU countries in case of an economic crisis:

If you have enough money, and on top of that you are doing well, I think solidarity has to be something [that] you don't have to think about. It is like those who are drowning in the sea [referring to migrants in the Mediterranean]: first, rescue them. Then you will see if you return them, how you return them, or if they stay, in what conditions they stay and so on. But first you can't let a child drown. So, solidarity has to be practised. I think the main thing is the human being.

(ESFG2_M1)

Some participants across all three focus group discussions pointed out that helping others within the EU is also in one's own interest:

It is not in anyone's interest that within the European Union there is a country where everything is going badly. In the end, we all lose out, because a country that is going to collapse is a lot of people who can't consume, which in the end is what is moving everything, who are not going to have money for that. [It's] people who are going to want to leave their country in any way. In other words: it is a disaster for everybody in the end.

(ESFG1_F4)

Because the better Europe does, the better Spain will do. For example, as Spain is dedicated to tourism [. . .] the more money the other countries have, the easier it will be for them to spend it in Spain. In the end, it is not in anyone's interest that within the European Union there is a country where everything is going badly. In the end, we all lose out, because a country that is going to collapse is a loss of people who can consume.

(ESFG2_M1)

[You can] expect mutual aid if you are part of the same community. What do I mean [by] "mutual aid"? That you are helping yourself, because you are part of the same, . . . If I help someone from Aragon [Spanish Autonomous Community], it is not mutual help, it is the same help [helping one-self] because we are in the same country. So, a little bit of taking that idea to Europe, to say: "I have the same responsibility to help this country, because we are part of the same community."

(ESFG3_F5)

Overall, in all three scenarios, participants tended to argue that it is up to the EU and the member states to help since they “believe that in these matters we must have a common policy and not individual action plans. Because the resources are common and so are the plans, the ways of acting” (ESFG3_F1). Participants of the high skilled group and lower paid and unemployed group generally emphasised not only the benefits of being part of the EU but also the call to show solidarity (on the basis of reciprocity) by virtue of past support and substantial funds awarded by the EU to Spain.

Expectations of how the EU and its member states *would* act in reality whenever a member state is in financial need are, however, not necessarily aligned with the way in which participants consider the EU *should* act. Some participants alleged that there are also “real-life constraints” that may determine the scope of European action in this scenario:

There are budgets, there are a number of people involved, and decisions are made based on the resources available and the needs of the problem. But, as much as we would all like to say “yes, you need it [the financial help], take some”, the reality is that things are not always like that, and there are a number of real-life constraints that you have to deal with. So, in that sense, I would not say that it is solidarity that drives the European Union.

(ESFG1_M1)

I also believe that, in these situations, the principle of mutual assistance between countries [should work]. But, of course, actually that also implies [spending] money, so many times countries get involved [helping other countries] as far as national public opinion allows.

(ESFG3_F3)

On the other hand, Spanish participants also raised concerns about the conditions that come with these grants. Some comments recalled Spain’s recent experience with financial support during the last financial crisis and its conditions, which were generally perceived as too harsh and unfair. The majority accepts that conditions are necessary in order to have coordinated actions; however, these should not be imposed but sufficiently balanced with respect to the sovereignty of member states – as expressed by the following two quotations:

I also think it is important to consider that all this aid is linked to the implementation of certain policies in these countries, in line with what the European Union also wants. [. . .] So, on the one hand you have something that could be a loss of autonomy of certain states, but you also have an order that allows integrating all of them and trying to unite them in that sense.

(ESFG1_M2)

I also don’t want daddy Europe to be telling me how to live.

(ESFG2_F4)

9.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

When addressing the third scenario, the focus group discussion participants encountered more complexities in the situation and this was reflected in their responses. Although no one was opposed to the idea, many participants found it hard to imagine how a common European scheme against unemployment or policies for reducing social inequalities in member countries would work. Some participants in the high skilled group considered that the EU is barely able to give recommendations, establish minimum standards or general guidelines, and exchange experiences in this regard:

Of course, the problem is that the casuistry of each country is probably very different. So, trying to solve the inequality of each country is going to be quite complicated [. . .] in a common European framework, because every-one [every member state] is different.

(ESFG1_M1)

So, I think it is difficult to have a policy that is the same for everyone. I do believe that efforts are being made so that, from Europe, each country is treated individually. What cannot be done is to use in all countries the same measures to combat unemployment, because they do not have the same economic structure or the same capacities. I do believe that there is an attempt to help, but we cannot ask for the same thing.

(ESFG3_F6)

Other participants considered that there are already EU policies in place to reduce social and territorial inequalities. One participant (ESFG3_F6) mentioned the cohesion policy in general and the European Social Fund in particular as examples. Participants in the lower paid and unemployed group took for granted the existence of such policies, although they did not mention any specific policy. However, it seems that most participants in all three focus group discussions found it necessary to introduce or deepen EU policies to fight inequalities:

Because there is a two-speed Europe, I think it (the EU) should have a scheme, a plan, so that there are not [. . .] many inequalities, and to be able to function and to push the project of the European Union. Because if not, it goes down the drain. But what I am seeing is that they do not carry it out, or they cannot, or they do not want to, and we are like this: some richer and others poorer.

(ESFG2_M1)

As can be seen from the quote above, this scenario was analysed by the participants from two perspectives that, in the end, overlapped with each other: (a) social inequalities within each country and (b) territorial inequalities between EU member states. Overall, there seems to be a consensus that the EU should take care of

inequalities at all levels, or at least coordinate policies in that direction, because that is in the best interest of all:

I do believe that there should also be at least an ideal, and from there establish a policy. “Does Europe want to be more or less unequal?” Well, what do we want to be? More equal. Why? Well, first, because if not, economically it will not work. But it will also have other implications, because if inequalities continue to grow there may be much more insecurity, we will have more health problems . . . In other words, in the end the costs will be elsewhere and worse. So, if Europe wants to be more equal, there has to be a European Union policy that guides the countries, all of them, in the same direction.

(ESFG1_F4)

9.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions in Spain

According to surveys, the Spanish society shows a strong attachment to the European identity and integration project (see Section 9.2). Many of the Eurobarometer findings place Spain among the countries with the highest levels of support for and positive feelings towards the EU. These findings have been confirmed by the focus group discussions carried out in Spain. However, the focus group discussions show a nuanced perception about the role of the EU and the benefits for Spain. The overall positive assessment is not free of criticism towards the EU, as not only shown by the Eurobarometer surveys but again likewise demonstrated by the conducted focus group discussions.

It became clear that the Spanish participants generally feel indebted to the EU for the important development of infrastructures, institutions and economy that Spain has enjoyed since its accession. It is precisely this sense of debt that seems to shape the conception of reciprocity within the EU in Spanish society, as it serves to justify the idea that Spain should provide help to other EU countries in case of need. According to the dominant statements in the focus group discussions, those who have benefitted from the EU in the past (i.e. Spain) should eventually be the ones to offer help to other EU countries in case of need. Mutual dependency and the acknowledgement that it is in all members’ best interest that no country falls apart within the EU is also a consistent argument in favour of helping others. This idea becomes especially strong when it comes to economic issues.

Obligation to help other countries in case of natural disasters seems more absolute and based on humanistic considerations, and the expectation of receiving help in this scenario also seems stronger than in the other scenarios. Economic capacities in the financial crisis scenario, and logistical issues (e.g. proximity to the disaster site) in the natural disaster scenario, are the key criteria for determining the type and amount of aid that should be provided by each country. Expectations of mutual help in the third scenario (common European scheme to tackle social inequalities) are more diffuse and the reasoning behind it seems more complex. Although in this regard, there is generally the perception that more should and can be done than is currently.

On the other hand, there seems to be a critical perception that the EU has not benefitted all countries equally and that it has not helped to reduce the gaps between countries within the Union so far. The common currency has been identified as one of the elements that has been most detrimental to Spanish citizens' pockets (due to the consequent increase in the cost of living after its implementation), although positive elements have also been attributed to the Euro, such as ease of trade and travel. Furthermore, the perception of a "two-speed Europe" and "first class" and "second-class" countries (among which Spain would be included) in the EU was present in all the groups. Particularly interesting is the perceived position of Spain in the EU, as some participants argue that Spanish people sometimes do not think of themselves as being in Europe. Along the same lines of reasoning, a recurring concern among Spanish participants was the alleged negative image that Spain has in the rest of the EU, being seen as a lagging country that "constantly needs help" and therefore would have a limited capacity in helping other member states in a reciprocal way.

With regard to the scenarios during the focus group discussions, in particular in the financial crisis scenario, self-criticism and mistrust emerged of how the Spanish authorities would manage the aid received from the EU in case of need. Some participants, especially in the lower paid and unemployed group, maintain an image that identifies Spanish culture as a sort of "doom" that holds the country back from catching up with the rest of Europe. Consequently, they consider that European institutions should supervise closely how the Spanish government spend EU funds. Although the participants consider that national sovereignty must be respected, trust towards European institutions seems stronger than towards national ones.

In sum, there was a consensus among the Spanish participants in all three focus group discussions that reciprocity and mutual aid are a fundamental part of the European project and that further integration of the EU is needed and would be positive for all. Mutual help among EU countries is expected in case of need, and the EU institutions are expected to play a central role in delivering aid where it is needed. Spaniards attribute much of their well-being to the aid they once received from Europe and, therefore, see it as their obligation to support others if they are in a position to do so. In that sense, the idea of solidarity is based on both reciprocity and obligation as members of the economic bloc.

10 Latvia

“We should stand strongly together
and support each other as much as
we can”

Inese Abolina

Latvia is a small country located in northern Europe, and along with Estonia and Lithuania, is one of the three Baltic states. It has a population of approximately 1.9 million people, making it one of the smallest members of the European Union (EU) in terms of population. Latvia has a complex history, having been ruled by various foreign powers, including the Germans, Swedes, Poles and Russians. It was a part of the Soviet Union from 1940 until 1991, when it gained independence.

A significant issue facing Latvia today can be attributed to the sizeable Russian-speaking minority population. Approximately 27 per cent of the population identifies as ethnic Russian, and many of them speak Russian as their first language. This has led to tensions between the Latvian-speaking majority and the Russian-speaking minority, particularly in the areas of language and citizenship.

Language politics are a contentious issue in Latvia. Despite Latvian being the official language, many Russian-speaking Latvians do not speak it fluently, leading to disputes over language requirements for citizenship and employment. The government has implemented language laws and policies to promote Latvian, which also caused controversy and criticism from the Russian-speaking minority. The issue of the sizeable Russian minority and language politics continue to be significant challenges for Latvia as it navigates its future in the EU.

Latvia's years in the EU since its accession in 2004 have had a profound impact on the domestic political system. A report authored by Potjomnkina et al. (2014) states that Latvia was more secure and prosperous after a decade in the EU but warned that society's trust in public institutions remained too low. The last half decade has seen Latvia's economy advance and public opinion regarding the EU grow more positive. More than 70 per cent of Latvian-speaking respondents in the survey conducted by Center for Security and Strategic Research at the Latvian National Defense Academy believe that Latvia's accession to the EU is the right decision, 20.5 per cent disagreed, and 9 per cent were undecided (LSM 2016).

10.1 An overview about the country

10.1.1 *The political system*

Latvia has a free-market economy and, according to its constitution, a democratic political system. It is a unitary republic, with a president serving as head of state, though with a mostly limited role in the national context and no role in European decision-making system. The government is headed by the prime minister, who remains responsible to the unicameral parliament (*Saeima*) and is appointed by the president. The parliament has 100 members, who are elected every four years through a system of proportional representation.

Political parties are the key actors in Latvia's domestic politics. The most important parties are the New Unity party, the National Alliance and the Greens and Farmers Union. These parties represent a range of political views, including centre-right, centre-left and nationalist ideologies.

Governments in Latvia have been somewhat unstable due to the fragmented party system, with no single party able to secure a majority of seats in the parliament. This has led to the formation of coalition governments, which often involve several parties with different ideologies and competing priorities. In the past, some governments have collapsed due to disagreements among coalition partners, leading to early elections.

Latvia's political parties have undoubtedly been impacted by membership in the EU. Party members sit in the European Affairs Committee or serve as ministers shuffling between meetings in Riga and Brussels. Some may even additionally be Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) or serve in the office of MEPs in Brussels and Strasbourg. Parties rally their members to campaign in European Parliament (EP) elections every five years and forge links with other similar political parties through membership of party groups in the EP.

In addition to the aforementioned parties, there are also those who occupy a more populist and Eurosceptic position in Latvian politics, such as Solidarity and Latvia First. However, they have not gained significant support and have been unable to form a government on their own. Latvia has generally been a pro-EU country, with the majority of political parties supporting EU membership and integration.

Latvia's influence in the European Council is constrained by the frequent changes of government that the country has experienced since it joined the EU in 2004. This volatility has meant that the country's prime ministers have not had the opportunity to build up the seniority and experience that is necessary to effectively represent Latvia's interests at the EU level. This lack of continuity in leadership has made it difficult for Latvia to establish a consistent and coherent approach to EU policy making. It has also limited the ability of Latvian prime ministers to develop strong personal relationships with their counterparts in other member states, which is often crucial for achieving consensus and advancing Latvia's interests in the EU. Addressing the issue of government volatility in Latvia is therefore an important priority if the country is to increase its influence in the European Council. This may involve reforms to the country's political system, such as changes to the

electoral system or the strengthening of political parties, to ensure greater stability and continuity in government. In addition to these institutional changes, it will also be important for Latvia's leaders to prioritise long-term planning and to develop a more strategic approach to EU policy making. By doing so, Latvia can better position itself to effectively engage with its EU partners and advance its interests in the European Council. Membership to the EU's single market, and the fact that according to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia (CSBL 2021) and Latvijas Banka (2019), 70 per cent of Latvia's exports go to the EU, means that decision-making on a multiplicity of economic issues affecting businesses and society more broadly takes place at both the national and supranational levels.

10.1.2 Core features of population and economy

With around 1.9 million inhabitants, Latvia is still among the poorer EU member states. Its gross domestic product (GDP) of €30.6 billion in 2019, that is of €12,300 per capita, reached just 69 per cent of the EU27 level, only ahead of Romania and Bulgaria (Eurostat 2021d, 2021e).

According to Morten Hansen (2020), Latvia is one of the more open economies in the EU, in terms of foreign trade as a share of GDP. In the 1990s, imports vastly exceeded exports. Latvia is an open economy heavily reliant on international trade, in terms of both imports and exports. The country has a diversified export mix, which includes various goods and services. Some of the main products that Latvia exports are wood and wood products, including sawn wood, veneer sheets and pulpwood; agricultural products, including grains, meat and dairy products; chemicals, including fertilisers, pharmaceuticals and essential oils; machinery and equipment, including electronics, vehicles and parts; and textiles, including fabrics, clothing and accessories. Latvia's main trading partners for exports are the EU member states, with Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Sweden at the top but additionally, the United Kingdom is a top destination for Latvian exports. In terms of imports, some of the main products that Latvia brings in are machinery and equipment, including computers, vehicles and parts; chemicals, including refined petroleum, pharmaceuticals and plastics; textiles, including fabrics, clothing and accessories; metals, including iron and steel products; food and beverages, including meat, dairy products and alcoholic beverages. Latvia's main trading partners for imports are also EU member states, with Lithuania, Germany, Poland, Estonia, but also Russia being among the top sources of Latvian imports.

Typical for a growing and converging economy that borrows in order to finance substantial domestic investment is a degree of volatility in the system. Indeed, the financial crisis of 2008–2010 led to a massive drop in imports as a credit-fuelled boom turned to bust and could no longer sustain massive imports. Remarkably, the domestic economy reoriented quickly from domestic consumption towards exports, seeing exports as a share of GDP climb from around 40 to 60 per cent of GDP (Hansen 2020), undoubtedly helped by free access to the single market – and assisting in eradicating the vast and eventually unsustainable current account deficits of the pre-crisis era.

The baseline scenario of the forecasts of the Bank of Latvia (Latvijas Banka 2022) predicts a temporary recession for Latvia. Although the soaring energy prices have resulted in a deterioration of the future economic outlook, the solid growth observed at the beginning of 2022 facilitates maintenance in GDP growth projections for 2022 at 3 per cent. With the effects of unfavourable factors persisting at the beginning of 2023, Latvia's economy was expected to stagnate. Therefore, the forecast for 2023 has been revised significantly downwards to -0.2 per cent. With inflation returning to lower levels, Latvia's economy can be expected to start recovering as of the second half of 2023. GDP is projected to grow by 4.4 per cent in 2024. Inflation projections have been revised upwards for the whole projection horizon mostly on account of higher energy (particularly, gas) and food prices as well as the assumption that the prices of these products are higher than previously expected. Inflation projections are revised upwards to 16.9 per cent in 2022, 9.2 per cent in 2023 and 3.4 per cent in 2024.

The most unexpected, and politically contentious, impact of EU accession in 2004 has been the large migration flow from Latvia to the older member states. Many assumed that with EU membership, Latvia's economy would improve, and the country would be able to offer more opportunities to its citizens, thus reducing the need for emigration. However, the reality was that EU membership brought increased opportunities for Latvians to move freely and seek work in other EU member states, where wages and living standards were higher. This led to a significant outflow of people, particularly young and educated individuals, from Latvia to countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany. The impact of this migration flow was politically contentious, as it led to concerns about brain drain and the loss of skilled workers, as well as the impact on the Latvian economy and society as a whole. The Latvian government also faced criticism for not doing enough to create jobs and opportunities within the country, leading to a reliance on emigration as a solution to economic challenges. While migration from poorer to richer member states in the EU is not a new phenomenon, the extent and speed of the migration flow from Latvia after EU accession was unexpected and had significant political and social consequences.

However, this is an expectable impact of the European integration process, given that, for one, free movement of persons is one of the four core freedoms of EU membership, and the large differences in wages within the EU triggered this migration more than in other EU member states with a lack of income and employment opportunities, for another.

The population of Latvia has become more international over the last five years. Although the growth in the number of refugees and asylum seekers is relatively small compared with other EU member states (usually under 500 persons annually; see EMN 2019: 21), Riga, the capital of Latvia, has become more internationalised in recent years due to the increase in the number of international students choosing to take a diploma or degree at a Latvian higher education institution. Indeed, the number of foreign students studying in Latvian institutions exceeds the number of Latvians studying abroad (UNESCO 2018). This has also contributed to the internationalisation and increased competitiveness of the Latvian higher education and research sector.

In 2003, economists viewed Latvian membership of the EU as a guarantee that the national economy would be transformed from labour-intensive into knowledge-intensive (Austers et al. 2019), thereby raising its global competitiveness in addition to increasing the prosperity of the people. However, one of the goals of Latvian economic policy was to reduce socioeconomic disparities between different population groups and regions. Unfortunately, there has been no success in ensuring greater income equality or reducing regional disparities. Riga still dominates the economy, while some areas suffer from depopulation.

10.2 Latvia and European integration

European integration began in Latvia with the restoration of independence in 1990–1991 and Latvia's accession to the EU in 2004. Latvia needed 15 years to restructure its economy, political and legal systems, and realign its values with Western, specifically European, democratic standards. It was a transition period for both the state and the society, transforming nearly every area of life. Latvia has made significant progress in restructuring its economic, political and legal systems since it joined the EU. This process has involved a range of reforms aimed at improving transparency, strengthening the rule of law and promoting democratic values. In terms of realigning its values with Western democratic standards, Latvia has made considerable strides. The country has made significant progress in areas such as human rights, media freedom, and anti-corruption measures. For example, in the 2022 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index (global score), Latvia ranked 22nd out of 180 countries, which is higher than a number of other EU member states (RSF 2024). However, like many other new member states, Latvia has also faced challenges in fully embracing liberal democratic values. For example, the country has struggled to address issues such as income inequality and social exclusion, which have led to tensions between different segments of society. Additionally, there have been concerns about Russian influence in Latvian politics, which has raised questions about the country's commitment to Western values and its ability to resist external pressure. While Latvia has made significant progress in realigning its values with Western democratic standards, there is still work to be done to ensure that these values are fully embraced across society. This is a challenge that Latvia shares with many other new member states, some of which remain rather anti-liberal, such as Hungary or Poland.

According to the Eurobarometer survey (Annex 1), 40 per cent of Latvians have a positive image of the EU. When asked about the benefits of EU membership (Annex 3), the most commonly cited results of the EU were free movement of people, goods and services within the EU (66 per cent), peace among the member states (41 per cent) and education programmes such as ERASMUS (35 per cent). The Euro as a common currency is also considered important by 28 per cent (6 percentage points more than the EU average), whereas 81 per cent support the EURO (compared to 69 per cent EU wide). The surveys also indicate that many Latvians see the EU as a source of financial support and funding for various projects, including education and infrastructure development.

However, the survey also found that there are some areas of concern for Latvians when it comes to the EU (Annex 1). For example, only 20 per cent of respondents felt that their voice does count in the EU, compared to 44 per cent as the EU average. Overall, the Eurobarometer data suggests that 54 per cent of Latvians view membership as a good thing for their country (Eurobarometer 2021b: 12). However, there are also some concerns about the role of Latvia within the EU and the level of influence that Latvians have in EU decision-making.

Latvia had substantially changed national institutional structures and managed to stabilise its economy to meet the accession requirements (Eihmanis 2019). The first years of Latvian membership in the EU were marked by a flourishing economy and new possibilities. Joining the EU came together with significant financial support. EU's political influence on Latvia became less direct, shifting moderately from import of rules to import of capital (Eihmanis 2019). This allowed Latvia to further develop its market economy and implement several development projects. The biggest chunk of funding comes from the European Regional Development Fund, European Social Fund and Cohesion Fund (Eiropas Savienības fondu līdzfinansējuma saņemšana 2020). In the framework of these programmes, the EU has an influence on the projects, areas and domains in which support is granted to Latvia.

Nonetheless, Latvia has left its mark on EU politics through the three influential portfolios of the country's two European Commissioners between 2004 and 2019. Andris Piebalgs served a term as the Commissioner for Energy (being named "Eurocrat of the year" by the Economist magazine in 2007), moving forward policies that were to result in greater energy security for Latvia and the other EU member states, and then moved to the development department for his second term (2009–2014), where he ensured that the Eastern Partnership states, strategically important partners in Latvia's foreign policy, remained recipients of EU development programmes. Valdis Dombrovskis has held the senior post of vice president of the Commission for the Euro and Social Dialogue since 2014 and has played a key role in modernising budget-making procedures and enhancing fiscal discipline in EU member states, including Latvia.

In the first half of 2015, Latvia held the presidency of the Council of the European Union. The presidency's planned central event – the Eastern Partnership Summit – ended inconclusively; however, this, at least partially, was brought about by derailment of the planned Council agenda by the severe migration crisis that engulfed Europe in the first half of 2016. Nevertheless, Latvia helped to secure an agreement on both the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and the Energy Union Framework Strategy and to broker a deal on ending mobile phone roaming charges and safeguarding open internet access.

10.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

10.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

Attitudes towards the EU were positive among all participants in the focus group discussions in Latvia. Freedom of movement (travelling), freedom to work in another member state, the common currency, security in the context of the geopolitical

situation, EU funding and education (Bologna process) were the main associations with the EU. Overall, the positive attitudes towards the EU and the associations with the EU mentioned in the focus group discussions in Latvia are consistent with the statistical findings of the Eurobarometer surveys presented earlier.

A participant from the young adults focus group characterised his understanding of the EU as follows: “Working and residential rights, borders and, kind of the same laws and rules, for example, the data protection regulation” (LVFG3_M2). Another participant added:

I must agree as well, I see only the positive, because the disadvantages aren't in front of my eyes and like other participants said, I don't remember myself living in a time where we weren't in the EU [. . .], so there is nothing, nothing to measure up.

(LVFG3_F1)

In all Latvian focus groups, the attitude towards the EU was rather similar in a positive sense. Participants perceived mainly benefits of EU membership, and none of the groups highlighted disadvantages in Latvian membership to the EU. A participant (LVFG2_F3) from the lower paid and unemployed group associated the EU with a common economic area, with a common currency – the Euro – with a joint protection of the common external border; with free travelling; with support for agriculture; with support for large infrastructure projects and with the Erasmus programme for education, directly for young people for exchange. Another participant from the same group associated EU with “Brussels, development and European funding” (LVFG2_M4).

Participants in the high skilled group considered the EU in terms of “easier traveling, easier moving around, and unity of countries, similar sense of values, understanding, being a part of a unity of countries” (LVFG1_F1). Another participant stated: “All 27 states of course are different [. . .], but common political and economic challenges in the countries helps the EU to collaborate, and, let's say, [. . .] live together” (LVFG1_M6). There was a common understanding between all participants about the relevance of free travel and mutual support:

For me, the first thing that comes to mind [when thinking about the EU], of course is travel, it's much easier to travel. And, I would also say – support. We are all supporting each other; all states.

(LVFG1_F5)

Nevertheless, one participant was sceptical about Latvia's ability to support others by saying: “Well, I think we should support, but whether Latvia would be able to do it, I couldn't say” (LVFG2_F1). However, others were sure “that Latvia should take part in that [i.e. helping other member states]. The same as we would want that other countries would take part if we would be [in] need” (LVFG1_F1) and “that the European Union already responds to different crises by allocating millions and millions to countries” (LVFG2_F5).

10.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

All focus group participants were confident that there would be solidarity on EU level in dealing with natural disasters. However, there was a concern about the ability to help another member state in such a situation, since living standards are not equal among all EU member states which concerns, from the perspective of the participants, particularly Latvia. Furthermore, Latvians in all three groups were less willing to help another member state if Latvia cannot guarantee the minimum living standard for its own population.

Despite this more general finding, a strong support of solidarity in the case of a natural disaster could be observed in the focus group of young adults via the quotation:

Latvia could help with human resources such as technical support specialists, volunteers, materials, expressing condolences, informing the society, donations from individuals, not from the government budget, emotional support for other countries which are like brothers and sisters to us.

(LVFG3_F6)

Regarding reciprocity, young adults responded that there is “no personal responsibility to help the countries, but the will – yes. Why wouldn’t I give something back? EU gives us Erasmus possibilities” (LVFG3_F1). Young adults also stressed that “Latvia should help equally as other EU countries, send a crisis management team, perhaps military support” (LVFG3_F5). Another young adult (LVFG3_M2) noted also that a neighbouring country, Sweden, provided support to Latvia during the COVID-19 crisis. Also, participants from the high skilled group expressed a strong sense of solidarity:

[Latvia should react] based on the available resources [. . .] whether it’s knowledge, [. . .] technical resources, [. . .] whatever other resources we might have.

(LVFG1_F1)

[There] should be [. . .] one and strong common political decision [. . .] by the Latvian parliament how to act in this particular situation.

(LVFG1_M6)

High skilled participants emphasised also that “we have a very strong airline here in Nordics, we could help with repatriation flights, as we have done before, if needed, also provide human, medical recourses” (LVFG1_F3). Kindness and help are also offered on a personal basis, as expressed in the following way: “I can help with my own experience and our human empathy, then of course, if I should go and maybe fight the fire than no, because I’m not skilled for that” (LVFG1_M4). The examples of support for closer neighbouring countries from high skilled as well as

lower paid and unemployed participants is expressed, for example, in the following two statements:

I can mention the repatriation flights, where we helped, Estonia or Lithuania to bring people back to countries when the COVID-19 started, for example. I think, we need to use our strong resources what we have also, for example, humans, medical stuff. Maybe we can help that way.

(LVFG1_F3)

I feel a very strong support, I would definitely support my closest neighbors, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland. And, if it would be possible as a volunteer. And, or also financially by a donation. Either way.

(LVFG2_F3)

However, high skilled participants underline that solidarity in case of a natural disaster should be a common task of all EU member states – as argued in the following statement:

[T]he first thing that comes to my mind is a unified approach, unified solution. I think that's the strength of European Union. If there is a problem, then people come together. We mentioned our knowledge and diversity, different opinions that would put those together very quickly, the speed, I think, is a presence there, and create a unified and better [solution], in a sense of better thought about solution. And then, of course, different countries could create a different contribution, depending on [their abilities]. Germany, having a fantastic [. . .] healthcare system [. . .] can do one thing, and then so on and so on.

(LVFG1_F1)

Participants of the focus group with lower paid and unemployed people had different feelings, and it was, for example, stated that “if something happens in a country, it will probably be the member state itself that will invest the most in this process of support” (LVFG2_F1). Furthermore, it was argued in this group that

no country should do more than the other, based on GDP per capita, because it would be fair to set up a common fund for this aid into which the countries would pay, taking into account the wealth of each country.

(LVFG2_F3)

and that first of all “the EU should react quickly, with a common structure, with financial help, medical support, in a united way” (LVFG2_F6). In general, participants in this focus group thought “that the people of Latvia are [and should be] responsive with the help of volunteers, because I don't think that financially we are that strong” (LVFG2_F3).

Although there were differences between the three focus groups, one can conclude that in the case of a natural disaster, solidarity at EU level and among the member states was seen as certain and clear action, according to all participants.

10.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a financial crisis

Discussing the scenario of a financial or economic crisis, solidarity was again understood as a concrete action. In the context of a crisis, solidarity includes financial support, debt relief and investment in the struggling economy. Participants referred to concrete actions, such as the provision of emergency funds and the implementation of economic reforms to address causes of the crisis. They also highlighted the importance of solidarity and cooperation among EU member states in addressing economic challenges and promoting economic stability and growth. However, in respect to Latvia, it was argued that the small size and weak financial possibilities of the country should be considered. Therefore, solidarity remains a nice intention but with limited capacities on the part of Latvia to help other EU countries.

It must be mentioned that likewise in case of economic crises, participants in the focus group of young adults were more willing to help – particularly close neighbours, as expressed in the following statement:

It's that if this crisis occurs due to external factors, for example, political like we are currently seeing with the Lithuanian firms suffering losses, due to the Chinese [. . .] official sanctions then I believe that we should, as much as we can support them, because if the reason for the crisis is an ideology that we stand for, and we believe in, then I believe that we should stand strong together and support each other as much as we can.

(LVFG3_M4)

One young adult emphasised:

I would be more than happy if Latvia could help the neighbouring country in need of aid in such situation. But I'm not too sure if we can help somehow and if we can then that would be very much appreciated, but maybe it's my lack of knowledge, but I just don't see it happening realistically.

(LVFG3_F3)

It was also argued among the young adults “that financial help should not be used as a tool for impacting the policy of a specific EU member state. [. . .] It has to be evaluated, depending on the specific requirements that the financial aid comes with” (LVFG3_M4).

In general, young adults did not see how Latvia could support other EU member states in case of an economic crisis – as expressed by the following two statements:

There really isn't that much that Latvia could do, because our economy makes up such a small part of the whole EU. So, our decisions are most likely going to be based on what the other countries are doing, what are the decisions of the EU going to be, what everyone around us is doing so we can't really affect anyone that much by what we do. Okay, we can of course make

some extremely stupid decisions, drag the Baltics into the ground and things like that, but, other than that, I don't see that much of an impact.

(LVFG3_F5)

Not much to do, because Latvia doesn't have a major impact on the EU's economy. Maybe Latvia shouldn't react, every country alone is responsible for their economy, one should think before this crisis happens.

(LVFG3_M2)

Lower paid and unemployed participants were willing to help – but only in a particular way, as expressed by the following statement:

Latvia should help from common EU budget, because each member state contributes to the common EU budget. And I think there should be and there are certainly smart enough people keeping track of this expenditure and the use of the money.

(LVFG2_M4)

One high skilled participant expressed a wish:

Hopefully other countries would support us and in return we should obey the rules that are asked from us. We can still negotiate, we can explain, we can give additional data in case if the restrictions, or rules, or requirements seem too harsh for us.

(LVFG1_F5)

Another participant thought that

the European Union, the European Commission and other institutions should divide this help and collect maybe this help from other countries to distribute them then to other countries, but negotiation is seen as the best tool to find a compromise.

(LVFG1_M6)

And one more participant from this group added:

So, first of all, we will be part of the unified EU reaction and decision. I think that, again, we are a rather small country in terms of economic impact and economic support we can provide. So, at that case I think it's a bit less an individual solution or action that we can take as individual countries. That makes me think that we would go more with creating a better joint decision and then take part in executing that.

(LVFG1_F1)

To summarise the second scenario, participants of all three Latvian focus group discussions backed the idea of support in the case of economic crisis but did not see the ability of Latvia to help other member states to a great extent.

10.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

At the beginning of this discussion point, participants of all groups agreed that there is cohesion in EU. It was strengthened by highlighting social issues, funding at EU level, free movement of labour force. Furthermore, it was agreed in all groups that support from EU is huge, but in many cases, ordinary people cannot access it, due to lack of information, bureaucratic barriers, language barriers, limited resources and corruption.

Young adults supported the idea that

[a] certain standard of living should be guaranteed for all EU citizens because in each member state the starting point has been very different. The level at which they joined the European Union and now the conditions are also different.

(LVFG3_M4)

Lower paid and unemployed participants believed that

[the] EU should strive for decreasing inequalities because I see that [the] EU is a union of states and we should strive for all these states to be equal in what we can gain, how we can help people, how the society strives and so on.
– as stated by one of participant of this group (LVFG2_F5)

Despite this, participants of all three groups shared the following wishes:

A fund should be invented, fund families, educate kids.

(LVFG3_F6)

A programme that reduces social inequalities should be created, each country should start by assessing their situation internally and aiding the most disadvantaged and inhabitant groups.

(LVFG2_F1)

One of the benefits of the EU is that, as a unity of a larger scale and size, we can tackle more difficult problems, larger scale problems than we would normally expect that we can try to solve. It's needed to create new knowledge-based programmes that could try to reduce the inequality, also support educational institutions and the individuals gaining additional skills and knowledge. Yes,

but by focusing on each country's special needs, not just giving away money. It's happening already with funding.

(LVFG1_F1)

I think we should try to ensure a similar standard of living with equal salaries, with providing free higher education for everyone, support small and medium-sized enterprises

(LVFG2_M2)

Nevertheless, the last participants admitted: "We must take into account that it isn't that easy; it takes time." Furthermore, as in the discussion on the scenario of an economic crisis, the limited scope for action of Latvia was highlighted and it was also emphasised:

It's hard to imagine how we could help some other EU country to reduce the unemployment rate. If we assume that there are less than two million people living in Latvia and, let's say, 80 plus million [in another country]. I don't know what's the number, but they have 86 or whatever million in Germany. So, if we would invite, let's say, 8 per cent of the German population to come to work here probably it wouldn't help us and them as well. I cannot imagine a scenario like that.

(LVFG1_M2)

Interestingly, another participant from the high skilled group fully supported Latvia's contribution to reducing inequality by offering jobs to unemployed people from other member states in Latvia: "I think that we definitely have to contribute, and [. . .] all borders are open and if somebody from other EU country is willing to come to work to Latvia, well: welcome!" (LVFG1_M7).

To tackle the unemployment, young adults thought, for example: "Latvia shouldn't contribute to reducing unemployment in other EU countries" (LVFG3_M2). However, it was also stated:

There should be an EU support scheme, but it shouldn't be over-inflated like a bubble, where benefits are given one after the other and in the end, nobody wants to go to work. It should get people into the labour market, provide more opportunities for people to try something else if a certain profession or something doesn't work out on the labour market, so that people don't end up getting those unemployment benefits for years.

(LVFG3_M4)

Another young adult added:

I believe that, rather than fighting unemployment on an individual level, the EU should focus more on helping people, helping entrepreneurs starting their businesses. And the result is the same, because those people when they started a business, they would need to hire people, so unemployment

gets solved either way. It's just that there is a less risk of the monetary help being abused, such as unemployment benefits, which often motivate people to stay unemployed.

(LVFG3_M4)

The same participants also argued

that with the freedom of travel that we have in the European Union, you can go and work in any [member state] you like. And I believe that if a person cannot get a job in any of the EU member states it's more of their problem than an EU problem.

Lower paid and unemployed participants praised Latvia for good employment opportunities: "We have a very good employment service now. Both in terms of offering jobs and support. The only thing that needs to be looked after are the long-term unemployed" (LVFG2_F1).

When asked about a common scheme that would bring about more equality, one participants of this group argued: "No, because it is up to each member state to decide what support instruments to put in place" (LVFG2_F3). In contrast, some high skilled participants supported a common scheme that would contribute to equality by reducing unemployment:

A common support programme would be awesome, and it should be a European Union programme, not just a domestic programme. However, we are coming in each of the countries from very different societal maturity. [Therefore, it would be desirable to have] joint funding that's managed on a local level.

(LVFG1_F3)

Other high skilled participants thought that unemployment was a domestic problem:

Again, it's the country's problem. However, we are already helping by allowing other European citizens to come and work here with easier work permits etc., also by paying some money into the common EU budget, and then the budget is used to help the country to solve its unemployment problems.

(LVFG1_M4)

To summarise the discussions on solutions to unemployment, most participants saw a need for solidarity in solving it. However, at the same time, participants referred mainly to the freedom of movement of people in the EU to address this issue.

10.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Latvia

The focus group discussions confirmed the survey results, pointing to an overall positive attitude towards the EU in Latvia. All participants in the focus group discussions agreed that EU membership is beneficial for Latvia in a political, economic and social respect.

The focus group participants' willingness to be solidary is commendable, though it is essential to acknowledge and address the financial limitations it may face. Strategic planning, resource optimisation and diplomatic efforts can help Latvia to contribute to solidarity initiatives within its means and make a positive impact on both its domestic and international commitments.

Cohesion was viewed in all groups in the context of equivalence, not only of EU member states but also of living conditions in them. Solidarity was perceived not as a question but as a reality. Focus group members defined solidarity as a sense of shared purpose and responsibility among individuals or groups, especially in the face of adversity or hardship. It involves offering support, resources and assistance to those in need. Solidarity is not just an abstract concept or principle but a tangible expression of that shared purpose and responsibility in the form of concrete actions. For example, if a member state is facing a crisis, solidarity among other member states could involve offering financial support, resources or expertise to help address the situation. This type of action demonstrates a commitment to the principles of solidarity and cohesion within the EU.

Concerning a natural disaster, almost all participants of the three groups expressed their willingness to help, both on a country level and on individual level, because the situation pertains to an emergency that is not self-inflicted and that could indiscriminately affect anyone.

Support in the case of an economic crisis was more or less considered self-evident (in contrast to the discussions carried out in the other countries – as shown in the other country chapters and in the concluding chapter). This was because an economic crisis was more likely to be seen by participants as externally caused.

Concerning social inequality caused by unemployment, it was agreed that responsibility mostly lies within each person and on a country level. Nevertheless, EU member states should act in solidarity by sharing “all the possible resources from all the member states of the European Union” – as claimed by a member of the group of lower paid and unemployed people (LVFG2_F5).

The emphasis on obligation in the context of solidarity suggests that Latvian participants see solidarity as a binding force that goes beyond mere willingness or voluntarism. It reflects a commitment to shared values and responsibilities within the EU and the broader international community. This perspective highlights the importance of upholding principles of mutual support and assistance in times of crisis or hardship.

At the same time, most participants in all three focus group discussions conducted in Latvia shared the opinion that the country would not be able to contribute much to supporting others in need. This was attributed to the size of the country – in terms of both its population and the strength of its economy. Instead, it was assumed that Latvia would need support from others. And if solidarity is needed, it should consider the economic capacity of a country. The participants in the focus group discussions conducted in Latvia support the idea of subsidiarity reflecting a belief in self-reliance and local responsibility, with an emphasis on addressing national issues before considering broader international solidarity. They recognise the existing EU measures as valuable tools for tackling social and economic challenges within the country.

11 Lithuania

Consistently pro-European but still “a bit of a scrooge”

Inga Gaižauskaitė

Among the nine selected project countries, Lithuania stands out with its rather persistently positive position towards the European Union (EU), while largely remaining void of stronger Eurosceptic voices. Lithuania became a member of the EU with the largest wave of accession of new member states on 1 May 2004. Since the restoration of its status as an independent state in the 1990s, Lithuania has pursued political and economic integration within Europe. At the first opportunity, Lithuania signed an association agreement with the EU in 1995 and submitted its official application to join as a full member state. Lithuania’s determination to become an EU member was motivated not only by interests in enhancing security, consolidating democracy, and boosting economic growth but also in restoring links with the European community of “shared cultural heritage, values and identity” (Dragomir 2010: 301). It followed a more idealistic motivation of “return to Europe” or “the European family” from which Lithuania had been forcefully excluded for five decades by the Soviet occupation (Miniotaitė 2005: 72; Vitkus 2016: 1). The orientation of Lithuania’s foreign policy towards the West included both the accession to the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Among Lithuanian political elites, the idea of EU membership enjoyed broad consensus and experienced no major controversies, with differences only concerning the preferred speed and depth of accession-linked reforms (Dragomir 2010; Matonytė et al. 2016).

Likewise, public attitudes towards the EU in Lithuania tend to be largely positive. However, since the 1990s, general support from the public for EU membership has fluctuated. Commencing in 2001, several years prior to accession, pro-European attitudes of Lithuanian public became stronger than those in Latvia and especially in Estonia. Among the three Baltic states, the Lithuanian public were more likely to perceive EU membership as “a good thing” (Dragomir 2010). The citizens confirmed their support for the entry to the EU during the mandatory referendum held on 10–11 May 2003. The turnout of the referendum was 63.4 per cent and the vast majority (91.1 per cent) of voters said “Yes” to Lithuania’s membership in the EU (LRVRK n.d.). Comprising 57.8 per cent of positive votes in the total electorate, the support was the highest among EU candidate countries (NSD n.d.).

Accession to the EU marked a threshold of Lithuania’s statehood with the incorporation of EU norms and regulations into its national legal system, modernisation of the economy and development of political identity (Miniotaitė 2005;

Vitkus 2016). Furthermore, Lithuania is generally prone to support EU reforms aimed at higher integration and consolidation of the EU institutions (Vitkus 2016). Despite the rise of Euroscepticism in other EU countries, there is a lack of any strong Eurosceptic political position in Lithuania and citizens maintain positive attitudes towards the EU. Both the political elite and general public proved to be among the most confident with the European project over the years (Dragomir 2010; Matonytė et al. 2016; Eurobarometer 2021a). Indeed, Lithuanians seem to be satisfied with the degree of European unity and perceive the EU as an already established entity (Vitkus 2016). Moreover, the public in the Baltic states generally perceive the EU as a “government and political elite project”, thus shaping expectations towards EU membership (Dragomir 2010).

11.1 An overview about the country

11.1.1 The political system

Lithuania is primarily a parliamentary republic while, at the same time, possessing elements of a semi-presidential republic due to a directly elected president who serves as the head of state. A single-chamber multiparty parliament (*Seimas*) is the key legislative body, and the government is the key executive body. The Lithuanian president has limited powers in domestic policies, with foreign policy being the area where the president can exercise the most influence while still sharing power and responsibility to execute foreign policy with the government (Janeliūnas 2019). The country is a unitary state and divided into 60 municipalities, which are self-governing authorities with directly elected councils and mayors. However, in Lithuania, the municipal powers are limited.

In Lithuania, there is a multiparty system, within which the government tends to consist of several parties forming a coalition rather than being dominated by a single party. The longest-standing parties are Lithuanian Social Democratic Party and Homeland Union (centrist conservatives), with other political blocks being comparatively recent or prone to change. Eurosceptic views are scarcely present in the Lithuanian party system and remain on the periphery of the political scene with little influence (Gudžinskas and Bekišas 2020; Unikaite-Jakuntaviciene 2014; Vitkus 2017). The most consistent and openly Eurosceptic party is The Lithuanian Nationalist and Republican Union (former Nationalist Union; Gudžinskas and Bekišas 2020; Vitkus 2017).

11.1.2 Core features of population and economy

With about 2.8 million inhabitants (OSP 2020a), Lithuania falls among the smallest populations of the EU (Eurostat 2020a). Since 1990, Lithuania has experienced continuous population decline, losing almost 25 per cent of its population (OSP 2020a; Ubarevičienė and van Ham 2017), with the population expected to decline even further (UN 2015). Although population decline can be attributed to

a variety of reasons, emigration is the key factor and accounts for almost 80 per cent of the overall decline, with Lithuania featuring the highest emigration rates in the EU (Ubarevičienė and van Ham 2017). For Lithuania, the opening of the EU labour market fostered flows of emigration to other EU countries, primarily to the United Kingdom and Ireland, and also to Spain and Germany (Sipavičienė and Stankūnienė 2013). Contrarily, Lithuania is not among the leading immigration destinations for foreigners. On average, between 50 and 80 per cent of immigrants are actually returning Lithuanian citizens; most immigrating foreign citizens are from Ukraine and Belarus, whereas the share of EU immigrants is negligible (EMN n.d.). In 2020, emigration decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic; in addition to the pandemic, Brexit increased the number of returning Lithuanian citizens (EMN n.d.; OSP 2020a).

In its overall composition, the structure of Lithuanian population remains largely homogeneous, with over 85 per cent declaring Lithuanian ethnicity (OSP n.d.); additionally, over 77.2 per cent identified as Roman Catholics (OSP 2013). It is, similarly, worth noting that Lithuania has one of the most educated populations in the EU; for example, in 2020, 44.1 per cent of the population aged 25–64 had attained the higher educational level compared to 32.8 per cent of EU27 (OSP 2021).

Lithuania's gross domestic product (GDP) has been steadily increasing and reached €49 billion in 2019 compared to €27 billion in 2009 (Eurostat 2021d). However, the GDP per capita of €14,060 in 2019 remains significantly lower than the EU28 average of €28,060 (Eurostat 2021e). Meanwhile, Lithuania's general government gross debt in 2019 amounted to 35.9 per cent of the GDP (IMF 2021) which adhered to the 60 per cent debt limit applied to the members of the Eurozone and was the lowest of all countries studied here.

Lithuania follows the trend toward a service economy with around 60 per cent of the GDP accounted for by the tertiary sector, 25 per cent industry and 3 per cent agriculture (Statista 2023). In 2019, Lithuania's exports stood at €30 billion and its imports at €32 billion, resulting in a negative foreign trade balance of €2 billion (Eurostat 2021f).

The main trading goods were intermediate goods (52.2 per cent of export and 55.7 per cent of import), consumption goods (28.6 per cent of export and 23.4 per cent of import) and capital goods (12.7 per cent of export and 15.8 per cent of import; OSP 2020b). In terms of export, intra-EU trade accounted for 58.8 per cent in 2019, with the main partners being Latvia (9.5 per cent), Poland (7.9 per cent) and Germany (7.6 per cent), whereas outside the EU, export share mainly went to Russia (14.0 per cent) and the United States (3.7 per cent). In terms of import, 69.1 per cent came from other EU member states, foremost Poland (11.8 per cent), Germany (11.7 per cent) and Latvia (7.1 per cent). Outside the EU, the main import share came from Russia (14.5 per cent) and China (2.9 per cent; OSP 2020b).

In 2019, Lithuania's unemployment rate was 6.3 per cent, slightly below the EU27 average (6.7 per cent; Eurostat 2021g).

11.2 Lithuania and European integration

EU membership has proved undoubtedly beneficial for Lithuania, leading to faster modernisation of the public administration, economic development, opportunities to participate in the single market, freedom of movement and social progress. Since joining the EU, Lithuania has been a net recipient of funding from the EU budget. The estimate of assistance received by Lithuania prior to accession and during the first decade of membership in the EU is about €13.5 billion, compared to its contribution to the EU budget of almost €3 billion (Vitkus 2016). Under the last Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of the EU (2014–2020), Lithuania contributed about €3 billion and received €12 billion resulting in a positive balance of €9 billion (European Commission n.d.). Receiving assistance through the European funds has fostered the development of the country in a wide range of areas, such as the development of infrastructure and support for agriculture, which has been highly regarded by the people.

Such clear advantages from integration into the EU have likely fostered the overall positive attitudes, and even the economic decline following the global financial crisis in 2008 did not affect the consensual pro-Europeanness of the national political elites (Matonytė et al. 2016). In fact, in Lithuania the crisis was not linked to its membership in the EU; on the contrary, the Central Bank of Lithuania assessed that membership in the Eurozone could have reduced the impact of the crisis (Vitkus 2016).

Though the Lithuanian political elite largely believes that the EU does not treat its smaller states fairly and that political parties diverge in their attitudes towards the EU (e.g. Social Democrats tend to be more supportive of common EU taxation and social security system than the Conservatives or the Liberals), the general pro-European stance and support for future European unification remain stable (Matonytė et al. 2016). Therefore, Lithuania continues to be the main exception (the other being Malta) among EU member states where Euroscepticism has otherwise become a universal force in the contemporary party systems (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). In contrast, Lithuanian Eurosceptics remain on the periphery (Unikaite-Jakuntaviciene 2014) and the 2019 elections in Lithuania did not showcase any stronger anti-European agenda (Vilpišauskas 2021).

Moreover, when it comes to the general public in Lithuania, there is no evidence of a perceived EU legitimacy crisis. Eurobarometer data confirms the overall positive attitudes towards the EU in Lithuania (see Annex 1). Overall, half of the respondents have a positive image of the EU. More than two-thirds of the respondents have a feeling of European citizenship, feel optimistic about the future of the EU and support the Euro; over half trust the EU and the European Parliament (EP) and are satisfied with the democracy in the EU. Interestingly, the positive image of the EU persists despite the perception, falling lower than the EU average, that one's voice counts within the union. It mirrors the perception of political elites who also recognise the lower significance of smaller states in the EU but nevertheless consensually support it.

Lithuania similarly stands out through its externalisation of trust (Sztompka 1999), with public trust in national political institutions being consistently lower than trust

in the EU and its institutions. Only 27 per cent of the respondents expressed trust in the Lithuanian government and 14 per cent in Lithuanian parliament (Eurobarometer 2022: T67, T69). The gap between trust in the national political institutions and the EU tends to be among the largest compared to other EU member states (Gaižauskaitė 2019).

The feeling of European citizenship is on average stronger in Lithuania than in the EU (see Annex 1). However, when asked to describe their identity (2019 data, Eurobarometer 2021a), 44 per cent of the respondents see themselves as Lithuanians only, a further 49 per cent feel Lithuanian first and also European, whereas only 6 per cent feel European first and then also Lithuanian. Therefore, despite highly positive attitudes towards the EU, Lithuanians tend to prioritise their national identity (Eurobarometer 2021a).

The importance of EU membership for economic development and security is reflected in the Eurobarometer data (see Annex 3). A significant majority of respondents in Lithuania consider the free movement of people, goods, and services within the EU to be the most positive result of the EU (it is also firmly above the EU average). Peace among the members states of the EU is the second most positive result, as indicated by half of respondents (also, slightly above the EU average).

Though Lithuania has not been a destination for foreign immigrants, the EU “migration crisis” of 2015 had its effect on the perception of major issues in the EU. Public concern about immigration has increased since 2015, and in 2019, 34 per cent of the respondents perceived it as the main issue in the EU (Eurobarometer 2021a). Coverage in Lithuanian media focused on refugee relocation quotas to other EU countries (including Lithuania) and covered potential challenges or threats. The image of threat intensified after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2016 (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2020). In the same vein, concerns over terrorism also increased around 2015 and, for some time, prevailed over immigration as the main issue: in 2017, over a third of the respondents perceived terrorism to be the main issue facing the EU (Eurobarometer 2021a). While immigration remained the biggest concern for Lithuanians, rising prices, inflation and cost of living gained attention by the end of 2020 (Eurobarometer 2021a and Annex 2). Although Lithuanians likewise regard the environment and climate change as important issues, their concern is lower than the average in the EU (see Annex 2) and has gained public attention only recently (i.e. starting 2019; Eurobarometer 2021a).

Though Lithuanian political elites and public uphold strongly pro-European attitudes, the attachment to the EU and public understanding of cohesion in Europe require a more detailed study. Positive attitudes towards the EU in surveys do not reveal the extent to which the public is actually concerned with European matters, especially given that the levels of familiarity with EU issues are not high (Dragomir 2010).

The following section will further explore citizens’ perceptions of the EU to gain a more detailed understanding based on our focus group discussions.

11.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

11.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

The general attitude towards the EU was predominantly positive among the participants of the focus group discussions in Lithuania, in particular so among the high skilled and young adults. It could be summarised in words of one of the participants: “Because for us life has really improved since we joined the European Union” (LTFG1_F4). Common associations that participants made with the EU were freedom of movement and freedom of work. Additionally, EU funding (specifically funding of infrastructure projects), (mutual) support, gaining experiences, changes in mentality and also a sense of stability and predictability were associated with the EU. Similarly, the notion of security was frequently brought up in connection with the EU. Interestingly, alongside security in a geopolitical sense, young adults also perceived security in an economic and social sense, for example, pointing to a common system of primary health care across Europe.

A participant in the lower paid and unemployed group associated “unity” with the EU; however, when asked to elaborate, the association was negative, that is, referring to the lack of unity. According to participants in the lower paid and unemployed group, the lack of unity manifested via prejudices against other (weaker) countries (LTFG2_M5), dictates of more powerful countries (LTFG2_M4) and disagreements among leaders of member states (LTFG2_F2). On the contrary, for high skilled participants, cohesion was discernible as Lithuania moving closer towards the EU (e.g. in terms of financial position, mentality, etc.), and they expressed a feeling that there are ever fewer differences between “old” and “new” member states: “It’s that cohesion, we [. . .] got close with [. . .] the ‘old Europe’” (LTFG1_M1). However, a participant in the high skilled group also expressed doubt whether such a feeling of cohesion is indeed reciprocal, stating that cohesion is more important for smaller countries: “while we’re small and we’re [. . .] weaker [. . .] maybe that connection is felt more, and for the stronger one [. . .], Germany, would they feel that cohesion? In my opinion, no” (LTFG1_M2). Nevertheless, in general, Lithuanian participants came to a relative consensus that despite (cultural) diversity and lack of common identity, the EU is a community to an extent, as the quotation below exemplifies:

I just had this thought that even though these different countries with their [. . .] different values [. . .], we’re still [. . .] on the same team [. . .] when we’re in the European Union. [When] you sign some kind of treaty, you agree to all those commitments and just that, despite those differences, we are still somehow trying to find that middle ground to be together and, I don’t know, friendly.

(LTFG3_F6)

Regardless of the nuances between the three groups, moving towards more unity was commonly perceived as an important aspiration for the European community by Lithuanian participants.

Interestingly, in all three discussions, the EU was paralleled and, at the same time, contrasted with the Soviet Union: “it’s a huge group of countries. Actually,

well, practically a bit like the Soviet Union, it was a huge group of countries, too. The EU is also a huge group of countries. Except, of course, everything is different [than in the Soviet Union]" (LTFG1_M3). High skilled participants discussed a double-sided effect of EU functioning as a group of countries. On the one hand, it enacts democratic order and thus differs from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, decision-making may resemble a "meat jelly", that is, "some decisions travel very long, they take a very long time, they are debated for a very long time" (LTFG1_M3). Obstacles to solidarity and fairness were highlighted by high skilled participants in connection with the idea that each country primarily takes care of its own interests and, moreover, interests of "big" countries (e.g. Germany) tend to be prioritised or more influential (the sentiment also shared with the lower paid and unemployed group). Lower paid and unemployed participants also described the national government as too eager to implement any recommendation from the EU regardless of the effects for the country. Here another association with the Soviet Union emerged: "we still probably have that kind of thing as it was in the Soviet era, you need to meet the plan. So, let's go over it" (LTFG2_M5).

In all three groups, there was a common belief in the benefit of the EU membership for Lithuania: "Benefits or advantages? Wherever you look, there are almost everywhere benefits" (LTFG1_M2). The high skilled participants did not perceive many disadvantages of Lithuania's membership in the EU. They discussed that any disadvantages may emerge with the future obligations, for example, when Lithuania becomes a net contributing country, rather than a net beneficiary. This was made clear by a participant (LTFG1_M4) in the following way:

All funding of infrastructure [by EU funds] will not be there all the time. There will come a time when they will stop. Other countries [. . .] will need help, and then we will have to help. So, maybe then this disadvantage will start to emerge.

However, the same participant also emphasised at a later point that other member states should be aware: "A Lithuanian is [. . .] a bit of a scrooge!" – which means that in such a future constellation, Lithuania might not show itself to be generous, but might be keen on frugality. A similar sentiment was later expressed by a participant in lower paid and unemployed group: "I don't know, but in that respect, I think Lithuania would not really help with anything. It really wouldn't. Because Lithuania likes to receive. We are talking about money, economy. Get. Get. But giving – definitely not" (LTFG2_F1).

Although the group of lower paid and unemployed participants shared a relatively positive attitude towards the EU overall, it was balanced with critical remarks. Participants shared a feeling that the EU overrides autonomy of member states (at least Lithuania), for example:

Lithuania is very much forced to do a lot of things, which, for example, makes people have adverse attitudes. It seems that we are forced to do things that we might not even want to do at times.

(LTFG2_F2)

Where participants in the high skilled group perceived EU's directives and regulations as an impulse for Lithuania to progress, participants in the lower paid and unemployed group perceived them instead as also having some negative effects on the state, culture and/or people's lives (e.g. pertaining image – even if incorrect – of the EU as imposing taxes).

If the high skilled group had a rather strong feeling of cohesion or being a relatively equal member and/or citizen of the EU, then the lower paid and unemployed participants repeatedly stressed disparities between member states, primarily focusing on the perceived gap of economic prosperity (i.e. rich countries and people vs. poor countries and people) and social well-being (e.g. income gaps, pension gaps between member states). The perceived distance between Lithuania and “stronger, richer” countries was clearly expressed in this group. Similarly, the extent of Lithuania's progress in this regard was not perceived as substantial:

Let's just take the prices that are going up crazy right now and [. . .] our government is saying that the European Union [is responsible for that]. That's fine, but then we would also like to have salaries as those [in other EU member states]. Pensioners would also like to have pensions like in the European Union. We are poor. And we are going to remain like that.

(LTFG2_F1)

The discussion on the disadvantages of Lithuania's membership in the EU in the lower paid and unemployed group again turned to the power-imbalanced image of the EU, where Lithuania presumably became a “victim” of certain policies or requirements (which were also perceived as unfair). For example, disrupted energy independence of Lithuania as a result of the pre-accession requirement to close the nuclear power plant. In the high skilled group, power-imbalance was linked to the nature of decision-making processes in the EU as a potential disadvantage and a hint about a disbalance between stronger and weaker countries – in line with an implicit wish for more reciprocity and fairness.

By contrast, the young adults were generally more reserved about potential disadvantages of Lithuania's membership in the EU, instead focusing more on the benefits. However, this group nevertheless expressed double-sided assessment of some of the aspects of Lithuania's membership in the EU which were considered advantages and disadvantages at the same time: Introduction of the Euro was seen as a good thing in a practical sense, whereas renouncement of national currency (*litas*) was simultaneously repented as a loss of a “sign of statehood” (LTFG3_F6). Similarly, free movement of labour force meant opportunities for those highly qualified while at the same time some losses for Lithuania: “And the best minds, the sharpest minds, go to other countries. Where, well, their work is valued almost double, triple. And in Lithuania, what is left is what is left” (LTFG3_F4).

All three groups in Lithuania alluded to possible clash of cultural values between the EU and Lithuania. However, the connotations diverged across the three social demographic groups. In the high skilled group, reference was made to a *potential* disadvantage linked with culture and values transfer from the EU to Lithuanian

society, which could be seen as a challenge (and even a pressure) for a more “traditional” country as Lithuania. In the lower paid and unemployed group, the question of cultural differences was explicitly discussed as a disadvantage, focusing on gender equality and in particular LGBTQ+ rights, which were perceived as unacceptable for Lithuanian society and culture (for some participants even personally offensive). In contrast, young adults were more prone to criticise Lithuanian society precisely for the lack of acceptance of values not considered as traditional, focusing on gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. Nevertheless, an understanding was expressed that many people in Lithuania might have a feeling that these “new” values were being forcefully pushed upon Lithuanian society and it might be seen as a potential disadvantage of EU membership:

[M]aybe I partly agree with those ideas that are spreading with liberalism and with the European Union approach, with values. But it still happens that there are people who do not agree with that and, I might say, it is destroying their world. And on the one hand it leads towards good, but [. . .] certain people may think that they have been betrayed. That even though it's their country [. . .] it's still being led by other countries and so they don't have a particular choice.
(LTFG3_M3)

11.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

The focus groups participants repeatedly showed a belief that at the EU level, mechanisms and policies have been established that are working well in dealing with varied (crisis) situations or issues. This indicates that the participants see solidarity as institutionalised in the EU structure; that is, all contribute to certain funds that are designed to help member states in need. For example, in the high skilled group a participant claimed:

I think it is quite clear. I imagine, there is a kind of [. . .] crisis fund, which [is] dedicated [. . .] [to] such [. . .] extra cases. Oh, and the other part of it is that if there is a need for technical or some kind of physical help, then I think every country contributes to that all the time.

(LTFG1_M1)

Additionally, there was a general consensus among Lithuanian participants that in the case of natural disaster help *should* be provided and thus solidarity was perceived as self-evident, often also driven by the values of “common humanity” (LTFG1_M3). Moreover, participants tended to extend the solidarity beyond the boundaries of the EU.

At the country level, reciprocity was presumed even though it was not stressed as a solid expectation in the natural disaster scenario. For example, a participant stated: “I think they should help, too. Because here, each country should think: ‘What if this happened to us, would we expect it?’” (LTFG2_F2).

Participants agreed that help should be provided, and all countries should be involved. However, Lithuanian participants felt that solidarity should be balanced when put into practice; that is, countries should help based on their capabilities. Each country should make the decision on the scope and kind of help that it can provide, and the cost should be shared between the EU and the helping country. The lower paid and unemployed participants, in particular, stressed the limits of financial support claiming that “[t]hose who can help more, those that are financially stronger, yes, [. . .] they can help more” (LTFG2_M5), seeing Lithuania as having limited capacities in this regard. Furthermore, the participants in this group were cautious about the extent of help provided which should not harm the helping country itself. Similarly, young adults discussed varied ways how the help should be provided and who should cover the cost. The starting point was existing EU mechanism and funding, which is set and working, according to the participants. Whereas at the country level, individual country capabilities should be considered. For example, if a country is capable of contributing financially (primarily referring to financially strong countries), or with human resources, and what would be the most rational way to organise the help. This is summarised, for example, in the following statement:

[W]e are all – these [EU] countries – [. . .] in the same boat. In the sense that if one gets wet, then probably everybody is going to get wet right away. But on the other hand, we also need rationality. [. . .] If I need help [from a friend], I’d rather call a friend in [the] neighbourhood, than call someone from [. . .] another town 300 kilometres away to help me. [. . .] So, if [. . .] it is possible to organise something better through one country’s or two countries’ helping, then why not do it? Of course, then, afterwards, we would have to think somehow how to compensate [. . .] that country or something else.

(LTFG3_M3)

Participants in all three Lithuanian groups expressed a strong sense of regional/neighbourhood (namely Baltic) solidarity. For example, Lithuania would immediately turn to help Latvia, since any disaster is likely to concurrently affect the country, too: “Because Latvia is on fire, so Lithuania will be on fire soon, too” (LTFG1_F4). In relation to countries that are geographically more distant, the scope or means of help might be different:

It is just those states, I think, that are nearby, that are neighbours, they are always helping. Just unconditionally. [. . .] If we talk about what happens in Italy during the eruption of Etna, whether Norway or Finland send their forces, that’s another [. . .] question. But the solidarity [. . .] is certainly shown in terms of money. And in terms of human resources, the more distant states also help in individual cases – I think.

(LTFG3_F6)

At the individual level, participants referred to an indirect solidarity in their role as taxpayers (thus contributing to the resources spent by the country in a case of emergency), charity and, to an extent, personal help if one had skills or capacity to do it, for example, with voluntary work. Yet again, personal contributions could be more evident in relation to proximity of the natural disaster: “And if there’s something like that going on nearby, say, maybe you just have to take a shovel in your hands and go dig that sand. And [contribute] in such a way” (LTFG1_M3).

To conclude, in the case of natural disaster, solidarity at the EU level and country level was not called into question, despite a degree of disagreement over how it should be implemented. Similarly, participants expressed a strong sense of neighbourhood solidarity.

11.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a financial crisis

When turning to the scenario of a financial or economic crisis, the solidarity approach observably shifted and more arguments against solidarity were provided. In both the high skilled and the lower paid and unemployed groups, participants turned to an image of Lithuania as a “small and poor” country (e.g. “poor as a church mouse” [LTFG2_F3]); therefore, not capable of contributing (in particular financially). Solidarity remained a major motive at the level of intentions (i.e. agreeing that a country in crisis must be helped) but restricted at the level of action (i.e. Lithuania was seen as a country with limited possibilities to help):

As far as helping is concerned, I think to some extent, as I said, there are these funds of some sort and [. . .] there would be some money allocated from those funds. But I think if there was a crisis in Europe, I think we would be in need of help, not us helping others.

(LTFG2_M4)

On the contrary, reverse solidarity (i.e. other countries should help the “small and poor” Lithuania) was perceived as a given: “I think that most countries should really help Lithuania [. . .] because our country is quite poor and quite small to be able to get out of the crisis by ourselves without any help from others” (LTFG2_F2).

Participants in the lower paid and unemployed group expressed a future possibility of solidarity from Lithuania if adequate levels of domestic economic and social well-being are reached.

At the same time, neighbourhood solidarity remained firm even in the financial crisis scenario (referring to Estonia, and in particular Latvia and Poland), notwithstanding the agreement among the young adults that ideally, there should be no difference in contributions of help.

Yet again, participants in all three groups expressed their belief in common EU mechanisms, for example: “It will still be the European Union’s own decisions, how to solve it, how to deal with it, not us Lithuanians deciding that we can save

someone” (LTFG1_M2). In this regard, Lithuania could demonstrate an indirect solidarity via a redirection of funds:

Yes, if the European Union then distributes that budget, or finances, we might just lose some of that money that was allocated for something, because it will go to rescue another country. So, the only thing we can do – not to be angry about it. That’s all.

(LTFG1_F4)

Participants in the group of lower paid and unemployed people as well as the group of young adults noted an “interest-driven” solidarity, meaning that they perceived Lithuania as more of a taker than a giver when economic or financial aspects were involved. They also argued that countries in general are driven by “self-interest” and should help only if a subsequent benefit is expected or “self-preservation” is at stake:

Meanwhile, about Lithuania, if we have another crisis, I think we should take into account our economic capacity. That is where the togetherness disappears. When it is difficult, everybody [wants to] get out of the puddle dry. [. . .] That’s the reality. [. . .] Each country is fighting for itself. So, Lithuania should, I think, take into account itself and not suffer as it did in the crisis of 2008.

(LTFG3_F6)

Participants in the Lithuanian focus groups did not oppose the idea of conditionality of support in the case of economic crisis. It was perceived that financial support always comes with certain requirements or rules that have to be followed. For example, although lower paid and unemployed participants initially argued against conditionality of financial support, they later came to an agreement that it is naïve not to expect constraints as “the cheese is free, as they say, only in the mousetraps” (LTFG2_M4). Interestingly, participants in the focus group discussions conducted in Lithuania did not pay much attention to the causes of a crisis or deservingness of support.

11.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

There were two common lines of reasoning among Lithuanian participants in regard to EU-level solutions for social issues. First, they pointed out that there *are* programmes and funding at the EU level that can be used to reduce inequalities and tackle unemployment, for example, via education and re-qualification or free movement of labour force. Second, they argued for subsidiarity, in the sense that solutions and responsibilities at a country level should precede EU-level solutions, as simply stated by LTFG3_F6: “I think it’s up to each member state.” However, young adults also agreed that some kind of umbrella funding or guidance at the EU

level would be good, so that, based on them, countries could further assess their needs, issues, and solutions:

But it seems to me, at first sight, that simply the more money the better. And it would be good that [. . .] the European Union has some kind of basic, minimum [. . .] fund that it gives to a country [. . .] so that it can achieve some basic things, like a minimum wage of some percentage of the average wage. [. . .] And then, as [LTFG3_F6] said, at the national level it could be looked at how to do it for the country itself – according to its own needs and its own resources and all the other things.

(LTFG3_M1)

At the same time, participants hinted to inequality and unfairness in the current EU arrangements. While the high skilled participants initially agreed that there is cohesion in the EU, they also highlighted perceived gaps between countries: “Well, poverty. For a German there is one kind of poverty, for us it’s another kind of poverty. [. . .] It’s not [clear] until we have [a common understanding of poverty]. Until then, we can’t talk about that matter” (LTFG1_M2). Lower paid and unemployed participants observed varied deficiencies in the current workings of the EU. On the one hand, they hinted that a common fund or programme to reduce inequality could make a difference. On the other hand, these participants noted how current common regulations, according to their perception, are not fair in regard to Lithuania (and, presumably, other smaller, weaker member states), for example, subsidies and regulations related to agriculture:

It [the EU] sets the conditions of what we have to grow. [. . .] If you take European countries, [Lithuania] probably was among the top three in terms of strength in agriculture. Now we are being told the conditions what we have to grow. So, if we want to stand strongly on our feet and be strong, we must not be told what to grow. We are now practically growing cereal crops, nothing else. Livestock farming has totally collapsed in our country.

(LTFG2_M5)

Though lower paid and unemployed participants acknowledged that there was support from the EU, they also felt that it did not efficiently trickle down to ordinary people. For example, a participant (LTFG2_F1) claimed that applying for EU funding for entrepreneurial projects lacked transparency and might be corrupt in Lithuania.

When discussing common EU solutions for the unemployment issue, high skilled participants had reservations about solidarity in solving it. They recognised that the reasons for unemployment can differ across countries and thus solutions should diverge accordingly. Lower paid and unemployed participants referred to freedom of movement in relation to the issue of unemployment. However, if high skilled participants framed it as a solution for unemployment, lower paid and unemployed participants also saw it as a source of supplying a cheaper labour force for the richer EU member states. Yet, once again, the emphasis was not on

the common EU strategy to tackle unemployment but rather on perceived income and retirement benefit gaps between Lithuania and other EU member states, which were seen as the key issues to be solved. Implicitly, such disparities were seen as unfair: “I understand, there can be a difference of 20, ok, 30 per cent between the stronger and weaker countries in the European Union. But here we have 100 and 200 per cent differences in salaries” (LTFG2_M5). Moreover, Lithuanian participants had reservations about Lithuania’s solidarity in helping to solve unemployment in another EU country, repeating the image of Lithuania as a “country in need”: “I think yes, it [Lithuania] should help. [. . .] But let’s look at the reality. It wouldn’t be us who would be really helping somebody, because it would probably be us they would be helping” (LTFG3_M3).

11.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions conducted in Lithuania

The review of previous research and analysis of empirical data depict Lithuania as a case of solid “EU enthusiasm.” The results of the focus group discussions supported the finding of an overall positive attitude towards the EU, as observed in surveys. Across the three focus group discussions, it was commonly agreed that EU membership was beneficial for Lithuania and assured its development (political, economic, social), which would otherwise have been slower and less advanced.

While Lithuania’s membership or future in the EU was not called into question by any of the focus groups, in some regards, the general attitude of participants in the high skilled and the young adults group diverged from the statements of the group of lower paid and unemployed participants. The former focused on the benefits of EU membership and held a disposition of “active agency”, that is, the EU having contributed to the development of Lithuania and further providing opportunities and support; therefore, it is up to a country or an individual to use those opportunities. The feeling of cohesion and equality of status compared to other EU countries was stronger in these two groups as well. Participants in the lower paid and unemployed group were more sceptical about the scope of benefits; they were instead focusing on a relative feeling of inferiority towards the EU, both of Lithuania as a country and at the individual level. Though high skilled participants occasionally hinted at inequalities between the member states and potential domination of larger (richer) EU members, that perception was more prominent throughout the discussion in the lower paid and unemployed group. If high skilled and young adults perceived EU membership as an “opportunity”, “progress”, or “positive change”, lower paid and unemployed participants repeatedly focused on “pressure”, “restrictions” and the image of the EU as overriding national interests or needs. Nevertheless, participants in all three groups called for more convergence between the EU members states, primarily in economic and social spheres of development.

Interestingly, participants of the focus group discussions conducted in Lithuanian made analogies between the European Union and the Soviet Union both being unions of a big group of countries. However, for the participants in the high skilled and in the young adults’ group, the perceived similarity ended there. Participants in the lower paid and unemployed group also suggested that the functioning of the EU

might resemble the one of the Soviet Union in the form of “oppressive” obligations that member states have to comply with.

The focus group discussions conducted in Lithuania supported the observation (Vitkus 2016) that positive attitudes of Lithuanians towards the EU are foremost bound to the instrumental side of the membership, whereas in terms of the transfer of cultural values, it can even be perceived as a threat. All three groups referred to challenges experienced by a “traditional” Lithuanian society when confronted with EU induced changes, for example, in regard to gender equality or LGBTQ+ rights.

At the level of intentions, participants of the Lithuanian focus group discussions did not question commitment to transnational solidarity; whatever the issue or crisis, the general consensus was that the EU or member states have to provide help (either because due to values of common humanity, in expectation of reciprocity, or because all states are mutually tied in the EU). However, at the level of action, nuances emerged. In case of natural disaster, solidarity was characterised as self-evident obligation, transcending the boundaries of the EU. Though Lithuania might have restricted capacities in some regards, a common approach was that “one has to help with whatever they can.” In case of an economic crisis, Lithuania was immediately perceived as “small and poor” and thus “not able” to be in the position of the helping side. Lithuanian participants were more concerned with the country’s (limited) ability to contribute to solidarity in case of financial crisis rather than pondering about the causes of the crisis or attributing fault to a country in trouble. In line with the survey data, the “syndrome of a small country” was present both as an excuse to refrain from solidarity and as a feeling of unfair prioritisation of interests of bigger, stronger members of the EU and silencing smaller member states.

Concerning social inequality and unemployment, responsibility was seen to lie chiefly with the individual countries, perceiving the EU as a source of guidance and funding but ultimately leaving the decisions and solutions for the member states. Nevertheless, Lithuanian participants also consistently expressed reliance on the EU’s preparedness to tackle common issues believing that there already are European-level mechanisms in place to deal with emerging crises and to ensure at least a basic level of solidarity in the European community.

While there were no doubts expressed about the future of Lithuania in the EU, the assessment of Lithuania’s current and future development within the EU slightly diverged between the groups. Participants in the lower paid and unemployed group felt much more strongly that Lithuania was still lagging behind (the older) members of the EU, whereas participants in the high skilled and young adult groups saw the country catching up quickly. Furthermore, participants in these two groups foresaw a shift of Lithuania’s position from a net recipient to a net payer. Yet, in such a constellation, one should be aware of what one participant of the high skilled group emphasised (as quoted earlier; in Section 11.3.1): “A Lithuanian is [. . .] a bit of a scrooge!” It could imply that under such conditions Lithuania will not be generous but will be keen on frugality – as Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden were during the negotiations on the Medium-term Financial Perspective 2021–2027, who proudly called themselves in this context the “frugal four” (Heinelt and Münch 2022).

12 Slovakia

“Why should we save their ass, when it’s their own fault?”

Jan Kotýnek Krotký

The Slovak Republic (Slovakia) is a country where growing criticism and disillusionment with developments in the European Union (EU) and the West has been recently observed. Slovakia, together with the Czech Republic (Czechia), Poland and Hungary, is part of the Visegrád Group (V4), which was established in 1991 in the Hungarian town called Visegrád, where presidents of Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary agreed to meet on a regular basis. The common interest was EU accession and mutual trade liberalisation (Koß and Séville 2020). However, as Nič (2016) argues, the V4 hardly manages to find a united political position, while multiple disruptions have been observed among the countries. Nevertheless, this cooperation has been revived in recent years, especially with regard to the so-called EU migration crisis (Koß and Séville 2020; Nič 2016). Thus, Slovakia’s post-communist development, geographical location and linkage with the V4 is unique among the selected nine countries. For those reasons, understanding how people perceive cohesion, reciprocity, fairness and solidarity in Slovakia, and how their attitudes differ from other selected countries, may help us outline the biggest obstacles and opportunities of promoting cohesion within the EU.

Slovakia became a member of the EU in 2004 in the “big wave” of Eastern Enlargement. However, the accession was much more problematic than in the case of other V4 countries. Contrary to Czechia, Poland and Hungary, Slovakia was part of the second wave of applicant countries along with Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Bulgaria and Malta, called the “Helsinki group” in 1997. Under Vladimír Mečiar’s government, Slovakia was failing to fulfil the political aspects of the Copenhagen criteria in the sense of instability of democratic institutions, relations between government and opposition and lacking independence of the media and legal systems (Nešpor 2001). The other pre-accession problems raised by the EU were trouble with the functioning market economy, environmental issues (ibid.) and lack of minority protection in the case of Roma people (Vermeersch 2002). The inclusion of Slovakia into the Helsinki group contributed to political change in 1998 since Slovak voters were eager to enter the EU. Upon entering office, Mikuláš Dzurinda’s government made a concerted effort to join the EU together with other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, and this process can be characterised as a “catching-up” policy (Malová and Weiss 2018).

The pre-accession period was seen as an integral part of the necessary transformation process and, thus, not highly politicised. The wider public and the whole political spectrum except the Slovak National Party (SNS) supported joining the EU accession. Slovakia's accession to the EU was preceded by a referendum in May 2003, in which 51.5 per cent of the population participated. The vast majority of voters (93.7 per cent) agreed with the accession. As Auer (2014: 323) argues: "Slovaks remain anxious about their national independence, but have sought to strengthen it by becoming truly European, which was in their eyes equated with being prosperous, democratic and embedded firmly in EU institutions."

The transformation period could be broadly characterised by two slogans: (1) "back to Europe" and (2) "there is no alternative" (Malová and Weiss 2018). The claim "back to Europe" expressed the further development of Central Europe as Slovakia's natural environment, bordered by Western European culture, values and traditions. However, as Malová and Weiss (2018: 275) argue, "the romantic vision of a 'back to Europe', accompanying the fall of state socialism in 1989, was associated mainly with naive notions that we [Czechoslovaks] would quickly and easily gain access to the conveniences of Western consumer society." On the other hand, the claim of "there is no alternative" is one of the explanations for the success of the illiberal and populist trends in CEE, as Krastev and Holmes (2019) argue. These countries may feel disheartened and exhausted after three decades of adaptation to and convergence with the Western countries. Now, they may feel satisfied that not all is working in the West either, and they put themselves in the position of the guardians of "traditional" European values (*ibid.*).

This chapter complements a national case study employing focus groups that has investigated domestic perceptions of "universal solidarity" and "dignity for all" principles. In particular, the study by Kusá (2017) found that "universal solidarity" is problematic to achieve in Slovakia since it clashes with meritocratic and reciprocity principles. Participants argued that the long-term unemployed and Roma citizens must deserve their social benefits by showing willingness to work. Following Kusá's findings, this chapter focuses on the solidarity and its related conceptions in a transnational and comparative perspective, relating it to European integration. The rhetorical question in the title of this chapter indicates a pessimistic tone of our focus groups in Slovakia. However, certain hopes were also expressed, and the EU was perceived as a significant actor for Slovak future. Therefore, this chapter offers a deeper understanding of what lies beneath the question: Why should we save their ass when it's their own fault?

12.1 An overview about the country

12.1.1 The political system

Slovakia is a relatively young democratic country, characterised by scholars as a laboratory of post-communist development and populism (Havlík et al. 2020). It is a parliamentary republic with a multiparty system. The highest legislative body

is the unicameral National Council of the Slovak Republic with 150 members, who are elected by proportional representation in a single nationwide constituency with an electoral threshold of 5 per cent for single parties, 7 per cent for coalitions of two or three parties and 10 per cent for coalitions of four or more parties. A president serves as head of state, is elected directly for a five-year term and has limited power.

Slovakia's democratic transformation was not without difficulties and tensions. After the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993, the first period of independence was marked by the authoritarianism and populism of Vladimír Mečiar and his party called the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). This era, called "Mečiarism", ended in 1998 when Vladimír Mečiar was succeeded by Mikuláš Dzurinda and his broad coalition of five democratic parties. The favourable view of the EU and opposition towards Mečiar were the main connecting elements of this broad coalition, which set Slovakia on a democratic track (Marušiak 2018). Mikuláš Dzurinda built a second government, consisting of four centre-right parties and ruled the country until 2006.

In the 2006 election, the Smer party (Social democrats) won and, for more than a decade, established a hegemonic position in the Slovak party system (Havlík et al. 2020), with its peak in 2012 when the party received more than 44 per cent of the votes, having the majority in National Council and formed a single-party cabinet. In 2014, the hegemony of Smer began to fade. Due to several scandals and corrupt practices, the party lost two presidential elections in a row and experienced the weakening of its position in local and regional elections (Kováčová 2019; Rybář et al. 2014). In February 2018, investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were murdered. The journalist had been working on exposing the corruption that was said to go back to the governing Smer (iRozhlas 2018). Following this, the largest civic protests happened since 1989, with the call for a reconfiguration of the government and pressure on the political elite. As a result, several politicians, including prime minister Robert Fico, resigned (Mrvová and Turček 2018). Thus, the 2020 elections were impacted by this mobilised civic society and its criticism of the establishment linked with Robert Fico and his Smer party (Haughton et al. 2022).

In 2020, the decline of Smer was confirmed when the party obtained less than 20 per cent of the votes. The other parties (Our Slovakia, We Are Family, Ordinary People, For the People, Freedom and Solidarity) that entered the parliament had not existed before 2010, demonstrating the volatility of the country's party system (Havlík et al. 2020). What also marked these elections was the rise of populist parties (Ordinary People, We Are Family, Our Slovakia) "and the fact that populism became the only viable alternative to the previous government" (Havlík et al. 2020: 230). The winning party with anti-corrupt appeal, Ordinary People, created a cabinet with We Are Family, another populist party, Freedom and Solidarity, the liberal right-wing party and with For the People, the centre-right party. However, after several scandals, this coalition government had to be rebuilt, including the transfer of Igor Matovič from prime minister to the position of Minister of Finance and the exit of Freedom and Solidarity from the government, which led to a minority

cabinet. However, Igor Matovič continued to be a source of political controversy, and the minority cabinet was given a vote of no confidence in December 2022. Thus, with Slovakia close to the anticipated elections at the time of writing in late 2022, the polls are showing increasing popularity of former prime minister Robert Fico. The corruption scandals associated with Robert Fico and the populist rhetoric of Igor Matovič contributed to disenchantment with democracy in Slovakia and distrust of politics. Indeed, polls show that no prominent Slovak politician enjoys more trust than distrust from the electorate (iRozhlas 2022).

12.1.2 Core features of population and economy

With around 5.5 million inhabitants, Slovakia is among the least populous EU countries. After independence, Slovakia was initially a country whose residents would migrate abroad for various reasons. However, with access to the EU and the Schengen area, the country has slowly become a country of immigration. Since 2004, when Slovakia joined the EU, the number of foreign residents has increased sevenfold (IOM 2021). In 2020, over two thousand people emigrated, and almost seven thousand people immigrated to Slovakia (Eurostat 2021a, 2021b). Nevertheless, the foreign-born population still represents just 3.6 per cent of the total population, the lowest share among the nine selected countries (Eurostat 2021c). Moreover, these foreigners come predominantly from culturally close countries; the biggest foreign community are Ukrainians (IOM 2021). However, unlike other Visegrád countries, Slovakia has quite a significant ethnic minority, which is composed of Hungarians. In 2020, Hungarians made up approximately 8.2 per cent of the Slovak population (Hrabovská-Francelová 2021). The Hungarian minority was also represented for some time in the political sphere by the Party of the Hungarian Community (SMK) and Most-Híd. These parties were also part of the post-communist governments. Moreover, they supported European integration, and SMK, for example, was crucial in the process of the approval of the Lisbon treaty (Malová and Weiss 2018). However, in the last parliamentary elections, no Hungarian minority party surpassed the electoral threshold.

Until the pandemic beleaguered the European economy, Slovakia had adhered to the 60 per cent debt limit applicable to the members of the Eurozone, amounting to 48.1 per cent in 2019. In 2021, the general government gross debt increased to 63.1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) (IMF 2021). In 2019, Slovakia's GDP amounted to €94 billion, indicating a GDP per capita of about €15,960 (Eurostat 2021d, 2021e). Slovakia's GDP per capita thus is far below the EU average, which amounts to €28,060. However, there is stable economic growth in Slovakia; compared to 2011, the country's GDP has increased by about 21 per cent in 2021 (Eurostat 2021d, 2021e).

Like other Visegrád countries, Slovakia developed an open economy, with Germany being the most important trading partner for both exports and imports. In 2021, Slovakia's foreign trade resulted in a negative balance of €36.6 million. However, the year 2021, along with 2019, was an exception as Slovakia had a positive foreign trade balance in the previous years and in 2020, too (Eurostat 2021f).

The main trading goods are vehicles, machinery and equipment. Slovakia is tied to the EU internal market; export to the EU consists of 80 per cent, and import amounts to 64 per cent in 2021. The main destinations of exports are Germany, Czechia, Poland, Hungary and France, and the main sources of imports are Germany, Czechia, China and Russia (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2022). The relatively low unemployment rate in Slovakia is often seen in connection with the open market (see below): Slovakia has the fourth-lowest unemployment rate (6.8 per cent) among the selected countries; only the Netherlands, Germany and Portugal had less unemployment in 2021. For comparison, unemployment in Slovakia was still at 13.5 per cent in 2011 (Eurostat 2021g).

12.2 Slovakia and European integration

Accession to the EU was an important event for the transformation of Slovakia and its economy. Integration into the common market enabled a stable and dynamic development of the Slovak economy, including the inflow of foreign investment (Šikula 2018). As Eurobarometer data shows, the free movement of people, goods and services within the EU is viewed as the most positive outcome of the accession. This element of EU membership is perceived more positively in Slovakia than on average across the whole EU (Annex 3). Nevertheless, heavy reliance on the single European market and the ability to attract foreign investors “might explain rather negative views on the potential harmonisation of tax policies (resisting especially any moves on the harmonisation of corporate taxes), or deeper integration in social policies” (Geist 2018: 25). Moreover, Slovakia is among the countries that receive more from the EU budget than they contribute. Under the last Multi-annual Financial Framework of the EU (2014–2020), Slovakia contributed about €5.5 billion euros and received more than €17 billion, which results in a surplus of about €11.5 billion (European Commission n.d.). Thus, for the economy, Slovakia’s membership in the EU is undoubtedly beneficial.

Slovakia’s ejection from the first wave of the candidate countries in 1997 “resulted in a stigma that fostered Slovakia’s wish not to be relegated to the status of an outsider again” (Pechova 2012: 786). In an effort to avoid backsliding into the political and economic isolation experienced under Mečiar’s government, the Slovaks aimed to be at the very core of the EU. Therefore, Slovakia, contrary to the other countries of the V4, accepted the common currency in 2009. Both main actors, the Slovak National Bank and the Slovak government, rationalised accession to the Eurozone by the “belief that the Slovak economy could only fully exploit the benefits of monetary integration once inside the Eurozone area” (Pechova 2012: 786). Slovaks’ perception of the Euro is indeed positive, as 78 per cent of Slovak respondents support a European economic and monetary union with one single currency, which is above the EU average (Annex 1).

Whereas a favourable position towards the EU connected all democratic parties in the late 1990s, in the time of the financial crisis (i.e. global financial crisis and the European financial crisis), the question of EU membership became controversial among democratic, mainly right-wing parties. The pro-EU centre-right

government led by Iveta Radičová, which took office in 2010, cancelled the bilateral loans to Greece that were agreed upon by the former leftist government of Robert Fico. Ivan Mikloš, minister of finances of the centre-right government, argued: “I do not consider it solidarity if it is solidarity between the poor and the rich, of the responsible with the irresponsible, or of taxpayers with bank owners and managers” (Rettman 2010). In short, in public debates it was questioned why Slovaks should be solidary with Greeks, who were deemed to have behaved irresponsibly, whereas Slovaks underwent hard economic reforms to gain access to the Eurozone (Malová and Weiss 2018). Nevertheless, Radičová’s government agreed to the temporary financial stability mechanism called the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), also known as “Euroval”, to tackle the sovereign debt crisis. The Slovakian contribution to the EFSF was €4.37 billion, mainly in the form of guarantees. However, the Eurogroup summit in March 2011 agreed to increase the EFSF capacity from €440 billion to €779 billion and the Slovak contribution increased to €7.7 billion. Consequently, the free-market-oriented party Freedom and Solidarity withdrew its support for the EFSF, and the centre-right government lost a vote of confidence and fell. Yet, the increase of the EFSF was approved in cooperation with Robert Fico, leader of the opposition party Smer, in exchange for an early election to be held early the following year (Halas 2018), in which Fico became prime minister.

Thus, the European debt crisis changed political leadership and influenced the future political and democratic development of Slovakia. As Auer (2014: 331) argues:

Slovaks can no longer be confident in strengthening their post-communist democracy through its engagement with Europe. The pressure to demonstrate more “transnational solidarity” with nations far richer than themselves contributed to Slovakia being ruled by a populist [Robert Fico], who simply proved more compliant with the EU demands rather than his pro-western and significantly more liberally minded predecessors.

One of the reasons might be that Fico wants to “shift the political discourse in Slovakia from domestic problems (like corruption, problems with the education system, etc.) to a field that he can dominate more easily” (Geist 2018: 25). However, Smer underwent shifts towards conservative values and Euroscepticism after 2016 with migration “crisis” and the political upheaval triggered by the murder of Ján Kuciak (Marušiak 2021).

Even though Slovakia was neither a target nor a transit country, political elites and media adopted “anti-immigrant” and securitised discourses that targeted mainly Muslims (Kissová 2018; Zvada 2018). The Slovak government and other CEE countries rejected so-called refugee quotas and were accused of non-solidarity with migrants and the Mediterranean states (E15.cz 2016; Lidovky 2015). Robert Fico argued in this context that “dictates” coming from Brussels violated national sovereignty (Bauerová 2018). Slovakia and Hungary objected to the adoption of the redistribution mechanism in the European Council and referred such actions to the European Court of Justice (ECJ). However, the ECJ dismissed in their entirety

the claims brought by Slovakia and Hungary (Zachová 2017). As scholars (Bauerová 2018; Braun 2020) argue, the migration “crisis” and decision on mandatory relocation quotas strengthened the ties within the V4, and these states were “interpreted by Western European states and EU institutions as problematic actors” (Bauerová 2018: 115). However, the opposition against the “quotas” was not the only common interest of the V4. The V4 argued for the maintenance of free movement under the Schengen acquis (Koß and Séville 2020), and Slovakia was willing to help, if only on voluntary basis (Bauerová 2018).

Although Smer was defeated in the elections of 2020, in terms of attitudes towards European integration, the elections did not bring positive results. In the 2020–2023 electoral period, out of six parties, only For the People clearly supported European integration (Havlík et al. 2020). Eurobarometer data partly confirms the increasing Euroscepticism in Slovakia (Annex 1). For instance, trust towards the EU and European Parliament (EP) was at 43 per cent, which is below the EU average in Winter 2021–2022. In addition to this, just 45 per cent of Slovak respondents thought that their voices count in the EU and just 47 per cent were satisfied with EU democracy, which is after Greece the second lowest result among the selected countries. Also, the EU’s image and the future of the EU were perceived much more critically than elsewhere (apart from Greece). Moreover, despite the fact that European identity is much more strongly felt in Slovakia than in other EU member states (Annex 1), the turnout in European elections in Slovakia is regularly one of the lowest in the EU (Annex 4). However, in comparison to trust in Slovakia’s national institutions, the cited results are still rather positive. For instance, just 24 per cent of Slovak respondents tended to trust the national government and only 23 per cent tended to trust in the national parliament in 2021 (Eurobarometer 2021a). Thus, the negative picture of the EU, satisfaction with EU democracy and turnout in European elections might, indeed, be impacted by the political environment in Slovakia.

12.3 Understandings of fairness, reciprocity and solidarity

12.3.1 Findings from the focus group discussions on conceptions of the EU

The participants in all three Slovak focus groups declared rather positive attitudes towards the EU. In general, participants agreed on the free movement of people, goods and services within the EU as biggest achievement of the EU, which corresponds with the Eurobarometer results (see Annex 3). However, the arguments were very diverse, especially related to freedom, the rule of law or economic prosperity (stimulated through EU funds). Besides that, the issue of cohesion was touched upon. Participants used the terms “community”, “cooperation” or “family” in this context. For instance, one participant from the high skilled group referred to cohesion in social policy:

For me it is a community of countries, just the size is quite different. When it’s a [. . .] community of several countries, then [there is] mutual support,

cooperation, help, and actually some social security [through] cooperation in the social field.

(SKFG1_F5)

Similarly, a participant from the group of lower paid and unemployed people mentioned “togetherness” with an emphasis on economic policy: “That they are actually states that want to create something together, like create some kind of entity that will help them to help each other economic-security-wise and economically” (SKFG2_F1). A participant from the young adult group saw the EU as a “family”:

And the last thing is maybe a little bit simple, but it is the word family, because I feel that actually all those countries that make up that European Union are maybe a kind of a community or something like that, and they are actually kind of dependent on each other and they are actually able to help each other out there and actually, as the European Union is also aiming to create maybe some kind of equality between those countries, so that there are not some big differences.

(SKFG3_F3)

All of the aforementioned statements, regardless of the policy area, are interlinked by the notion of reciprocity. The EU in the participants’ eyes constitutes a community of countries which mutually “help each other.”

However, reducing the disparities is not fully working in the EU, as was elaborated in the group of lower paid and unemployed participants. For example, an employee of a non-governmental organisation talked about how the EU actually does not reduce differences between Eastern and Western Europe:

[T]he EU declares the projects [Erasmus+] should mostly reduce the parity or simply reduce the difference between the West and the East, right, between the old countries and the newly acceded countries. So, those rules are loosely reflected in the [EU] projects. It means that if I have a project with six organisations from six countries, I simply get paid significantly less for the same job in Slovakia than the same person gets in Italy. So, this is not quite fair in my opinion.

(SKFG2_F3)

According to this participant, the EU itself gives within its funded projects (such as Erasmus+) higher salaries to those employees coming from high-income countries, which was considered unfair. From the perspective of these participants, it would create a hierarchy of salaries with Western employees at the top. In other words, participants argued for equal pay for equal work across the EU countries. The same occurred in the high skilled group where it was stated: “I hope [. . .] that one day there will be equal pay for equal work everywhere. That a baker in Snina [a town in eastern Slovakia] gets the same money as a baker in Cologne for his work” (by SKFG1_M2).

Similarly, it was argued that the EU funds, which should reduce social and regional disparities, do not yield sufficient results. Yet, for Slovakia, this was not perceived as a failure of the EU but rather a national issue. A participant from the high skilled group compared the handling of EU funds in Slovakia with tribal African societies where “tribal chiefs who [. . .] get some foreign support, whether in the form of food, medicine or whatever, take it as if it is their business” (SKFG1_M2). Here, the participant implied that the EU funds are exploited by the political elites (tribal chiefs) in Slovakia. The misuse of EU funds is perceived as a missed opportunity, as concluded by one participant: “We just simply have not made it” (SKFG1_M2).

In addition to the critique of EU funds and how they are used in Slovakia, complaints about insufficient “control” of EU funds were prominent in all three focus groups, as argued, for example, by a participant from the group of lower paid and unemployed people:

I also do not like the weak controls on the flow of EU funds, because it is public knowledge that EU funds are being tunnelled [financial fraud] all the time, certainly to a greater extent in some countries. So, I would certainly tighten up the controls.

(SKFG2_M2)

A participant from the group of young adults claimed:

[T]he EU should be able to look more at the problem of corruption. It seems to me that it is a terrible thing that, if we as a country cannot sort it out, it is a great pity that some “bigger power” [i.e. the EU and particularly agencies of the Commission] cannot actually come in to look after it.

(SKFG3_F3)

The call for enhanced control from the supranational authority contrasts with the Eurosceptic discourse, criticising the “dictates” coming from the EU (cf. Bauerová 2018). However, it also illustrates how the conditionality argument relates to trust and why Slovak citizens may trust EU institutions more than national ones (Eurobarometer 2021a).

Despite prevailing positive tone towards the EU, and a tendency to hold national elites responsible for the problems in Slovakia, the young adults articulated concerns rooted in the principle of subsidiarity. For instance, one of them pointed out that “states lose that kind of sovereignty and sometimes [. . .] the European Union tries many times to make decisions for other states and basically [. . .] it can increase the bureaucracy” (SKFG3_M4). Similarly, another expressed that the EU “is trying to address cultural and ethical issues for nation states [and that] should remain explicitly [. . .] within the competence of nation states” (SKFG3_M2). According to this participant, the EU should only “step in” in cases of violations of “basic human rights.” This highlights an intriguing contrast: While the EU is perceived as a watchdog of Slovak elites and an ally in combatting corruption, its

potential interference in cultural and internal policies is viewed negatively and is seen as a case where the principle of subsidiarity should apply.

12.3.2 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster

Concerning the natural disaster and financial crisis scenarios, there was an interesting disparity among the responses from the participants. In the case of natural disaster, all participants were willing to help as an expression of acting in solidarity, which corresponds to the Eurobarometer (2018) data. Reciprocity was also very often mentioned in such a case in the sense of mutual help – as expressed in the following quote by a participant: “I would hope or even believe that if I help another member state, that they would actually [. . .] remember that and then they would give us the help back” (SKFG3_M5). However, this participant was not really sure about it and continued by saying: “Well, I rather hope and believe, not that I expect it, because you never know” (SKFG3_M5).

In the high skilled group, there was an intense discussion relating to the question of contribution capabilities in the response to a natural disaster in another EU country. On the one hand, one participant emphasised differences between contributors and beneficiaries among the EU membership. According to her, more effort should be done by the “bigger contributors” as a gesture “of some kind of gratitude or something like that country is seen to be trying to harmonize its rules and basically cooperate with other member countries” (SKFG1_F1). On the other hand, not all participants agreed with such an approach and, instead, stressed practical considerations in such situations:

I personally don't think it's clear-cut whether somebody should do more or not, I guess I wouldn't relate it to who gets how much and who takes how much, but rather I think the perspective should be different, it should be: what kind of disaster it is and basically which of those countries has, let's say, better developed those emergency services.

(SKFG1_F5)

Although participants in all three Slovak focus groups mentioned that in the case of natural disaster they would feel responsibility to help, many emphasised the need for conditionality. As stated by SKFG1_F1, the help is provided “as long as they contribute to the European Union, as well as everybody else.” A critical voice was also expressed in the lower paid and unemployed group by a participant who reflexively argued within this scenario that the solidarity often depends on whether the country/people who ask for help come from the EU or culturally close countries, citing the example of how Slovakia did not show solidarity with refugees from Middle East:

I think there will be more of a debate here that as long as they are European Union countries, it is sort of okay, but if they are not European Union

countries, the debate stops being a bit okay. Right, because it can also involve people from Afghanistan and refugees from Syria, and we behaved very bad in these situations. We argue that we are a Christian country, but this has not been a Christian thing that we have done at all. So, I guess it makes a difference to whom we help and on what occasion we help. Whether it should be the same for every aid? Yes, in my opinion, because it is still humanitarian aid, but whether it is reality, it seems not.

(SKFG2_F3)

Although the participant did not think that solidarity should be conditional and dependent on different factors and scenarios, the perceived reality appears to be different in Slovakia according to SKFG2_F3. The next sections further show how solidarity is perceived and understood in the two following scenarios.

12.3.3 Findings from the focus group discussions about solidarity in the case of a financial crisis

Reciprocity was similarly very important in the discussion about a financial or economic crisis, as expressed by SKFG2_F1: “We would certainly like them [other EU member states] to help us, just like we helped Greece, we would actually expect that help from other countries as well.” It is evident from further statements that the responses of participants in all three groups were strongly based on the historical experience with the Eurozone debt crisis in 2011, its causes and consequences.

So, we have experienced it when we contributed to “Euroval”, in 2012 the government of Iveta Radičová fell, then there were several electoral periods when Smer governed after this one, after the fall of this government. They even governed alone; they didn’t even have to form a coalition. We have experience of that. By being in that – in the Eurozone, that is, the monetary union – we contributed more than the Czechs, who were not so affected. So, there was definitely help from Slovakia. I think it will be again in the future, if there is such a need.

(SKFG1_M2)

Despite “12 unforgettable years of bad times” (SKFG1_F1) governed by Robert Fico and his party Smer, which followed after the approval of the EFSF, participants promised that Slovakia would be solidary on similar occasions in the future.

However, there was a tentative consensus among the participants in all three groups that a country, badly affected by an economic crisis, is ultimately deserving of support – as argued by SKFG1_F5 in respect to the crisis in Greece: “[This] was not a crisis caused by the Eurozone [. . .], but just because there were actually a number of mistakes [made by Greek governments] and maybe even disregard of some European rules.” When asked what assistance should be expected if such

a crisis were to affect their own country, the same participant emphasised: “The question is whether it will be an economic crisis caused by economic factors or just by the way our government is functioning, the decisions that are being taken and the way we are functioning in general.” Another participant (SKFG1_M7) added:

I [am of] the opinion that it’s not always the fault of an outside influence, it’s often the fault of the politicians’ decisions, bad ones. And [. . .] why should we save [. . .] their ass, when it’s their own fault?

A participant of the group of young adults (SKFG3_M2) emphasised with reference to the Greek bailout:

I think it is very important to [. . .] assess the situation, how much the country actually needs [. . .] and how high the degree of self-inflicted guilt actually is.” And the same person added: “I think the state should certainly deserve the aid.

To summarise the above, participants from all three groups agreed that financial assistance should be subject to a set of provisos, and any country wishing to receive assistance must fulfil the conditions and deserve the help. What is more important, Slovakia would not be an exception in this case as noted by SKFG3_F1: “If it was caused by the latest events in Slovakia now, I wouldn’t give us the aid, and if I did, and that goes for those other countries as well, there would be conditions.” A similar self-critical attitude was observed in the focus groups conducted in Finland (see Chapter 4). As one of the prerequisites for the help, participants put the example of the level of corruption in the country as stated in the following dialogue:

SKFG2_F3: “I wouldn’t be surprised if other countries were a bit more reticent about helping countries that have an awful lot of corruption.”

Moderator: “Including Slovakia?”

SKFG2_F3: “Yes, I think so.”

However, some participants argued (like SKFG2_F4) that negative effects of conditionality should not affect the “ordinary people” who are not responsible for an economic crisis, but the national elite bearing ultimate responsibility for it. That would be fairer. To streamline the statements of the participants on this issue: solidarity yes, but only if external factors cause the need for help.

12.3.4 Findings from the focus group discussions about EU response to social disparities

The last scenario about the levelling of disparities in EU member states elicited complex responses from the participants, with the principle of subsidiarity at the

forefront. However, it was argued that, in principle, social policy should be a task of member states first – as made clear in the following statement:

This should be solved by each state, it should be solved by Slovakia independently, but simply if the state itself cannot solve it or simply does not want to solve it, then in my opinion [. . .] the EU should step in, which would set some conditions. If the European Union can simply dictate the conditions that we simply have to, I do not know, to shut down more coal-fired power plants and so on, then it could also simply order to make the equality more equal.

(SKFG2_F5)

Again, as mentioned earlier, the “dictate” from the EU is not criticised as could be expected but rather welcomed and understood as a necessary action to reduce inequalities.

The notion of subsidiarity in this scenario was also expressed in the young adult group by a participant who argued that the responsibility for levelling social disparities “should probably be borne by the individual states” (SKFG3_M2). Moreover, participants argued that there were already tools to tackle these inequalities, but the blame fell on Slovakia for not being able to use these tools more efficiently: “It is a bit up to us how we can use them [EU funds] in Slovakia and how we can use them for the disadvantaged groups in Slovakia, but I think that the EU gives us the funds for that” (SKFG1_F3).

Similarly, reference to the subsidiarity principle was striking in the case of unemployment. Here, a centralised pan-European system was deemed questionable:

I cannot imagine how at the level of the European Union, let’s say from Brussels, unemployment would be solved in Rimavská Sobota or Poltár, where it is the local companies that know what employees need and who they lack. As far as I know, there are regional career centres and regional centres for dealing with unemployment . . .

(SKFG1_F6)

Instead, participants argued that unemployment could be solved through the mobility of labour within the EU – a stance similarly purported by many in the group discussions conducted in Latvia and Lithuania (see Chapters 10 and 11). However, this was problematised in the lower paid and unemployed group, since not all unemployed are able to move due to age and family ties.

Moreover, regarding the question whether Slovakia should help a country with high unemployment, the argument “Slovakia first” was dominant due to Slovakia’s limited capacity to help – as expressed by the following statement: “I am of the opinion that if we have a problem ourselves, how can we help another country that has the same problem if we can’t solve it ourselves” (SKFG3_M5). Particularly in the lower paid and unemployed group, the following opinion was widespread: “we are a small country and basically, we don’t even have [sources and money] for

ourselves. There are bigger and richer countries that could do it, I think. Germany, France, for example” (SKFG2_F4).

12.3.5 Key findings from the focus group discussions in Slovakia

This chapter introduces in the beginning the idea of “back to Europe”, which was crucial for Slovakia’s journey in the post-communist period. The results from the focus group discussions help us to understand how this idea lives on. Slovakia’s transition from its communist past within Czechoslovakia to becoming an independent state and joining the EU was not easy, and it affected the current understandings of solidarity, fairness and reciprocity in Slovak society. Although in some policy fields (e.g. monetary), Slovakia is more Europeanised than other CEE countries, or even some Western countries, Slovak citizens still have a feeling that Slovakia is not “rich”, “developed” and “big” enough to help another country in crucial challenges, such as unemployment. This results in externalisation of responsibilities to “bigger” member states, such as Germany or France. Thus, Slovakia still needs to take some steps to become fully “back in Europe”, with the EU portrayed as an accompanying guard on this journey, according to focus group participants.

Although our aim in the focus groups was to discuss solidarity in the EU and among member states, the participants perceived these issues in relation to their national problems, which demonstrates a lack of European public sphere (see Koozmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2014; Trenz 2004). The national stance, respectively the national political elites, was criticised in most instances. In this regard, participants often adopted a pessimistic tone in the discussions. Such a pervasive attitude may also negatively influence the perception of the EU and increase Euro-scepticism. The critical voices in regard to the EU appeared unexpectedly in the group of young adults, who worried about potential loss of national sovereignty and the imposition of cultural values.

Despite this, a core finding from all three focus group discussions is that the EU is seen as beneficial for the development of the country because the EU is providing not only economic stability but also a lot of financial support. However, EU funds are also placed in the context of growing corruption in Slovakia. The participants of the focus group discussions blamed the national elites for corruption and have hope that the EU could help to solve this problem. Contrary to the Eurosceptic voices (see Bauerová 2018), the participants welcome more control from the EU. Nevertheless, in the scenario of dealing with social disparities, Europeanisation was not the preferred option. The participants argued for subsidiarity in the field of social policy, which might be explained by the heavy reliance on the single European market, which brings job opportunities to Slovakia and allows Slovak citizens to work abroad (see Geist 2018). The open labour market was seen as the most effective, and only sporadically questioned, solution. It emphasizes the opportunity to work which aligns more closely with meritocratic and reciprocal principles rather than addressing unemployment through social benefits (see Kusá 2017).

Similarly, as in other focus groups from the selected countries, the help in the case of natural crisis scenario was taken for granted, and in both, natural and

economic crisis scenarios, the claim for reciprocity resonated. In Slovakia, the biggest difference between financial crisis and natural disaster scenarios was in the perception of who bears responsibility for the crisis. Solidarity in a natural disaster case is not questioned since there are always external roots of the crisis, which countries very often cannot control. In the case of financial crisis, the culprits can be traced, as references by participants to the experience with the Greek bailout show. Furthermore, attaching conditions to help is seen as a necessary prerequisite which explains why the resistance to solidary actions in this scenario is higher than in the case of natural disasters.

Despite the criticism of the EU's proposed solution to the European debt and migration crisis, Slovakia's official position emphasises the necessity

to show solidarity within the EU, but also beyond, towards our partners in Africa, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. The entire EU is based on the principle of solidarity, and the Slovak Republic wants to be part of the system of aid and solidarity.

(Mokrá and Figulová 2022: 96–97)

This outlook expressed by the Slovak State Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was likewise present in our focus groups. However, it remains an open question whether public support for the EU and calls for solidarity will be the same once Slovakia becomes a net contributor to the EU budget.

13 Solidarity in the European Union

Results of comparative analysis of the focus group discussions

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In this chapter, we present a comparative analysis of the 27 focus group discussions. Section 13.1 contains some general observations on the conceptions of *solidarity* that we identified within the corpus, covering both calls for unidirectional support and expectations of reciprocity (see Chapter 3 and Annex 5 for details about the analytical approach). Having laid the groundwork for analysis, we will turn in Section 13.2 to the reasons that participants gave to underpin their statements about solidarity. Section 13.3 explains how the scenarios that we presented to the focus group participants impacted the discussions. Section 13.4 will then wrap up the analysis.

In all of the sections, we discuss interpretations of qualitative data, showcasing the key patterns with quantitative data, where most relevant. Concerning countries, quantitative data is only presented if the analysis shows considerable variance and can be meaningfully interpreted with qualitative findings. We do not discuss sociodemographic groups extensively, because comparative analysis did not reveal striking differences.

13.1 General observations about solidarity and its conceptions

Overall, our focus group discussions showed that participants generally supported the idea of solidarity among European Union (EU) member states and fellow citizens. Participants perceived it as an inherent feature of the EU, which they imagined both as an institutional structure and as a political community of states. The following quotations document these two aspects.

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

(LTFG2_F3)

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

(DEFG1_M1)

Although participants recognised unidirectional support and reciprocity as cohesive elements of the EU community, they also reflected about fragility and deficits of solidarity in the EU and among member states. Discontent with the balance of payments in the EU was perceived as a danger to the future of the union, thus strengthening political forces that push for exit. The following quotation illustrates this line of reasoning:

Yes, I think it is an issue that clearly affects the future of the European Union, because if there is discontent within a country, and there can be in all countries [. . .] then we will see what was mentioned before, the Brexit. I mean, we are growing, but we don't want others to leave. And it would be good to say: "Well, don't feel that you are always giving and you are not getting anything in return." In other words, there should be a little more harmony, to say "I am compensated for being in the European Union", right?

(ESFG1_F5)

Before moving further, it is important to note that participants largely provided country-centred perceptions and reasoned statements. The country's history, its path to EU membership, the perceived position in the EU as well as national or even the local social, political or economic conditions played a significant role in participants' reasoning and, in particular, storylines.

According to participants' understanding, potential of, or barriers to, solidarity and integration in the EU are closely linked to attributed roles, both in how they see their own country's position and/or role in the EU and in what images they have of other member states. The results showed clearly divergent perceptions along the lines of wealth, size, political and economic power, financial contribution to the EU and even cultural characteristics. Net contributors versus net receivers, rich versus poor, big versus small, powerful and influential versus insignificant, productive versus unproductive countries, just to name a few, are the perceived divisions that underpinned participants' perspectives on support and understanding of reciprocity and, importantly, fairness in the EU.

Additionally, participants depicted regional clusters of countries and this affected their reasoning about cross-country and EU-level solidarity. At times, regional solidarity was discussed in rather pragmatic terms, that is, based on geographic position and distance between countries. Other clustering pointed to historical or cultural ties of neighbourhood. For example, the Nordic countries were called upon to help each other because they were close and have historical links. However, regional divisions also were considered as counter to European solidarity. Across the focus groups, distinctions were made between North and South or East and West, understood as regions having different cultural, social, economic and political dispositions and consequentially, different status at the EU. There are regional clusters that "carry the burden" and other clusters that "are the burden", as perceived by the participants.

Trust also played an important role in the participants' reasoning about solidarity. Participants generally seemed to acknowledge the importance of trust in

statement followed by reasoning about practicability and need. Some reasoned statements clearly concentrated around a certain context:

- *availability/ability* and *obligation* were more important when discussing natural disasters,
- *conditionality* in a financial crisis, and
- *subsidiarity* in discussing social disparities and how to overcome or reduce them.

It is important to note that, as a deeper qualitative analysis reveals, the same reasoned statement may be used to argue for or against solidary action, depending on circumstances, as we will discuss later in the chapter. Therefore, the sheer quantity does not mean that the statement always followed the same line of reasoning. Likewise, even when a statement seemed to be similarly distributed or relevant in country discussions, qualitative analysis revealed country-specific nuances in lines of reasoning, as it will be shown in the following sections.

13.2.1 *Availability and ability*

Reasoned statements about availability and ability are concerned with the resources needed to help others across borders. It was a prevailing consideration in the majority of the country discussions. We detected two distinct lines of reasoning (as illustrated by the two snippets below) when participants resorted to such statements: pro-solidarity, claiming that one must help with whatever one can and whatever is available; and restrained solidarity, doubting if one can help at all or indeed has the required resources available.

That is from country to country, everybody should do that or help what is in his possibilities. That's clear. It doesn't depend on the money. Depends on the help [laughs] and how you are ready to help. Sometimes small things can make a big difference (DEFG2_M1). Well, I know, that depends also on how rich the country is. And if a country has nothing, well, what should you donate? What should you do then?

(NLFG2_F3)

The most common point of reference when turning to availability and ability arguments was the idea of financial aid, with funds taken from country budgets, individual donations or EU-level funds. Speakers often made the point that smaller, poorer, economically less advanced member states or individuals lacked the financial resources to help others. In such cases, as illustrated by the quotation below, participants tended to suggest other means of aid, such as human resources, technology, knowledge or even moral support as a sign of solidarity.

I think every country gives what it has [. . .]. Certainly, in terms of financial resources Portugal doesn't have so much [. . .]. There are other countries that are richer, aren't there? They can contribute with more financial support. But we have good human resources, for example. There are good technicians who work in crisis situations, psychologists, firefighters, and doctors who could be deployed to these situations, for example.

(PTFG1_F6)

We were able to detect some other common presumptions about the availability of help. For example, the idea of the pooling resources of several countries is better than relying on the help of one single country. In addition, the EU funds and the common EU budget (to which each country contributes) were mentioned regularly, as (to an extent self-evident) prerequisites for the existence of the EU and expectation that the EU should have resources readily available for future crises. Finally, participants considered that when resources are scarce, a country should make sure not to harm itself in the attempt at helping others; otherwise, that country would itself become needy.

13.2.2 Practicability

Statements about practicability pertain to the performance of solidary action from a pragmatic point of view (and not informed by normative concerns such as fairness). When practicability was raised as a reasoned statement, the main concerns were whether the help would be used properly, how rational the suggested measures were and if they would actually lead to a desired outcome (i.e. solving the problem in question). Showing solidarity for its own sake might not be the best and most practical solution, as a number of examples (like in the quotation below) provided by participants showed.

And then it's the same as with fires or natural disasters, I would help. But you also have to be sure that the measures will work. It's very, very difficult to communicate this if you give money and it vanishes, then it just dissipates, then you don't achieve the effects.

(DEFG1_M5)

Although participants in all countries discussed practical aspects of solidarity to some extent, German participants paid particular attention to the issue of practicability (and even more so the high skilled German participants). They primarily were concerned that resources committed in solidarity with others should not go to waste and be used properly to achieve the desired effect. Dutch participants similarly gave more weight to the practicability arguments, yet more in relation to a natural disaster and debating chiefly what kind of support would be most practical (and thus most efficient) in such a situation.

13.2.3 Need

Unlike statements about availability or practicability, those statements coded as need addressed the conditions on the recipient's side of the solidarity relationship. In the focus group discussions, need often emerged as a consideration complementing other reasoned statements. Yet again, the most general motto was "to help if it is (really) needed." Two main questions arose here: if help was (really) needed and what kind of help exactly? Need was also discussed in connection with reasoning about availability, practicability or deservingness. To some extent, need was regarded as a criterion to decide if and to whom to extend solidarity: who needs the support more? Who is most in need?

13.2.4 Conditionality

As already mentioned, statements invoking conditionality were most salient in the discussion about a financial crisis (see more detail in Section 13.3). Strikingly, across countries and sociodemographic groups, we did not find many instances of a strong opposition to the general idea of conditionality. Indeed, participants agreed that it is logical – and not contradicting solidarity – to set conditions when support is provided. We found diverse considerations about the conditions themselves and how they should be formulated or implemented but little rejection of the idea that conditions have a logical connection to support. However, conditionality was mostly relevant in social contexts where the fault for a crisis or problem could be attributed to an event or circumstance, such as in the financial crisis. Here, it was often considered or debated whether the actions of the potential aid recipient have contributed to the crisis. Furthermore, as will be emphasised later (in Section 13.3), it was often argued that the conditions should be agreed with the beneficiaries of solidary help, rather than being unilaterally imposed by donors or the EU.

13.2.5 Deservingness

As in the case of conditionality, statements about deservingness concentrated in the discussion of a financial crisis and, in fact, were often linked with conditionality. The following “criteria”, in the minds of participants, served to decide if a country deserved help and whether others should be willing or hesitant to provide it. Deservingness was questioned

- if a crisis was perceived as self-inflicted;
- if a country was not able or willing to solve its structural problems (e.g. corruption or flawed taxation system);
- if a country disregarded democratic values or was perceived by participants as being ruled by oligarchs or autocrats (Hungary and Poland were mentioned in such a light repeatedly, for example).

In the following quotation, we see the tendency to question the deservingness of recipients by pointing at their own actions:

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

(SKFG1_M7)

The history of relationships between countries (e.g. regional or neighbourhood relationships; having a partnership relationship between countries or pending tensions), the country's special contribution to solve specific EU-wide problems (e.g. immigration crisis), and being hit harder than others/being most in need were also among the participants' considerations before committing to solidarity. Interestingly, participants very rarely endorsed the idea reflected in the quotation below

that everyone deserves help if needed, notwithstanding the aforementioned considerations of deservingness.

I think it is the same for everybody. Whatever your name is: Italy, France or whatever. When you have, you give, and when you don't have, you get, because of this principle of help, of solidarity. So, it doesn't matter if lightning strikes or a crisis occurs because Lehman Brothers collapses or whatever. If you have, you give, and when you don't have, you get. That is reciprocity.
(ESFG1_F3)

If we scrutinise how the reasoning of deservingness is distributed across countries, we find that one-third of all coded segments pertain to Finland – and there across all three social groups. Finnish participants forthrightly expressed concern about the potential tendency of some EU member states to repeatedly fall into a “victim” role, presumably because of their own doing. Therefore, it seemed questionable to them if other member states (in particular those who are always “hard-working” and thus doing well) should keep being solidary. Curiously, although in a more moderate manner, Slovak participants shared a similar sentiment (also applying it to their own country at times).

13.2.6 Obligation

Obligation to help others in distress was mostly articulated in discussions about solidarity in the case of a natural disaster. Next to the expected humanitarian dimension of obligation (“we have to help because it is a human thing to do”), we also found an EU-specific dimension. That obligation was sometimes presented as an informal one, related to the common EU values but sometimes also as a formal obligation, arising from the EU treaties and other legal texts (or from what participants assumed was written there). We also found a reciprocity-driven meaning of obligation in the EU context (“because they helped us before”).

The obligation in question was mainly ascribed to states. Participants were less prone to assume an individual obligation to support other EU countries and their citizens. To provide help as an individual was perceived as a personal decision of goodwill. Some participants explicitly rejected an individual obligation to help and pointed at the country level instead, as the following quotation shows.

I don't feel personal responsibility to go down to Germany and fill sandbags around the Rhine River and build barriers. I pay enough taxes in this country and I trust that some of the tax money that I pay is used in such a way that I don't have to think about that myself.

(FIFG1_M1)

13.2.7 Fairness and equality

Reasoned statements on fairness and equality address the social relations between donors and receivers of aid. Generally speaking, participants clearly agreed that solidarity should be enacted with due regard to fairness and equality. Since solidarity

is perceived as a common bond and duty among all EU member states, its rules and principles should universally apply to all, and discrimination of countries should be deterred, as the quotations below demonstrate. They show that fairness considerations can pertain to receiving aid when needed (quotation one) and also to conditionalities (quotation two) or burden-sharing among donors (quotation three).

But I also expect if there is a crisis or a disaster in Finland, I expect the same. That Finland gets the same help, that it is not just that we might help some countries that are otherwise economically, we could say worse off than Finland, and if it were to happen in Finland, we would stand alone or perhaps [only] with the Nordic countries to help. We should get the same help here in the North as for example Southern Europe gets.

(FIFG1_F4)

Well, if it happened in another country [. . .] we had to borrow money and pay what they wanted and how they wanted, and we are still paying. I think right now, if it happened in another country, the rules should be the same for everyone. Maybe the loan shouldn't be with interest, or at least [not] with such high interest rates. But that's what happened to us and Greece, for others it would have to be the same.

(PTFG1_M2)

I do think that the Netherlands should contribute, but only if all the European Union countries are cooperating in this, then we should do so too. However, if it should cost us extra, then it should cost all of us. It should not be that the Netherlands as the only country should think that it should lead the way in this.

(NLFG1_F2)

To some extent, there was also an agreement that, as a matter of fairness, member states with more resources should contribute more than those less advantaged. Participants argued that because EU member states were very different, there should be a system to ensure fairness of solidarity contributions. However, the key question that often remained unsolved was how *to make* it fair in practice. Participants provided vague proposals of proportionality or quotas (e.g. according to gross domestic product or population size). However, they did not come up with any tangible course of action. With regard to perceived disparities between “stronger, richer” and “weaker, poorer” members states, we could trace a distinct pattern throughout the discussions. Participants from net payer countries (Germany and Finland in particular) seemed to be concerned with the aspect of fairness and equality that there should not always be the same (presumably – stronger, richer) countries that primarily provide the support (as the quotation below illustrates).

They would insist that it was only fair that strong and rich members of the EU should receive the same solidarity as the others if need were to arise in the future.

I think Finland should do it, but the costs should surely be something that also comes together from the Union. If we have the competence to participate and the opportunity, we should be involved, but it is not only Finland that should stand, or I do not think that Finland should bear the costs alone. It should be together. But there again, according to the efforts that we put into the EU some kind of relationship to size is needed.

(FIFG1_F4)

In contrast, participants from net receiver countries seemed to have adhere to the sentiment that EU members are not currently treated equally. For example, the Greek participants, in particular from the young adult group, seemed most concerned about it and feared that their country would remain on the more disadvantaged side forever.

It is important to note that the focus of fairness and equality statements shifted not only across countries but also across the scenarios (see more detail in Section 13.3). In case of a natural disaster, the key concern was that if needed, it was only fair that *all* countries contribute in some way and that contributions are somehow proportional. In a financial crisis, fairness and equality in relation to responsibility, conditionality and deservingness prevailed (mainly, that the same rules should apply to all members states). When looking for solutions to enduring social disparities within the EU, the sentiment of fairness and equality was rather unspecific, as participants vaguely gestured at some balance and proportionality of EU support to overcome disparities within the EU which was perceived as being too unequal and diverse in many regards.

We also found general concerns of unequal and unfair treatment of and between the EU members states during the ice-breaking phase at the beginning of the focus group discussion. Such observations ranged from a general sentiment that member states are not regarded as equals in the EU (e.g. “I think that clearly there are no equalities at the moment, the EU is not looking at all countries in the same way, at all problems”, ELFG1_M4) to more specific issues, such as perceived unequal benefits from, or conditions for, EU membership; unfair distribution of EU support among member states; or lacking a sense of shared responsibility when countries dealt with issues relevant to the whole EU (e.g. immigration). The following quotation illustrates this sentiment:

[W]e cannot be a union only for an economic issue or when something is to be done for the better, but also in a crisis, in a difficulty. I think that the responsibility must be shared equally. Of course, we say this being in Greece and being the front line of the borders. I do not know if I would have had this discussion in Sweden or Finland what my opinion would have been on this issue [solidarity during refugee crisis]. However, I think that responsibility should be shared somewhat differently.

(ELFG1_F6)

13.2.8 Cost and benefit

For the cost and benefit reasoning, we labelled pragmatic considerations pertaining to advantages and disadvantages of some courses of action. They were least relevant in the discussions about a natural disaster, but more present in the other two scenarios. There were two different lines of reasoning about cost and benefit. One emphasised the cost of solidarity (mostly thinking at the country level) but acknowledged that it also brings benefit. Participants claimed that solidarity may be perceived as costly for a country that contributes to it, but that the country can also benefit from being solidary. The benefits suggested by participants were, for example, avoiding and/or preventing a bigger (EU-level) crisis/instability; preserving or opening markets (as the first quotation below illustrates); or expecting something in return (e.g. future negotiation leverage or improved reputation, as the second quotation below shows).

It seems that if [. . .] a country goes bankrupt or is in a big financial hole, it probably needs to be rescued. Even though then the economic level [. . .] falls for everybody, more or less accordingly. But apparently if left to its fate, it would be even worse. [. . .] Because businesses would collapse, some markets would collapse, people's lives would collapse, there would be internal migration, there would be crime. [. . .] But anyway, it would affect us. [. . .] So, in any case, it must be rescued. Apparently, there is no other [. . .] option. Although, from the other side, you think: "Well, why does it have to be on my account?" But in the end, everyone will be much worse off. Either everybody is slightly worse off, or everybody is much worse off.

(LTFG1_M3)

Regarding the cost [. . .] ideally it would be good if the EU covered it. However, in case the EU does not want to contribute, and Greece is in a moral dilemma to help or not, it could do so and thus ensure a good relationship with that country or in the future claim some advantage from the EU for this stance or do it for PR reasons.

(ELFG3_F1)

The other line of reasoning elaborated mainly on the benefits of solidarity but also considered the costs. The participants agreed that it is important to feel a sense of solidarity for a country that is in trouble, but at the same time, they asked what a country would have to "sacrifice" or what obligation it would have to accept in exchange for the help received in a solidary arrangement. They considered that in some cases the cost of accepting solidarity may outweigh the benefits. For example, as the quotation below shows, a sensitive issue for some countries was a risk of reduced sovereign decision-making in return for external support.

The changes are complicated because here, for example, the conditions set by the European Union when it gave us money to make cuts in everything,

including health, public education, etc., etc., were not very well received. So, normally [. . .] it gives a lot of power to the Union over the domestic policy of each country.

(ESFG1_M1)

A cross-country comparison shows that cost and benefit were a more relevant concern to German and Lithuanian participants. Yet again, the lines of reasoning reflected the different status of these members states within the EU: German participants (high skilled and young adults in particular) tended to acknowledge that while Germany contributes a lot to the EU (i.e. the financial contributions to the EU budget), it also benefits (e.g. in respect to single market access). Lithuanian participants, in contrast, usually started by discussing the benefits of being an EU member before turning to the current costs of membership for the country (more pronounced in the lower paid and unemployed group) or anticipated cost in the future when Lithuania might become a net payer (high skilled group). Statements about cost and benefits were often made during the ice-breaking phase (as shown in the Table 13.3), when we asked participants to reflect on their general views about the EU and their country's membership in it. Therefore, participants discussed that being or becoming a member of the EU both was beneficial for the country *and* incurred some cost.

13.2.9 Convergence

Reasoned statements about convergence expressed the goal of EU member states to become more similar to each other in terms of living conditions. Although more frequently evoked in the discussions about social disparities (but also ice-breaking and particularly wrap-up phases), convergence was certainly the most elusive reasoned statement. Here, participants were mostly concerned with the goal of getting EU countries closer together in terms of standards of living and achieving an ideal level of unity. The former issue was more tangible, especially where participants explicitly recognised that currently social and economic gaps between EU members states are too wide (e.g. to make EU-level social policies feasible). The latter type of statements on cohesion encompassed idealistic calls for “living together” and “making progress together” (as the extract below illustrates).

However, at the same time, if there are areas that are very poor, that is also very negative for us, because that just costs money. If other countries cannot keep up, they will never be able to contribute as much. So, if we help each other a little [. . .] we will all make progress. So, in that sense, I think it is good to try and work on that.

(NLFG1_M4)

13.2.10 Subsidiarity

Interestingly, the reasoned statement of *subsidiarity* proved to be particularly prominent in the scenario dealing with social disparities. We found a plethora of

reasons why citizens would not favour EU-level solutions related to solidarity-based actions. These reasons can be aggregated into three different lines of reasoning about subsidiarity:

- 1) Reasoning based on a normative belief in the country's responsibility as preceding EU-level solutions/responsibility (e.g. country *must/is responsible* to firstly solve/attempt to solve its issues/crises itself, should have a *right* and *possibility* to do that before seeking for help or, conversely, a country is firstly responsible for itself and only when it solves its own issues, it can be involved in helping others);
- 2) A more practical belief that EU-level solutions are impossible or hardly feasible (e.g. country can *better know* and solve its own issues, countries are too diverse to apply a common solution), or, the contrary;
- 3) Already existing EU-level solutions are considered sufficient, so no additional action is deemed necessary.

The idea of subsidiarity often addressed a precarious balance. One between a country's responsibilities and the wish to maintain national sovereignty on the one hand and the need of accepting help which might come with negative consequences or losing the power to make decisions on the other. As we will show below in more detail, we found mixed feelings related to the EU's role in directing member states. In some contexts, participants saw EU initiatives as an unnecessary or unwelcome intrusion; in others, they were perceived as a useful lever of accountability that would push member states to comply with the commonly agreed EU regulations, development goals or values. The quotation below shows an example of how subsidiarity claims were combined with calls for EU control over a member state.

This [social inequality] should be solved by each state, it should be solved by Slovakia independently, but simply if the state itself cannot solve it or simply does not want to solve it, then in my opinion [. . .] the EU should step in, which would set some conditions. If the European Union can simply dictate the conditions [. . .] to shut down more coal-fired power plants and so on, then it could also simply order to make the equality more equal [solve issues of social inequality in the country].

(SKFG2_F5)

When we compare countries, the reasoned statement of subsidiarity emerged most often in the discussions among Dutch participants (see Table 13.4). An interesting nuance added by Dutch participants to the lines of reasoning listed earlier was that the Netherlands should sometimes refrain from being the first to help or contribute the most to a joint effort (a sentiment partially shared with Finnish participants), while Latvian participants thought that Latvia should solve its own issues before extending solidarity to others.

13.3 Conceptions of solidarity and reasoned statements in the context of the three discussed scenarios

In this section, we show how the context provided by a scenario influenced the discussions about solidarity in the EU. First of all, in case of a *natural disaster* afflicting one of the EU countries, participants had the least reservations about solidarity. They generally perceived it as a self-evident obligation which should not be bound to any conditions. Moreover, some of the participants explicitly extended this duty of assistance in “no one’s fault” circumstances beyond the borders of the EU, framing it as a universal humanitarian obligation to help those affected by a natural disaster, as the following quotation shows.

Obviously, for something like this to work, everyone has to act altruistically. [I]f we want to have a united Europe, and then a united world, then obviously we have to act altruistically in anything that has to do with either financial or material aid or whatever.

(ELFG1_M8)

In the natural disaster scenario, participants focused on practical aspects, such as the timely and most efficient provision of support. In contrast, the causes of the disaster (e.g. whom to blame for it), conditionalities linked to solidarity or cost and benefit considerations were rarely debated in connection with a natural disaster. The following line of reasoning about the floods devastating parts of Germany in 2022 was rather atypical:

Yes, but there spontaneously I can feel that it is the Germans’ problem. They have surely done something flawed with their ponds or something like that. Now I say it so provocatively just to show how indifferent I am to this. And I do not know now whether I am a failed EU citizen or is it that EU has simply failed in this to communicate that we have a shared responsibility for major disasters.

(FIFG1_M1)

Such a view was exceptional, however, and it seems that the participant was aware that his views would come across as provocative and controversial. Much more common across countries and sociodemographic groups was the following line of reasoning: in case of a natural disaster, everyone should first provide help without hesitation and only then other considerations, such as covering cost or taking preventive action for the future, might become relevant. The following remarks can illustrate it:

[J]ust to give you an example [. . .] in the case of a fire in an apartment block, the fire brigade is going straight through. They do not coordinate [. . .] whether it’s okay to open a door or not. They just go, they break it down,

and then afterwards, say, later on, when the fire is out, then they work out the cost of the door and who should compensate it. This is practically what is [happening] in the European Union, I imagine, [. . .] that is the way it has to be [. . .] in the event of a natural disaster, try to help as quickly as possible and [. . .] to provide some material resources.

(LTFG1_M3)

The dominant reasoned statement in this scenario was about the ability to help and the availability of necessary resources.

Participants further argued that it is important to be clear about the type and extent of help that is needed and if the help that is available will actually be useful, as a concern of one participant in the quotation below shows. Individual efforts to help, even if well-intentioned, might be futile, even counterproductive, in some circumstances.

But as in the Ahr Valley [in Germany, flooded in 2021], that does not make sense either when the roads get jammed, I believe, because everyone felt they had to go there and help. It must be meaningful, and then I would get involved also. And if it is another country or far from Frankfurt, it will take a long time until I would probably feel the need to go there. Except out of emotional concern, but then the question is whether it makes sense, whether it really helps on the ground.

(DEFG1_M5)

Perceived “closeness” of countries (primarily in terms of spatial distance but also, for example, in terms of common experiences of issues like fires or earthquakes) was an important consideration of availability and practicability of support. As illustrated by the quotation below, neighbouring countries and regional clusters were seen as the most logical and pragmatic providers of immediate support.

I also think that the issue of territory and proximity to the site is important. It’s useless to be crossing Europe with fire trucks days and days and days, when we probably have closer countries that can meet these [. . .] needs [in an emergency].

(PTFG1_F7)

Though participants tended to focus on inter-country solidarity, the role of the EU as an institution was also rather clear in the case of a natural disaster. Here, participants believed or even expected that the EU is (and if not, should be) prepared to manage such disasters, with procedures, resources and/or funds in place, as the quotation below exemplifies.

So, the European Union already has a mechanism for such disaster management [. . .] and it already foresees possible disasters, both with humanitarian aid and with financial subsidies. There’s already a fund for that and there’s

already manpower for that. This is already taken care of, in fact, they are already set up for this.

(PTFG2_F4)

The fairness and equality statements were also relevant when discussing solidarity in the context of a natural disaster. The main concern of the participants was to assure that all countries contribute (in some capacity that is needed or available) and that contributions to solidarity were somehow fairly distributed. The burden of solidarity should be equally shared, as one participant expressed in the quotation below. Participants perceived such an equally shared obligation as a prerequisite of being in the union, and the main consideration was the one of ability and availability, as already noted.

I also think it is important that the burden of helping does not end up just in the nearby areas, that it should be distributed evenly. Even if it is quick help, if it requires more from some neighbouring country and so on, that country should then be supported later. Everyone simply takes care of their part.

(FIFG3_F1)

To summarise, the natural disaster scenario was generally perceived as a crisis without an attributable human fault. For that reason, citizens' support for the idea of solidarity was very strong, almost unconditional and highly inclusive (i.e. "everyone" should be involved in helping and "everyone" deserve help). With the normative rationale for European solidarity settled quickly, participants zoomed in on practical questions.

In the scenario of a *financial crisis*, we found a very different picture. The focus group discussions revolved predominantly around conditionality. Moreover, participants repeatedly referred to (dis)trust in this scenario. Two lines of reasoning could be distinguished here. First, participants expressed a lack of trust in other countries which allegedly misused support in the past or have an image of being corrupt, irresponsible, indolent. Some focus groups, especially in the three Southern European countries, also discussed problems in their own country (e.g. corrupt politicians) in this context. The interplay of conditionality (i.e. assuring that support will be used as intended) and distrust was addressed by a participant in the following way:

I dare say that [. . .] [we need] to find [. . .] [means to assess and ensure] [. . .] whether that aid actually had the meaning that was originally intended or whether we were just [. . .] pouring money in there unnecessarily and basically completely meaninglessly. Because that country would either have such a level of corruption there, that the money would basically be stolen right away or the money would somehow go to waste because they would not be able to develop projects effectively, they would not be able to draw it down effectively.

(SKFG3_M2)

Our analysis shows that lack of trust in the prospective recipient reduces readiness to provide support and/or requires a clear set of conditions and external monitoring (carried out, e.g., by the EU). Across the focus groups, there was little opposition to the idea of conditionality when discussing support in the case of a financial crisis. However, participants tended to question the type and scope of the potential conditions, and importantly, the consequences they might have for the receiving country. Many participants argued that conditions should not harm the recipient country, which should also have a say in formulating them. The following quotation illustrates this line of reasoning very well.

I also think that there should be conditions, because [. . .] no one lends money without guarantees that they will get it back. But having said that, I do not think that the European Union should impose policies on the country to which it lends money. There must be freedom for the country to present a plan to return the borrowed money, and as long as there is that guarantee, and through negotiation, I think the loans can be made. I don't think it has to be a one-sided thing on the part of the European Union.

(PTFG3_F1)

Participants also saw financial support as a form of political leverage, in particular to push some member states to respect the values of the EU and comply with human rights and rule-of-law requirements, as the quotation below illustrates.

I think you should generally tie it [support] to conditions that, for example, should be geared towards making a country more democratic in some way. Or in general or quite bluntly to human rights [. . .] for example, that Poland somehow has a problem with legalising abortions, then one could also think about [. . .] such individual problems, and say that if there is a consensus in the EU that this should be legal in a country, in a democracy today, that one should create such a condition. [. . .] But if the EU wants to have something like that as a right for society in its member states, I think you can set that up as a condition in a financial crisis.

(DEFG3_F3)

Statements about deservingness gained more prominence in the financial crisis scenario where the potential causes of the crisis were a major talking point of debate. The key considerations here were whether the crisis might have been self-inflicted and, if that was the case, why or to what extent other countries or the EU should show solidarity. Clearly, many participants felt that duties of solidarity could be legitimately restricted or even suspended if for whatever reasons the crisis was self-inflicted – as the quotation below exemplifies.

[S]ometimes these are also countries that don't change, so, say, structurally fall into the same problem. Then I think we can keep pumping money into them, but that is, so to speak, red figures for us, and then I think: well, if the country is not prepared to change, then at some point that's it. You can try by

doing it two or three times and then, if you see that it is recurring, I would say: “We are closing the tap, done and done.”

(NLFG3_F3)

Unlike in the natural disaster scenario, participants here were looking to attribute fault or responsibility for the occurrence of financial crisis. We found both instances of

- *blaming others*, by arguing for example: “But if those countries have put themselves in that shitty situation, then they can sink with the ship” (FIFG3_M2) and
- *self-blaming*, by stressing for example: “If it was caused by the latest events in Slovakia [. . .], I wouldn’t give us the aid” (SKFG3_F1).

The question of deservingness and whether hardship is self-inflicted or not was well elucidated in the following quotation.

I find what is always very interesting is that there is also the search for a guilty party. So, in the case of a natural disaster, regardless of the fact that it may have something to do with climate change or whatever, there are people affected, affected states that need to be helped. And what I also noticed, when it comes to financial things, that then very often people say: “Yes, but they drove themselves against the wall” and so to speak they are themselves to blame for this situation. And that thus the willingness to help is smaller. That’s just an observation.

(DEFG2_F2)

Past experiences in dealing with financial crises (at both the EU and the country levels), country development and perceived internal issues, attributed image of one’s own country and perceived characteristics of other countries in the EU were important in discussing solidarity in the case of a financial crisis. The statement quoted below provides a good insight into how participants questioned pre-crisis developments:

So, an economic crisis like this doesn’t just happen out of the blue and hit an EU country overnight; it has a very long history. There are more than enough criteria or rules of the game, the national debt, for example, or other things that should be adhered to by the member states, or corridors that should be adhered to. And in the run-up [to crises] there is also conscious, and in the crisis, I think, quite a lot of measures and mechanisms that have been thought of to avoid a crisis. And to that extent you have to go back into the reasons why it has come to the crisis and then somehow also see, is the assistance that has been granted then also good for getting out of the crisis.

(DEFG1_M5)

The financial crisis scenario appeared to be the most sensitising with regard to the obligations, expectations and commitments to solidarity at play in the EU. It pointed participants to the perceived stark divisions within the EU and potential unfairness in national contributions to joint efforts. The discussions about solidarity

in financial crisis and related financial redistribution showed that it was a loaded question, for participants from both “giving” countries and potentially “receiving” countries. Discussions on the financial crisis scenario also brought to light quite a number of stereotypes and nationalist sentiment, as the following quotations show.

And there [is] my slightly negative attitudes towards Southern Europeans. I feel we [Finns] who are always best in class were a little deceived. Partly because we were among the few in the Euro zone who actually had our economy in shape for EMU [Economic and Monetary Union of the European Union].

(FIFG1_M1)

The big question is that we don't know how to read the culture of each country. That is, it is very easy to generalise, and in their case, we are the PIGS [acronym for Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain used during the financial crisis], and for us, they are those rich guys who bathe in gold and don't deserve any help. What I think should be done is a European balance and really when we receive, we can and should give in return.

(PTFG2_M2)

Although considerations of availability and ability were important in all three scenarios, a qualitative analysis of the transcripts reveals that the participants' approach differed – especially between discussions about a natural disaster and a financial crisis. When discussing solidarity in the event of a natural disaster, participants were willing to look for any resources that they or their country could provide to help (even though in some countries recognising that they might not be able to offer much). In the financial crisis scenario, by contrast, participants turned to excuses as to why their country would not be able to show solidarity even if it wanted, as the quotation below reveals. This turn was particularly characteristic of the selected net recipient country cases.

I think that Lithuania is too small [. . .], and it's not rich enough yet, to be able to react in any special way, compared to other countries. Or by the general consensus of the European Union. Yes, if the European Union then distributes that budget, or finances [the help], so well, we might just lose some of that money that was allocated for something, because it will go to rescue another country. So, the only thing we can do – not to be angry about it.

(LTFG1_F4)

Fairness and equality were relevant reasonings when discussing solidarity, should a financial crisis occur. However, while fairness statements had a somewhat idealistic and aspirational character in the natural disaster case (i.e. “all countries help equally with whatever they can”), here they carried a different connotation. In the financial crisis scenario, rules and conditions of receiving support were in focus, and for many speakers, the key point was that these rules should be the same for all

the member states. Two lines of reasoning can be distinguished in this regard: first, if the crisis is somewhat self-inflicted, the country affected should primarily accept responsibility for it. In such cases, many participants thus resorted to the principle of subsidiarity. At the same time, speakers often underlined that, as a matter of fairness, subsidiarity should apply to everyone, including the speakers' own country, should it ever be in the same situation. The quotation below can illustrate the point.

I find it is important to act in solidarity. If we place certain expectations toward, for instance, Cyprus, Greece or whomever, then we should also take a good look at ourselves, and say, okay, we are also prepared to, like, subject ourselves to controlling mechanisms to show [. . .], we work hard and we follow the rules.

(DEFG1_F4)

Second, it was argued that even a strong, financially capable country in trouble should be eligible for the same solidarity as poorer member states. Likewise, if some member states made disproportional contributions to joint efforts in some spheres, for example, by taking in a great number of refugees they deserved support in others (as stated in the quotation below).

Yes, there's Germany and France, but the Netherlands is at the top of the list, so of course, you can expect something from them. And we benefit a lot from those other countries. Plus, it is of course Greece, but also Italy, who are taking in all the refugees at the moment and who are doing an awful lot, while we here in Ter Apel [the place where the participant lives] are actually doing nothing at all. The Netherlands takes no responsibility at all there, so, yes, there are things we should contribute more to. We forget that other countries do that, too.

(NLFG1_M4)

The third scenario was related to common EU solutions to tackle persistent *social and regional disparities*, with the concrete example being a potential European unemployment insurance scheme. This idea did not elicit much enthusiasm among focus group participants, even among those who would presumably benefit from such a scheme, such as inhabitants of net recipient countries or participants at high risk of losing their jobs. Interestingly, at a high level of abstraction, few participants criticised or rejected the idea of common EU policies to reduce social inequality and solve social problems. It was instead the implementation of such policies that seemed dubious to many participants. Again, reasoning about subsidiarity became manifest in this scenario (half of the coded segments in this discussion phase, as shown in Table 13.3), as participants expressed doubts about the necessity, feasibility and practicability of EU-level social policies. They argued that social policies should primarily be the responsibility of national or even local governments, who presumably have a better grasp of local needs and thus are better placed to find appropriate and efficient solutions. Interestingly, participants from net giver and

net recipient countries shared this line of reasoning. The following extract from a Finnish debate sums it up succinctly.

Unemployment is so different, in different parts of the EU. [. . .] At least in the current situation [it] would be very difficult to deal with it in a uniform way. And in combination with that, the different member states have such different [. . .] social safety nets. [. . .] It will be very difficult to look at it [unemployment] from an EU perspective. These are issues that better can be resolved at the national level.

(FIFG1_M1)

From the perspective of many participants, their respective country should be responsible to solve or at least be the first to put effort in solving perceived “internal” issues and to turn to others for support only if they are not successful.

In this context, participants in some countries raised the question of national sovereignty to be protected from EU influence on matters of domestic politics (well grasped in the quotation below). For example, participants from countries that had experienced austerity measures related to EU help in the financial crisis seemed to be more hesitant to accept EU level schemes and questioned what the effects and the cost of it would be for their country.

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

(ESFG2_F4)

Furthermore, participants repeatedly characterised EU member states as being too diverse and argued that EU-wide policies addressing unemployment would, therefore, be all but impossible to implement. In this case, the EU's role was not overtly dismissed. However, participants regarded the EU as a source of funding and advice. The quotation below shows the interplay between the two issues as discussed by a participant.

[W]e are very different countries and the reasons for unemployment are also very different. [. . .] Maybe there might be some kind of programme from the European Union, but how to deal with it [the issue of unemployment] should still be up to the state itself to find the ways. Because I think there is no one-size-fits-all plan [. . .] I don't think it's possible.

(LTFG1_F4)

The discussions showed that, paradoxically, socioeconomic inequality and disparities between members countries were seen both as a problem to be solved at the European level and as the main obstacle to EU-level solutions. While participants

expressed their desire for a more equal Europe, they also argued that until the EU is more equal, it is hard to imagine a possibility of common social security schemes. Alongside the reasoning that EU-level policies are “not possible”, there were countervailing observations that such EU measures already exist (in the context of EU cohesion policy – such as the funding of professional re-qualification measures). Furthermore, participants in some countries tended to refer to the principle of free movement of labour, thus reframing the issue of unemployment and its solutions, as outlined in the quotation below. This idea was particularly salient in the Baltic countries, where memories of labour migration seemed to be part of the shared imaginary, if not personal experience.

I don't know whether we need a programme or not. But [. . .] in the treaty of the European Union it is written that there is free movement of labour force. So, the solution is already there. In that sense, every citizen of the European Union can go to work in another country. That's it, that can solve unemployment.

(LTFG1_M1)

In general, when discussing potential solutions of social inequality, participants often tended to redirect the question at hand (e.g. about an EU unemployment insurance scheme) to other issues that were identified either as sources of the problem or as a potential solution. Education, retirement, migration, industrial policy and business environment were among the topics that participants named (and that can be illustrated with the two quotations below).

I do think that there are certain things where we can say that we are going to equalise them. I mean look at pensions. I mean, here you have to work until 67 and there are countries where you can retire as early as 50. And those are not the economically strong countries in general. [. . .] Then I think, adjust that, set one rule for the whole EU.

(NLFG2_F4)

If there's anything like you might think could help [. . .] or reduce that unemployment in some other way. Then work with education policy [. . .] and that kind of stuff, [. . .] support it that everyone has the opportunity for education and thus an opportunity to get a profession. And then the free movement [of EU citizens enable them] to freely move within the EU to seek or create work for oneself.

(FIFG1_F4)

13.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented findings from the comparative analysis of 27 focus group discussions across nine EU member states, highlighting how European citizens perceived transnational solidarity, and how they reasoned about contributions

to it when faced with three crisis scenarios. Overall, we observed that participants perceived solidarity as a value that came with belonging to the EU. They expected that support (material and non-material) should be provided if some of the member states were in need or crisis. At the same time, we found that most participants would not want to grant transnational solidarity universally and unconditionally. Depending on the context, they had important reservations and restrictions to make.

The expectation of solidarity, and the corresponding obligation to provide support, was most pronounced when the problem in question was not attributable to anybody's wrongdoing, as in the case of a natural disaster. If there is no human agency to blame for a crisis, there is a strong predisposition to be as solidary as realistically possible and to accept certain sacrifices. Whenever a crisis was perceived as potentially self-inflicted, however, most participants saw conditionality of aid as justified, almost a logical prerequisite to solidarity.

Regarding the levels of political action, we found that citizens remained attached to the nation-state. Overwhelmingly, solidarity relations in the EU were imagined as interstate relations. Most participants did not feel an individual obligation to provide help across borders. Neither were they enthusiastic about EU-level action, in particular when it comes to tackling the enduring socioeconomic disparities in the EU. The very ideal of more social equality across Europe was accepted, and even desired, by the participants in the focus group discussions. However, there was much scepticism towards EU-level solutions in the field of social policy, such as a common unemployment insurance. On the one hand, from the perspective of the participants, such policies seemed to be more of a vague aspiration than achievable reality. On the other, they feared that EU-level solutions of the "one size fits all" kind would be neither effective nor fair.

The discussions in this chapter drew mainly on the results of comparative analysis of the transcripts obtained from our 27 focus group discussions. Our chief interest here was in detecting patterns regarding the distribution of coded statements across countries, sociodemographic groups and the scenarios we used. We quoted statements literally to illustrate how the coded conceptions of solidarity and related arguments were presented by participants thus providing insights into their way of reasoning. In the next, shorter chapter, we will focus on the recurring narrative elements that we were able to find in the transcripts, in particular *topoi* and storylines.

14 National storylines and topoi found in the focus group discussions

Hubert Heinelt and Jens Steffek

In this chapter, we will present the results of our qualitative and interpretative analysis of the narrative elements that we detected in the focus group discussions. As set out in Section 3.5.2, we scrutinised the transcripts for recurring commonplaces (topoi) invoked by participants. In some cases, at least, we were also able to reconstruct more encompassing storylines that were used to embed arguments related to European solidarity into broader horizons of collective experience. We did so because our research started from the assumption that human beings are “storytelling animals.” Unfortunately, the context-dependent conceptions of solidarity and reciprocity turned out to be perceived (and presented) in the focus groups in a more complex way than we initially expected (see Chapter 1). In most focus groups, statements about the European Union (EU), the other member states and the issues at hand were deeply entangled. Participants did not present general accounts of European integration history to sustain their statements. Instead, their political storytelling related to national experiences with European integration and the country’s position in the EU, in particular along the lines of big versus small and rich versus poor member states. The dominant perspective on European integration remains a firmly situated one, viewed from the position of a specific country. Even within these distinct national perspectives on the EU and integration history, we struggled to reconstruct robust narratives in the sense that focus group participants could tell a comprehensive, consistent tale about solidarity in the EU.

14.1 Storylines detected in the focus group discussions in two of the selected countries

However, particularly in two countries, we were able to grasp at least portions of such a tale which could be called in line with the scholarly debate “storyline” (see Chapter 1). One such storyline we reconstructed from statements made in all three national focus group discussions conducted in Portugal. It can be summarised as follows (see for the evidence of this reconstruction Chapter 8 dealing with Portugal):

In the past, Portugal was a great nation. After we lost our focus on Atlantic and the colonies, we chose the way to Europe instead. This brought many

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development opportunities for Portugal, e.g. the structural funds (EU cohesion policy). However, we have not taken advantage of these opportunities, unlike the new member states in Eastern Europe do now. Instead, all the money we had access to sunk into the swamp of corruption that the political parties have created in Portugal. It is our own fault: We could have profited from EU membership, and even when we noticed what was going on, we could still have voted those people out of office. But we did not do it. Instead, only half of the eligible voters are taking part in the election. The whole story is an unfortunate tragedy.

The second storyline could be reconstructed from statements in the focus group discussions carried out in Finland, and it differs significantly from the Portuguese narrative (see for the evidence of this reconstruction also country chapter on Finland, i.e. Chapter 4).

Finland already helped other states a lot. We are still willing to help to achieve economic and social cohesion, because we consider this the basis for political cohesion – and, consequently, the ability of the EU to speak with one voice in a globalized world. However, we are always vigilant to distinguish those who are really deserving help from those who are in a bad situation as result of their own actions. It is important to make proper use of the funding made available by the net payers to ensure their future willingness to stay a net payer. People in post-war Finland always had a very high work ethic. This Protestant work ethic performs very well. This is not the case in other countries, which sometimes waste the money we are handing over. At some point in time, enough could be enough.

These two storylines are clearly distinct from another. We can see that the development in Portugal is perceived as an unfortunate tragedy to which the Portuguese themselves have contributed significantly. There is a strong emphasis on self-inflicted pain and damage, mostly presented with regret and leading to a bleak, even desperate, assessment of the country's future. Therefore, we decided to label the storyline from Portugal a "*fado story*." The Finnish self-perception could hardly be more different. Full of pride about their own accomplishments, Finns are generous towards those who were struck by misfortune, albeit with reservations. Participants warned that they were hesitant to keep helping time and again if the problems are self-inflicted and/or caused by "laziness" or inefficient public institutions. Sometimes, participants seemed to lose their generous stance and switched to impolite assessments of other countries (e.g. talking about "Italy and Greece and these banana republics around the Mediterranean" (FIFG1_M1). Consequently, we labelled the Finnish storyline "*a story of pride and prejudice*." In other countries, the national storylines were rather blurred and did not allow for such a succinct reconstruction as in the cases of Portugal and Finland. We therefore did not attempt to reconstruct a storyline from the statements made in those groups.

14.2 Topoi detected in the focus group discussions

As mentioned in Chapter 1, we were also looking for topoi as commonplaces that are used in communicative interaction because it is assumed by the speaker that they are considered meaningful and reasoned by other participants. Such commonplaces can also appear as common sayings, catch words or metaphors. As such, they usually only expressed, on the one hand, by what they are intended to capture in an oversimplified form, which can easily lead to prejudices being reproduced by them (such as talking about “lazy Greeks” or calling certain member states “banana republics”). On the other hand, they reflect “a practice of reasoned argument” or “a shared social practice of argumentation” (Balkin 1996: 221) by which they are produced as well as reproduced. Therefore, as emphasised in Chapter 1, it says a lot about shared or hegemonic social practices of argumentation how a particular commonplace is used and why the related claim passes as a reasoned statement in a given societal and also temporal context.

In principle, topoi may be quite diverse because they result from social practices which are related to different temporal and societal contexts. Furthermore, we have to underline that we are, in practical terms, not able to list in the following all topoi which can be found in the transcripts of the focus group discussions. We limit ourselves to discussing topoi that were characteristic for how a certain issue was debated and that were pertinent to our research questions about solidarity in a European context. We do not consider topoi here that were used by participants in statements unrelated to the theme of this book.

Although topoi may be quite diverse and context-specific, some could be found in numerous focus group discussions, spread across countries and sociodemographic groups. These topoi seem to travel well across languages and cultures. Others, in contrast, seemed to be specific to particular cultures or languages because we found them only in one country.

The most frequently mentioned topos of the universal kind was that *humans ought to be solidary with other humans in distress* – or as expressed by a participant (LTFG1_M3): “[When it comes to solidarity,] it’s [. . .] not so much [about] the European Union. It’s not [about] the European Union, it’s just about the community of human beings.” This topos of humanitarian obligation was articulated above all in the discussed scenario of a natural disaster, particularly with reference to the fact that human lives are at stake, as the following quotation shows, for example: “help because, especially in a natural disaster, *we are talking about human lives*” (ELFG2_M4).

Another topos often directly connected to the one just mentioned is that *solidarity should not be a one-way street*. Although participants mentioned (as pointed out in Section 13.1) unidirectional solidarity considerably more frequently than reciprocity, they nevertheless hoped that others would act in solidarity when they need help themselves.

A topos used by participants across all social groups and countries was the “*bureaucratic beast*” (DEFG1_M3) or “monster” to characterise *EU institutions*. This topos was distinctly deployed when the importance or even the necessity of

subsidiarity was underlined – for instance, in the discussion about the desirability and feasibility of EU-wide unemployment insurance.

Similar to the first mentioned topos, the metaphor of *the* “same boat” refers to a community of human beings as a community of fate. In our focus groups, that community was usually restricted to the EU when participants emphasised that “*we are all* – these [EU] countries – [. . .] *in the same boat*. In the sense that *if one gets wet* [when the boat sinks], *then probably everybody is going to get wet right away*” (LTFG3_M3).

However, the commonplace that we are all in the same boat can also be used for different purposes than calling for solidarity – which brings us back to the importance of context. This becomes clear in the following example when it was argued: “We chose to be in the same boat as those countries who couldn’t really row, and we [Finns] were quite good rowers ourselves and we had to row as hell and we are still rowing.” And the same participant (FIFG1_M1) added to the familiar boat metaphor another metaphorical conclusion, which is conversely less familiar than the boat: “And there I can sometimes feel a disadvantage that we have been too blue-eyed. We have simply been pissed in the eyes by the Italians and Greeks, especially in Euro cooperation.” As a way of shortcutting a story of deceit, being “pissed in the eyes” may be intuitively understandable only to Swedish-speaking Finns.

Another topos that was used frequently, but with different intentions and by participants from particular countries, is that *not all EU member states are equal*. At first glance this looks like a typical commonplace with obvious meaning. However, as our focus group discussions reveal, context matters.

This topos can mean that *equality between powerful and powerless countries is an illusion* because there are member states in the EU that can impose their will to others, so that “those with the most influence within the European Union decide, and the others have to eat it up and shut up” (PTFG3_M2). Or in other words:

Germany and France push very strongly and [. . .] they just have a much greater influence on what is implemented. You can often see this in the appointment of important personnel positions within the Union, which are then often German or French candidates.

(DEFG1_M2)

In this respect, referring to the commonplace that not all EU member states are equal simply means that “there is a very big [political] imbalance” (DEFG1_M2).

Furthermore, the statement that not all EU member states are equal is also often used to underpin the imagination of “a two-speed Europe” (ESFG2_M1). The “two-speed Europe” does not only mean that there are poorer, less-developed and less economically competitive member states – such as “Portugal, Spain, Greece, Italy and so on” (ESFG2_M1) – but also member states that push strongly for a deepening of European integration and others, which remain more sceptical in this respect.

At the same time, as already mentioned earlier, the assertion that not all EU member states are equal prepares the ground for reasoned statements that a fair distribution of the costs of solidarity-based support has to take the different economic

strengths and budgetary resources of the individual EU members into account. A participant (ESFG1_F5) expressed this in the following captivating way: “It is fairer that whoever can contribute more should contribute more.”

Finally, when talking about common solutions to policy challenges (like social and territorial disparities) within the EU, the statement that European countries are too different to enable the development and effective implementation of standardised policy instruments is a recurring topos. Referring to the commonplace that *not all EU member states are equal* is, in this case, used to argue in favour of subsidiarity.

These statements are considered reasoned with reference to widespread topoi on a general basis or in certain countries and among certain social groups. However, there are also those that are considered meaningful only under particular member states or within certain social milieus. This was evident, for example, in the following two statements made by a manager of a globally operating company (DEFG1_M3) in the focus group discussion with highly qualified, high-paid employees in Germany:

“The huge export market [of the EU] outweighs the net payer status many times over.”

“You don’t let a customer go bankrupt if he can continue to lay golden eggs.”

After these statements, there were no further debates in this group about solidarity-based support for member states that would be particularly affected by a financial crisis, because its sense was beyond question. Instead, the focus of the discussion in this group was on questions of fairness in the mobilisation of necessary financial means and conditionality. This was particularly different to the discussion in the group of German lower paid participants where such statements were missing, and the sequence of arguments was not the same as in the discussion of the German high skilled group. In concrete terms, neither the term “net contributor” nor the importance of the EU for Germany’s export economy was mentioned in the discussion of this group. In the group of German young adults, the importance of the EU for the German export economy was emphasised, but no one spoke about Germany as a net contributor.

A common saying used to characterise a country’s economic or fiscal problems as self-inflicted occurred – in one or another form – is as follows: “*An economic crisis [. . .] doesn’t just happen out of the blue* and hit an EU country overnight; *it has a very long history*” (DEFG1_M5; emphasis added by the authors). Who should be able to resist the persuasive power of this statement, which refers to a long series of previous events, and not address the resulting question of self-inflicted guilt? As the transcripts of the focus group discussions documenting the course of the discussion show, such a statement effectively draws the attention of the participants to the historical reasons for such a crisis and its self-inflicted nature.

And there can hardly be a catchier way of emphatically clarifying that financial help – even solidary help – cannot come without conditions than the following saying which is probably not only common in Lithuania: “*The cheese is free [. . .] only in the mousetraps*” (LTFG2_M4; emphasis added by the authors).

14.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, we presented and discussed some narrative elements that we found in the 27 focus group discussions. Unfortunately, we were unable to identify full-fledged narratives about European solidarity that transcended the national perspective, as we had expected in the beginning. We found that participants did not present general accounts of European integration history to sustain their statements about solidarity. The political storytelling remained attached to the participants' view of their national experience with European integration and their perceptions of their own country's position in the EU. Even after more than six decades of European integration history, the dominant perspective on the EU remains a firmly situated one, viewed from the position of a specific country. Accordingly, we found only national storylines about European solidarity in the transcripts. Even if important elements of these storylines recurred in other countries, their chronology and final message usually remained country specific. Two national storylines were reconstructed in this chapter: a rather sad story of missed opportunities that we found in Portugal and a proud Finnish storyline about national achievements.

What we found more frequently than storylines in our qualitative analysis were *topoi*. In this chapter, we documented the discursive effects of such commonplaces. We showed how participants used them in a conversation as an argumentative shortcut. Invoking *topoi* allowed them to convey their view of things in a nutshell, when it would have been much more cumbersome to convince conversation partners with an explicit line of moral argument or a fully formulated historical narrative. Rather, we have shown that it can be sufficient to invoke commonplaces to initiate reasoning or even terminate a discussion. Although *topoi* can function as discursive elements in their own right, they can also contribute to the formation of more complex and persuasive political narratives, where, for instance, a "bureaucratic beast" plays the part of the villain.

We will use the final chapter of this book to relate our findings to the literature and to spell out their implications for future academic research and policy making.

15 Conclusion

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In this concluding chapter, we summarise our findings about citizens' perceptions of transnational solidarity in the European Union (EU). We revisit the initial assumptions that guided our research and relate our results to the existing literature on political solidarity and European integration. In particular, we highlight that European citizens are ready to act in solidarity, but with the caveat that this should not perpetuate existing problems in the recipient countries, such as corruption, or reward breaking common rules of conduct. We show that Europeans are prepared to help in case of a natural disaster without any strings attached but expect (and would accept) conditionalities whenever human decisions seem to be at the root of a crisis. Regarding solidarity discourse, we point out the remarkable resilience of the nation-state as a cognitive frame whenever it comes to solidarity relations. Citizens and EU institutions are seen as complementary actors at best. Not least, our findings show how careful academics should be when making assumptions about "rational" motivations for policy preferences. Neither the net payer/net recipient distinction nor the imputed class interest that informed our research design played out in the way we had anticipated. In the last part of this chapter, we outline the implications of our findings for policy making and cohesion in the EU. We also envisage avenues for future academic research on transnational solidarity in Europe and beyond.

15.1 Summary of key findings

In our research project, we were interested in expectations of solidarity that citizens have towards fellow European citizens, European-level institutions and other EU member states. Given that European societies are riddled with a plethora of crises – geopolitical, economic, environmental – that unfold simultaneously, we wanted to know what Europeans think they owe to each other in hard times. What kind and what extent of transnational solidarity do they expect under different crisis scenarios? How much support are they willing to provide to citizens beyond borders? Do they expect any kind of reciprocity from recipients? In our research, we adopted the focus group method to uncover ideas, arguments and underlying assumptions that average citizens make in their collective reasoning about solidarity. To render abstract concepts more tangible, we introduced three hands-on scenarios for

participants to discuss: a natural disaster striking a country in the EU; a financial crisis in one or several states of the Eurozone; and persistent social disparities within the Eurozone, marked by high levels of unemployment in some regions.

With the help of these scenarios, we were able to study solidarity-related political reasoning “at work.” First of all, we found solid evidence that European citizens are ready to support persons beyond borders who are in need. Context matters a lot, however. Especially in the case of a *natural disaster*, readiness to help was almost unconditional. Diffuse reciprocity was expected, in the sense that others should help in the future if today’s donors suffer a similar fate. Yet reciprocity was not demanded as a prerequisite for support, and fairness was not much of an issue at all. Instead, participants discussed mainly practical questions related to the scenario, for example who would have the resources required, who would be able to deploy them in time and if the help offered would meet the needs.

In the case of a *financial crisis*, by contrast, our focus groups participants often shifted quickly to questions of conditionality. Generally speaking, participants were still willing to help countries and individuals in distress. However, additional concerns were often raised to justify this commitment, for example whether the people in distress really deserved assistance; what their own government had been doing to tackle the problem; or who was responsible for the financial crisis in the first place. Across all countries under study, the focus groups agreed that some form of conditionality was justified in a financial crisis scenario. Conditionality was widely supported even in countries that endured austerity programmes mandated by the donors during the public debt crisis in the Eurozone. More controversial was the question of what strings exactly should be attached to the offer and who should be involved in formulating the conditions.

In the third scenario of dealing with *social disparities* in general, and *persistent unemployment* in particular, the principled commitment to transnational solidarity in the EU was also contingent. Here, participants not only worried about practicalities and the effectiveness of European social policies but also expressed concerns about normative problems of fairness and subsidiarity. Quite like in the financial crisis scenario, deservingness and possibly self-inflicted harm became an issue here. In that context, many participants from net contributor countries seemed to take it for granted that their country would be in the role of an EU donor forever and could hardly conceive that they would receive help from today’s net recipients in future situations. On the other hand, participants from Greece, Portugal and Spain, that is, net recipient countries, often did not consider themselves in a financial position to help others. In both cases, no expectations of reciprocity emerged.

These results seem to confirm findings from surveys, utilising comparable scenarios, that asked EU citizens about their attitude towards supporting other member states; these focused on environmental disasters and minimum living standards (Eurobarometer 2018). They also found that citizens were more prone to help unconditionally in the case of a natural disaster than in the case of an economic crisis brought about by human action. Framing a crisis as exogenous and no one’s fault is certainly conducive to sharing the burden of solidarity and, importantly, sharing it unconditionally. Our findings are in line with claims of Genschel and

Hemerijck (2018), who found that support for European solidarity was strongest and opposition lowest in case of natural disaster. According to them, when issues are exogenous and one-off (e.g. natural disaster, military attack), public support of solidarity is high and uncertainty low. Waas and Rittberger (2023) argued that the German government's unexpected support for EU-wide fiscal burden-sharing during the COVID-19 pandemic was linked to framing it as a crisis without attributing fault (i.e. depicting it as a natural disaster). According to them, "framing success crucially depends on the nature of the crisis itself, that is, whether its origins are perceived as endogenous or exogenous" (Waas and Rittberger 2023: 659). In their findings on public support for international aid in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic, Heermann et al. (2023) highlighted that fault attribution and negative national stereotyping played a role in reluctance to justify solidarity.

The prospect of solidarity in the case of a financial crisis elicited "ill memories", scapegoating and other sentiments that counteract solidarity. Participants speculated who was to blame for the crisis or already had suspicions about the "culprit", as also seen during the Eurozone crisis (Genschel and Hemerijck 2018). With someone to blame in mind, there was substantially more hesitation about granting solidarity to other EU members states. If a crisis is (rightly or wrongly) attributed to flawed human decisions, convincing European publics to support transnational solidarity is much more difficult. When a potential solidarity recipient is perceived responsible (i.e. because of risky or inadequate policy decisions) and/or there are concerns about a recipient's deservingness, advocating for solidarity becomes awkward (as also found by Heermann et al. 2023; Waas and Rittberger 2023). Interestingly, however, in the scenario of dealing with social disparities, participants found it relatively hard to pinpoint the root causes of social and regional imbalances so that the attribution of blame remained quite diffuse.

Interpreting survey data on transnational European solidarity, Lengfeld and Kley (2021) reported that respondents rejected the idea of conditionality. They underpinned this claim with a finding that respondents did not support the majority of proposed conditions (i.e. austerity measures) linked to solidarity (Lengfeld and Kley 2021). As explained earlier, our findings show that in the financial crisis scenario participants did not reject the idea of conditionality *per se*; however, they did question what kind of conditions should be imposed and how they would be negotiated. Here are some recurring caveats from our focus groups: conditions have to be reasonable and proportional; they should help overcome the crisis now but not cause long-term backlash; likewise, they should not be harmful for the recipient country; importantly, conditions should not be imposed by donors (such as the EU) unilaterally, but the recipients should always have a say in formulating them. Moreover, the implementation of conditions needs to be monitored so as to see if the intended effect was actually achieved.

Heermann et al. (2023) observed that respect for the shared fundamental norms of the EU is an important relational consideration when it concerns EU transfers. According to them, potential recipients of support should be aware that "honouring community norms and reciprocity can pay off in times of crisis" (Heermann et al. 2023: 648). Indeed, we found that citizens question support for solidarity when

a potential recipient is perceived as overly diverging from shared EU norms and would place more stress on conditioning solidarity to “straighten” a recipient’s political course. We also found that “clusters of solidarity” form inside of the EU, where countries that see themselves as geographically, historically, culturally or otherwise bound together, tend to be more readily committed to mutual solidarity. At the same time, focus group discussions were profuse with attributed characteristics and roles pointing to perceived “carriers” of the shared solidarity burden versus “users” and “misusers” of it. Such positionalities and perceived imbalances between EU members states must be carefully regarded when framing calls for transnational solidarity, as they clearly intertwine with citizens’ dispositions.

Not least, it is interesting to note that European citizens make context-dependent differentiations which largely echo the distinctions made in the theoretical academic literature on solidarity that was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 2, the concept of solidarity was broken down into a number of more specific, context-dependent conceptions. Reflecting upon the solidarity-related reasoning “at work” during the focus group discussions, much of it seems to fit the conceptions of social solidarity and civic solidarity, as distinguished by Sally J. Scholz (2015).¹

According to Scholz, *social solidarity* refers to “the universal connection among human beings” (2015: 728). This understanding of solidarity was widely shared by participants in the focus group discussions across countries and social groups when reflecting about support in the case of a natural disaster. In this context, support was seen as a *humanitarian obligation*. Therefore, some participants also emphasised that assistance should not be limited to EU member states but extended to persons who are affected by a natural disaster, albeit living outside the borders of this community. As one participant pointed out: “I don’t think it makes any difference to me if it is in the EU or outside. I mean if I have to send help somewhere I will send it or I will not send it” (ELFG1_M2). Moreover, it is striking that a number of participants also seriously considered helping in person in such cases of distress – and not leaving help to their government or the EU institutions: “Well, if we have the competence and [. . .] we can help, then of course, why not. [. . .] I mean, if you really can, or if you’re some kind of a professional. [. . .] If I just could, I would help” (LTFG1_M1).

In contrast to this universalistic conception of social solidarity, Scholz defined *civic solidarity* as an “obligation of the state to ensure the welfare of its citizens” (2015: 731). She argued that although this definition “appears tied to the organisation of particular states, it is worth asking whether a more extensive account of civic solidarity, such as international or regional civic solidarity, is feasible” (ibid.). She also briefly outlines how this is already the case for the EU. This understanding of solidarity as an *institutionalised obligation*, set and secured by state regulation, was clearly what the participants in the focus groups had in mind when they discussed solidarity in a financial crisis and how to handle social inequalities in general and unemployment in particular. These discussions zoomed in on the responsibility and liability of the member states and EU institutions. Consequently, it was also debated whether states or supranational institutions were in a better position to provide assistance. When the moderators of the focus groups asked if

the participants felt personally committed to act under those two scenarios, participants regularly pointed out that they would, after all, be paying taxes that would be available to either the member states or the EU institutions.

What our research adds to the survey-based literature are insights into the reasoning behind these positions and the justifications that participants provide when they discuss such choices. Why, for instance, do people in net receiver countries support conditions tied to external aid for themselves? We learned from our focus groups in Portugal, Spain and Greece that citizens of these countries are acutely aware of deficiencies in their political and economic systems that have brought about excessive public debt. Widespread corruption and nepotism were regularly cited, and national politicians were accused of being unwilling or unable to resolve such problems. From this perception derives an understanding that other countries would not want to help them unconditionally and that unconditional help might even lead to a perpetuation of the *status quo* in the country, thus eventually becoming counterproductive. This example shows how focus group research can add to our understanding of solidarity relations in the EU. Context matters and focus groups help us understand the moral reasoning of citizens in context.

Many discussions among our participants revolved around fairness in the context of European integration. Deservingness of recipients was an issue that participants often related to fairness. Participants from Finland and the Netherlands pointed out that some countries, by brushing up their statistics, had cheated in their application to join the Eurozone. For their critics, those past shenanigans still taint their entitlement of aid in a public debt crisis to this day. Other fairness concerns pertained to procedural issues. As explained earlier, even prospective recipients were prone to agree on conditionality of aid when human behaviour had caused a problem. They often argued, however, that affected populations should also have a say in the formulation of conditions. Not only did they deserve to be heard on matters that affected their lives, they also felt that in fair procedures, they could contribute local knowledge about the causes of a crisis – a type of knowledge that international organisations do not have. Participation would thus enhance not only the fairness of conditionalities but also their efficiency.

We found similar arguments about proximity and local knowledge also in debates about a prospective European unemployment scheme. As outlined in Chapter 13 (particularly in Section 13.3.3), participants across the studied countries were quite sceptical of a European unemployment insurance. Again, this included – contrary to the findings of Gerhards et al. (2016: 10) – participants from countries in the economic periphery of Europe who could presumably benefit from the financial transfers that such a scheme would offer. Yet again, their line of reasoning was not one of economic self-interest or cost-benefit calculations. Instead, they felt that European schemes to tackle unemployment would disregard the local conditions on the ground and tend to implement “one size fits all” solutions.

In many focus groups across scenarios and countries, we found calls for solidarity that were often triggered by a feeling that European policy making was generally too detached from national or local conditions. Both the effectiveness of governance and the efficiency of means deployed would be at risk when ready-made

solutions were just parachuting in from Brussels. These sentiments seem to echo trends in democratic theory, where, in particular, Pierre Rosanvallon has underlined the importance of “proximity” in governance. He argues that citizens have come to expect government to pay attention to the particularity of each situation and to take the diversity of contexts into account (Rosanvallon 2011: 171–172). We certainly found such expectations in our focus groups.

The results of our focus group discussions also showed that it is quite problematic to just assume interests that citizens should “rationally” have regarding European solidarity, especially depending on the socioeconomic characteristics of their country and their own position in society. We organised three focus groups per country to target three different sociodemographic strata, assuming that they should have different views on solidarity in Europe. We found, however, that the positions and arguments varied much less along the lines of sociodemographic groups than we initially expected. To be sure, younger people and high skilled participants in our focus groups generally appeared to be more pro-European. At the same time, nationally framed lines of reasoning proved to be dominant when it came to questions of solidarity, reciprocity and fairness across borders.

Starting from our abstract expectations about material self-interest, we expected that lower paid and unemployed participants in poorer EU member states should view a European unemployment insurance favourably. However, their positions often resembled those expressed by high skilled co-nationals in executive jobs. In the Baltic countries, for instance, high skilled and lower paid and unemployed participants pointed to the possibility of labour migration within the EU as an alternative to handing out unemployment benefits. This clearly reflected collective experiences in these countries after the end of the Soviet Union, when many citizens were going abroad to find work. It also contrasted significantly with the Southern member states that also have a history of labour migration. Remarkably, in Greece, Portugal and Spain, we found a much clearer expectation across sociodemographic groups that unemployed persons should be able to find work close to home or, if that proves impossible, to receive benefits from the state.

Upon designing our research approach and selecting the countries for the study, we also used financial indicators to select the nine countries, dividing them into net payers and net receivers in order to expect important differences in attitudes along those lines. In the end, we only found some of the variation that we were expecting. There was indeed concern in the net payer countries that their “hard-earned money” was draining to the less prosperous parts of the Eurozone, epitomised by the stereotypical “lazy Greeks.” However, there was at least as much wariness of cost-benefit balances in the three Eastern European countries under study, which are still on the receiving end of EU transfer schemes.

As we were studying solidarity relations in the EU, we also paid particular attention to the multilevel character of the European polity. We were wondering to what institution citizens would assign responsibility for solidary action and for creating robust reciprocity relations. Conventionally, most of the academic literature on solidarity, reciprocity and the fairness of political institutions envisaged the nation-state as the quasi-natural framework to discuss such questions. Our initial

expectation was that European integration, and in particular the advent of the Euro as a common currency, should have made citizens' reasoning more complex. Migration of refugees and financial crises have spawned enormous and recurring challenges to the solidarity among its member states and citizens. As cumbersome negotiations over bailout packages and the distribution of asylum seekers have shown, these are tremendous issues involving reciprocity and solidarity. At the same time, the EU still lacks the strong collective identity that underpins the political authority and legitimacy of nation-states. Thus, we were curious to see to what extent the imagined solidarity relations would extend to the European level, involving EU institutions and policy programmes.

Our results, however, showed a remarkable prominence of the nation-state as a reference point. The dominant perception in the focus groups was that solidarity and reciprocity relationships unfolded between countries. This was obvious in the natural disaster scenario but also when participants discussed financial crises, where primarily countries were seen as helping other countries. Existing EU-level institutions, such as the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM), were rarely mentioned, probably because they were unknown to most participants. The low cognitive salience of the EU level is especially interesting, because the time of the financial crisis saw a lot of controversy over the role of the EU in preventing the defaulting of member states and organising recovery measures. The interstate framing of solidarity was somewhat less prominent in the unemployment and inequality scenario. However, this might have been due to our suggestion that participants consider a European-level unemployment insurance scheme, which prompted them to think about EU institutions in charge.

Our analysis of narrative elements was able to shed more light on the cognitive dominance of the nation-state. We found that problems of solidarity, reciprocity and distribution perceived as fair are framed in the context of collective national experiences and narrated histories. The national experience provides a lens through which abstract issues are being discussed, and where real problems of European integration become tangible. For many participants, the EU is beyond their horizon of personal experience and becomes manifest only through national or local storylines. The Lithuanian focus groups, for instance, discussed restrictions on the use of private water wells due to European drinking water regulations as a problem and contentious issue. We found no mention of this topic, which apparently affected perceptions of the EU and its political "intrusiveness" in Lithuania, in any other country.

Regarding geography, a factor conditioning reciprocity that we had not anticipated in the beginning were regional groupings within the EU. We found them in the form of the Nordic and Baltic countries, both (self-)perceived as transnational communities of solidarity below the EU level. Within these groups, there are specific expectations towards the other members when it comes to solidarity. This was partly justified with the practical advantages of helping neighbouring countries, but it clearly had an identity dimension based on shared history and cultural proximity within the group. Interestingly, we did not find such a strong group identity, at least regarding perceived mutual duties of solidarity, among the Southern European countries. Exploring the regional level of solidarity and reciprocity relations

would be an interesting issue to address more systematically in future research. We turn to these prospects in the next section.

15.2 Political implications and perspectives for future research

The body of evidence that we found in our empirical research and summarised in this concluding chapter has implications for political practice in the EU. First of all, in case of emergencies, policy-makers should be confident that citizens across Europe are willing to act in solidarity. In terms of concrete political projects, our results call for caution regarding the viability of “social Europe.” As discussed earlier, participants accepted the need for solidarity in Europe and for the ideal of cohesion. They also seemed to be willing to accept a certain redistribution of wealth across borders to achieve such goals. At the same time, participants were wary of grand social policy schemes organised by “Brussels.” In particular, the proposal of a European-level unemployment insurance scheme was met with scepticism of the practical and also the more principled kind, pointing to normative problems of democracy and fairness. We also found that citizens are not overly enthusiastic about solving disparities in a strictly uniform and EU-directed way (see also Busemeyer et al. 2023; Eick et al. 2023).

The scepticism about EU-level social policies that was apparent across countries and sociodemographic groups does not seem to bode well for further European integration in the social policy field. However, a closer inspection of the arguments revealed that the main bone of contention is how to formulate concrete policy measures adapted to local contexts and needs. Setting common goals and some policy guidance at the EU level does not seem to be a problem. However, setting priorities and implementing measures on the ground is primarily perceived as an issue for domestic politics, attributed to national or local government. Such calls for devolution were voiced by participants in both net payer and net recipient countries.

It is important to point out that this preference for subsidiarity is not simply a case of nationalism. Our focus group transcripts suggest that, for participants, this seemed to be more of an epistemic issue. The main concern that citizens formulated was a perceived lack of knowledge about, and consequently a lack of responsiveness to, conditions on the ground. Of course, EU structural funds are already implemented today with ample participation from the regions targeted.² If the EU were to take on a stronger role in fighting unemployment, it should engage with local stakeholders and populations across the territory in a similar way.

Let us turn, in a final step, to the implications for future academic research. One methodological lesson we learned from the project was that focus groups are not the best gathering ground for narratives. Initially, we had assumed that we could identify in-depth elaborated narratives represented by the participants during the focus group discussions (Heinelt and Egner 2021) – at least for countries and social groups. However, full-fledged narratives were scarce. One reason for this was probably that the available material, namely the transcripts of the 90-minute focus group discussions, was simply insufficient to track down narratives. It should

be noted that in studies in which narratives are uncovered, in addition to transcripts of interviews, a large number of other documents are usually studied – such as newspaper articles, policy documents or even minutes of parliamentary debates (see, e.g. Heinelt et al. 2022).

It seems that in the 90-minute time frame, participants simply did not have the opportunity to present detailed narratives in the focus group discussions. This was due to instructions for the moderators to involve all participants in the discussion as equally as possible and to ask participants who were heavily involved in the discussion to exercise restraint. Participants were therefore almost forced to make shorter statements and to mark them with reference to commonplaces as reasoned. Therefore, we concentrated finally on topoi and storylines but – as briefly outlined in Section 3.5.2 – we looked also at a broader spectrum of narrative elements. Topoi and storylines can – as shown in Chapter 14 of the book – explain the reasoning behind a statement or its embeddedness in a particular storyline. How this actually plays out for individual countries and the social groups included in the focus group discussions has become visible in the country chapters of this book.

Considering the resources which were used to organise and conduct the underlying empirical analysis (focus groups in multiple countries, transcription, qualitative content analysis of the text corpus), it is not easy to imagine how the standard suggestion for a forthcoming research agenda – rolling out the design to as many cases as possible – could work. Nevertheless, the research we did only included EU member states that are also members of the Eurozone. We picked those countries because we suspected that their membership in three economically defined strata (“donors”, “recipients” and “receivers-and-maybe-soon-to-be donors”) would result in significant differences concerning the central question of who owes what to whom, and why. This line of reasoning can also be adapted to the whole EU, because the EU even without considering the Euro as a common currency can be described as a system of redistribution via membership fees and spending schemes like the structural funds. It is fair to assume that the EU is commonly framed as a redistributive union, because if not, then why have a Brexit? So, including member countries beyond the Eurozone into a research project would surely broaden our knowledge about solidarity in the EU.

It would be even more interesting to go beyond the EU for obvious reasons. Since the EU is very important for other countries in Europe, going into the neighbouring countries could produce useful insights. One could compare countries that have clear ambitions to join the EU in the near future (e.g. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia) and those that have not, but are in treaty relations with the EU (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland). It would be interesting to know if sentiments considering solidarity differ among citizens of those countries and how they are affected by the context (e.g. natural disaster scenario vs. self-inflicted budgetary crisis).

There is another possibility to broaden the perspective. Instead of reaching out horizontally (i.e. to other countries in Europe), we could examine different notions of solidarity and reciprocity by digging into different regions within EU member states. It is no secret that there is considerable domestic variation within some

member states regarding attitudes towards the EU, arguably fuelled by diverging levels of economic development and political influence. It would be interesting to explore if those regional perspectives also play a role. Not least, European regions that stretch across national borders could be very instructive cases to study, since they already have more local experience with sharing problems, policies and solutions.

Notes

- 1 As another form of solidarity, Scholz (2015: 732–733) deals relatively briefly with political solidarity. By this she means support for political movements – such as the (international) workers’ movement, the women’s movement or the anti-globalisation movement.
- 2 EU cohesion policy, and in particular the EU Structural Funds, already operate in a way that does not seem to be too different from what participants were demanding. They are guided by the principles of

“*concentration* on a limited number of objectives with the focus on the least developed regions; *multi-annual programming* based on analysis, strategic planning and evaluation; *additionality* ensuring that member states do not substitute national by EU expenditure; *partnership* in the design and implementation of programmes involving national, sub-national and EU actors, the social partners and non-government organisations ensuring ownership and transparency of the interventions”.

(Petzold 2022: 123; see also Heinelt and Petzold 2018)

Annexes

Annex 1: Attitudes towards the EU

	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Latvia</i>	<i>Lithuania</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>EU</i>
Trust in the EU ¹ (per cent of tend to trust)	52	48	39	50	59	54	69	43	45	47
Trust in the EP ² (per cent of tend to trust)	52	53	44	47	53	57	70	43	40	50
Support for the EURO ³ (per cent of the support)	78	83	71	81	71	83	84	78	80	69
Satisfied with EU Democracy ⁴ (per cent of “very satisfied” and “fairly satisfied”)	51	53	35	57	57	55	74	47	55	55
Future of EU ⁵ (per cent of “very optimistic” and “fairly optimistic”)	62	63	45	56	68	70	77	56	68	62
My voice counts in the EU ⁶ (per cent of “totally agree” and “tend to agree”)	44	58	27	20	25	54	47	45	41	44
Feeling of European citizenship ⁷ (per cent of “yes, definitely” and “yes, to some extent”)	75	82	57	71	76	74	85	76	81	71
Image of EU ⁸ (per cent of “very positive” and “fairly positive”)	43	49	32	40	49	46	62	35	40	44

1 Measured by responses to the following question: “Please tell me if you tend to trust or tend not to trust the European Union.”

2 Measured by the question: “Do you tend to trust or tend not to trust the European Parliament?”

3 Measured by the question: “Please tell for each statement, whether you are for it or against it.” A European economic and monetary union with one single currency, the Euro.

4 Measured by the question: “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in the European Union?”

5 Measured by the question: “Would you say that you are very optimistic, fairly optimistic, fairly pessimistic or very pessimistic about the future of the EU?”

6 Measured by the question: “Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: my voice counts in the EU.”

7 Measured by the question: “Please tell to what extent the following statement corresponds or not to your own opinion: you feel you are a citizen of the EU.”

8 Measured by the question: “In general, does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?”

Source: Eurobarometer (2022), Winter 2021–2022

Annex 2 Responses of citizens of the selected countries to the question “What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?” (Share of responses in per cent, max. 2)

	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Latvia</i>	<i>Lithuania</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>EU</i>
Crime	6	6	5	3	4	3	3	8	4	6
Economic situation	20	15	21	24	17	14	20	25	28	21
Rising prices/ inflation/cost of living	18	29	16	32	26	15	20	31	18	24
Taxation	2	1	1	5	6	1	4	2	4	3
Unemployment	2	3	12	5	4	1	6	5	17	8
Terrorism	7	5	6	8	9	6	8	8	3	6
EU’s influence in the world	27	18	17	10	15	23	8	13	8	12
The state of Member States’ public finances	31	22	27	11	13	17	26	26	17	18
Immigration	22	20	24	28	34	33	20	21	20	22
Pensions	2	3	1	2	2	1	3	4	4	4
The environment and climate change	33	37	15	12	14	50	25	13	15	26
Energy supply	15	16	10	30	12	20	7	12	14	16
Health	10	13	38	12	12	10	26	18	25	21

Source: Eurobarometer (2022), Winter 2021–2022

Annex 3 Responses of citizens of the selected countries to the question “Which of the following are the most positive results of the EU?” (Share of responses in per cent, max. 3)

	<i>Finland</i>	<i>Germany</i>	<i>Greece</i>	<i>Latvia</i>	<i>Lithuania</i>	<i>The Netherlands</i>	<i>Portugal</i>	<i>Slovakia</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>EU</i>
Peace among the member states of the EU	54	65	54	41	50	51	29	38	39	47
The free movement of people, goods and services within the EU	61	59	62	66	76	65	72	67	52	53
The Euro	36	30	11	28	8	26	28	27	20	22
Solidarity among member states of the EU	12	21	23	13	20	21	22	21	19	22
Education exchange programmes such as ERASMUS	14	14	20	35	23	11	20	30	14	19
The Common Agricultural Policy	3	5	7	5	8	5	3	11	8	9
The economic power of the EU	6	20	30	15	18	16	23	18	29	21
The political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world	18	19	34	9	15	25	15	13	21	19
The level of social welfare (healthcare, education, pensions) in the EU	16	12	8	18	18	16	22	13	16	17
The protection of the environment	16	10	9	12	10	14	13	11	11	14
Care for human well-being	18	12	3	14	12	14	9	11	10	11

Source: Eurobarometer (2022), Winter 2021–2022

Annex 4 Turnout in European elections in selected countries (in per cent)

<i>Country</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>1987</i>	<i>1989</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1999</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2014</i>	<i>2019</i>
Germany	65.7		56.8		62.3	60.0		45.2	43.0	43.3	48.1	61.4
The Netherlands	58.1		50.9		47.5	35.7		30.0	39.3	36.8	37.3	41.9
Greece		81.5	80.6		80.0	73.2		70.3	63.2	52.5	60.0	58.7
Spain				68.5	54.7	59.1		63.1	45.1	44.9	43.8	60.7
Portugal				72.4	51.1	35.5		39.9	38.6	36.8	33.7	30.8
Finland							57.6	30.1	39.4	38.6	39.1	40.8
Lithuania									48.4	21.0	47.4	53.5
Latvia									41.3	53.7	30.2	33.5
Slovakia									17.0	19.6	13.1	22.7
EU total	62.0		59.0		58.4	56.7		49.5	45.5	43.0	42.6	50.7

Source: European Parliament (2021a)

Annex 5 Extract of the codebook

<i>Code</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Guiding note for coding</i>	<i>Example of corpus segment</i>
Unidirectional support	The participant refers to one-sided support without any or clear expectation of getting something in return.	Support can include different types of assistance/help (e.g. monetary/financial support, transfer of knowledge, support in kind).	“I [. . .] think that the European Union should behave in such a way that, basically, the member states will somehow coordinate this aid and support for the affected areas [or country]” (SKFG1_F5).
Reciprocity	The participant refers to the mutual exchange of support and/or a clearly expressed expectation of return.	Support can include different types of assistance/help (e.g. monetary/financial support, transfer of knowledge, support in kind). Coded <i>only</i> when two-way direction of help is explicitly articulated.	“The neighbouring countries and other countries of the EU would most probably give some aid, [. . .] because at some point the other countries might as well face this disaster, and they would very much appreciate the help [of others]” (LVFG3_F3)
Need	The participant discusses presence or absence of the necessity for help.	Typically, the word “need” (or a synonym) appears in the text.	“But I think the moment a country would not be able to solve it themselves, a lot of money and resources would go there at that very moment, but only if there is a real crisis” (NLFG3_F1).
Deservingness	The participant argues about the question who deserves support and why.	It is related to what a potential recipient of the support did before the situation where the need for solidarity occurred. Is the hardship self-inflicted?	“I would say, it depends a bit on the context. So, let’s say a country has gone crazy and taken out a lot of high loans etc. [. . .] or if they want to retire people at 40, then I think I would be a bit less generous than if it were due to other factors” (NLFG3_F4).
Practicability	The participant discusses if, when and how support is feasible and/or practical.	Practicability refers to the potential receiver of the support (i.e. will the help make it better where it arrives? Does the help fit to the problem?).	“Organisation and coordination are also necessary. Maybe [. . .] a single part [. . .] helps more than if [. . .] 2000 people come to clean up although there are already enough people bustling about” (DEFG2_M5).

(Continued)

Annex 5 (Continued)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Guiding note for coding</i>	<i>Example of corpus segment</i>
Availability and ability	The participant discusses if and what resources could be used for helping others, i.e. what resources are available or absent.	Availability and ability refer to the potential provider of the support (i.e. is one able/does one has available what is needed to help the other?). Includes ability (or lack thereof) to afford to be solidary.	“You are part of a club called European Union and we all help each other in the ways we have said before, in the possibilities that each country can” (ESFG2_F3).
Obligation	The participant expresses presence or absence of level of duty or responsibility as the reason to be solidary.	Usually accompanied by some reference point that encourages obligation (e.g. must, should, duty, humanity, inner commitment).	“But certainly, part of the obligations to be part of [the union] I suppose is to help in crises, so something must be done” (FIFG2_M4).
Fairness and equality	Participant argues about fairness of enactment of solidarity at the EU and between the EU member states (both in regard to contributions to solidarity and receipt of solidarity).	This code does not refer to the phenomenon of social (in)equality in a society, but fairness and equality as linked to the solidarity in the EU and between the EU members states. References to the presence or absence of equal treatment, preferential treatment, discrimination. There could be mentions of solidarity-related “shares”, “proportions”, “fair rules” and similar.	“I think it’s not more or less, I think it’s proportional to the economic capacity of each state, its population and so on and so forth. It’s relative I mean” (ELFG2_M1).
Cost and benefit	The participant considers or weighs out both the cost of support and the benefit.	To code it, <i>both</i> cost and benefit have to be discussed. At least one aspect has to be expressed explicitly (or be clearly linked to a question or a context of the discussion).	“And it is also necessary to understand whether these costs [. . .] translate into improvements in [. . .] the quality of life of people, right? [. . .] If it translates into improvements in the indexes of what is the quality of life of people. Not only are costs just because, based on spending only, but on concrete results in people’s lives” (PTFG3_M2).

(Continued)

Annex 5 (Continued)

<i>Code</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Guiding note for coding</i>	<i>Example of corpus segment</i>
Conditionality	The participant argues for or against certain conditions that must be met or imposed when/if support is to be provided.	Can refer to any kind of rules and/or conditions directed towards a potential recipient of support. Usually introduced by if/when-sentences, stating requirements or qualifications to be met for being helped.	“Then there must be some form of punishment or compensation included in the picture if there is to be help. If [. . .] corrupt things that have happened or similar [that have caused the crisis]” (FIG2_M2).
Convergence	The participant expresses aspiration for processes aiming at or leading towards EU member states getting closer in certain regards.	Reflects the idea of convergence as a goal and/or as a consequence. Typically includes description of units (individuals or countries) moving towards each other regarding living conditions or indicator-wise. Has to address the convergence as a <i>goal</i> or <i>consequence</i> of politics, not as a fact.	“For me equality yes, but upwards. In other words, we should not be equal so that we are all worse, of course. Here everybody has to be able to eat a piece of meat a week, in any part of the European Union. Absolutely, upwards. With the help of whatever, with the contribution of whatever” (ESFG1_F3).
Subsidiarity	The participant assumes that the EU or member states should not take action if an issue can or must be solved at a lower level of government or by the potential recipient(s) of support.	Reference to one’s own responsibility in solving problems or dealing with issues. Delegating responsibility to the country, local or individual level to solve problems and not to higher levels or to others. Likewise, if a solution at the EU level, or in cooperation with member states, is not preferred or deemed necessary.	“To do something about your own country’s unemployment in the first place and not waste energy on any other country” (FIG2_M1).

Annex 6 Key terms in EU languages

	<i>Solidarity</i>	<i>Reciprocity</i>	<i>Fairness</i>	<i>Cohesion</i>
<i>Selected cases</i>				
Finland	solidaarisuutta	vastavuoroisuus	oikeudenmukaisuus*	yhteenguuluvuus
Germany	Solidarität	Gegenseitigkeit	Fairness	Zusammenhalt
Greece	αλληλεγγύη (allilengýi)	αμοιβαότητα (<i>amoivaiótita</i>)	δικαιοσύνη *(<i>dikaíosýni</i>)	συνοχή (<i>synochi</i>)
Latvia	solidaritāte	savstarpīgums	taisnīgums *	kohēzija
Lithuania	solidarumas	abipusiškumas	teisingumas *	sanglauda
The Netherlands	solidariteit	wederkerigheid	eerlijkheid (cf. honesty)	samenhang
Portugal	solidariedade	reciprocidade	justiça* (or equidade)	coesão
Slovakia	solidarita	reciprocita	spravodlivosť *	súdržnosť
Spain	solidaridad	reciprocidad	justicia * (or equidad)	cohesión
<i>Other EU member states</i>				
Austria	<i>[see Germany]</i>			
Belgium	<i>[see France, The Netherlands & Germany]</i>			
Bulgaria	солидарност (<i>solidarnost</i>)	реципрочност (<i>retsiprochnost</i>)	справедливост* (<i>spravedlivost</i>)	сплотеност (<i>splotenost</i>)
Croatia	solidarnost	reciprocitet	poštenje	kohezija
Cyprus	<i>[see Greece]</i>			
Czechia	solidarita	vzájemnost	spravedlnost *	soudržnost
Denmark	solidariske	gensidighed	retfærdighed*	samhørighed
Estonia	solidaarus	vastastikkus	õiglus *	ühtekuuluvus
France	solidarité	reciprocité	équité (or justice *)	cohésion
Hungary	szolidaritás	kölcsönösség	méltányosság	kohésió
Ireland	dhúthpháirtíocht	cómhalartacht	cothroime	comhtháthú
Italy	solidarietà	reciprocità	equità (or correttezza)	coesione
Luxembourg	<i>[see France & Germany]</i>			
Malta	solidarjetà	reċiproċità	ġustizzja *	koeżjoni
Poland	solidarność	wzajemność	uczciwość (cf. honesty)	spójność
Romania	solidaritatea	reciprocitate	echitate (or corectitudine)	coeziune
Slovenia	solidarinost	recipročnost	pravičnost *	kohezija
Sweden	solidaritet	ömsesidighet	rättvisa *	sammanhållning

* If also justice

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