

# European Solidarity and the Politics of Blame and Reciprocity

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European solidarity can be built or broken on popular ideas of blame and reciprocity. But political leaders are more than passive conduits for public opinion. Drawing on social science research, Sharon Baute, Max Heermann, and Dirk Leuffen argue that the narratives we use to explain Europe's many crises are key to the emergence of shared European solutions.

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In the last decade, the European Union has faced multiple shocks, including the Eurozone, climate, and so-called "refugee" crises, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic and the current energy crisis, dramatically intensified by Russia's war on Ukraine. These crises have challenged the economic, cultural, and political foundations of the European project, giving rise to numerous populist and Eurosceptic challenges. At the same time, new manifestations of European solidarity have emerged. The NextGenerationEU recovery fund but also the joint procurement of vaccines are prominent cases in point. While most experts agree that there are good reasons for promoting European integration, including on social issues, hurdles remain. A major challenge consists of the "constraining dissensus", exerted by a reluctant public opinion. The pitting of national democracy against the European public interest can be particularly troubling for European solidarity.

The good news, however, is that solidarity is not a fixed, unmalleable quantity. Rather it emerges through group dynamics and can be strengthened by engaged political actors. The question remains, how to promote European solidarity among the general public? Building on current social science research, we discuss two key ingredients that contribute to building public support for European solidarity, namely blame attribution and reciprocity.

## **Blame attribution: linking causes and solutions**

Solidarity builds on and reproduces social ties between donors and recipients. An extensive literature shows that Europeans' willingness to share risks and resources with others depends on whether they evaluate the receiving side as "deserving". This holds for interpersonal as well as inter-state solidarity. Are potential recipients truly in need? Are there other individuals, social groups or countries with greater or more pressing needs? And why are they in need? Have they failed to do their "homework", possibly because they are "lazy"? Do they maybe seek to freeride on the efforts of others? Or have they been detrimentally affected by dire circumstances beyond their control?

In European politics, Eurosceptic populists tend to fuel in-group versus out-group dichotomies, mostly along nationalist lines. Whereas populists in donor countries tend to blame foreign out-groups for their irresponsible and damaging policy decisions, populists in recipient countries regularly blame other out-groups for exerting structural dominance and thereby causing their misfortune. While blatantly simplified, such popular blame attribution can exert huge detrimental effects on European solidarity.

At least three important “blame targets” matter for citizens’ willingness to support European solidarity. The first concerns the attribution of blame to individuals. Unemployment is a typical example where opposing views about the role of individual agency exist. While some consider the unemployed as victims of external circumstances, others believe that unemployment is the result of a lack of individual effort. Research has shown that individuals show less solidarity with the unemployed if they believe that they do not try hard to find a job, and are consequently more supportive of tougher active labour market policies. Depicting the needy as personally responsible for their precariousness is not only detrimental to national but also European solidarity, as it makes people less likely to embrace joint EU-level efforts to reduce inequality (Baute & Pellegata, in press).

Likewise, socially constructed perceptions of government responsibility matter for European solidarity because these affect the perceived deservingness of countries. Our research highlights that Europeans are more willing to support mutual assistance between EU member states in the event of an environmental rather than a social crisis, even though the harm to people’s lives may be comparable (Baute, forthcoming). The key difference here again concerns the attribution of blame – while the environmental shock is arguably beyond human control, governments can be held responsible for economic and financial problems. Such blame attribution narratives are often shamelessly simplified, as paradigmatically highlighted by the social construction of the “Northern Saints” and “Southern Sinners” dichotomy during the Eurozone crisis. In contrast, the pandemic hit Europe as a natural, external shock for which no country could be blamed. Previously inconceivable measures such as the issuing of joint European debt became suddenly possible.

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During the Eurozone crisis, Chancellor Angela Merkel opposed the creation of joint EU debt, declaring that there would be no Eurobonds as long as she lived. Merkel’s government and her Christian Democrat Union / Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) party actively pushed the narrative of the “Southern sinners”, who were painted as responsible for their high public debt and economic woes due to misguided fiscal policies. EU financial support for Greece and other member states was only granted under strict conditionality, requiring governments in need to implement unpopular austerity policies which worsened social problems.

In contrast, when Europe was hit by Covid-19 in 2020, Merkel – after an initial period of reluctance – changed her reasoning. She argued that no country was to blame for the

health and economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. The virus was an external shock threatening the unity of the EU. By employing this novel blame attribution narrative, Merkel justified her joint proposal with Emmanuel Macron for a European recovery fund in front of the German Bundestag and German voters. Not only did her own partisan camp, the CDU/CSU, follow suit, but German public opinion did so too. Public support for joint EU debt increased over the course of 2020 and large parts of the population, including a majority of CDU/CSU supporters, approved of the Next Generation EU recovery fund (Heermann, Koos, Leuffen in press; Heermann, Leuffen, Tigges in press). Merkel thus convinced her party and the public to accept joint EU debt despite their long-standing opposition. Framing the pandemic as an exogenous shock was an important justification strategy on her part.

Europeans increasingly hold the EU accountable for a multitude of problems, including economic conditions, healthcare, and social welfare. In the context of the Eurozone crisis, empirical research covering 10 EU countries shows that substantial shares of the population believe that “EU-imposed” austerity policies worsened social and economic problems in weaker member states (Baute & Pellegata, in press). Such beliefs go hand in hand with stronger demands for EU-level welfare policies targeted at vulnerable groups such as the poor, the unemployed, and disadvantaged children.

Blaming the EU for adverse social outcomes thus may not mean a request for “more Europe” as such, but fosters a demand for EU-level initiatives that have an explicit social purpose and raise the profile of the EU as a provider of – instead of a threat to – social protection. The more citizens attribute the causes of social problems such as poverty and unemployment to the EU, the stronger their demand for compensatory policies on the EU level. Here, diverging perceptions about why some countries perform better than others (in terms of unemployment, poverty, or growth rates) matter and aligning the different perspectives across the net-contributor and net-recipient countries remains a challenge. Efforts to create common pan-European narratives must therefore be maintained and intensified.

## **Reciprocity: linking donors and recipients**

Reciprocity is another key feature of solidarity. In an insurance system, citizens agree to help each other out, given that everyone contributes their fair share. In the EU, it is states who have contractually – through the European treaties – agreed to contribute to the joint production of common goods. However, to access the fruits of European cooperation, member states bind themselves to commonly agreed norms and values.

Trust in reciprocity is of particular importance in the EU because solidarity at an EU-wide scale may evoke even greater fears of freeriding than domestic redistribution. From this perspective, it makes perfect sense that proposals for European unemployment risk-sharing find more traction among the general public when they are both generous and conditional. In other words, generous unemployment benefits are more likely to be supported if recipients commit themselves to actively look for work, accept job offers, and are sanctioned if they do not. In a similar vein, our research among Belgian voters shows that those who believe that the misuse of social benefits by benefit recipients is already very common within their national welfare state are also less willing to show solidarity beyond the national community.

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Reciprocity in the EU functions both at the interpersonal and inter-state levels. Our study on solidarity during the Covid-19 crisis reveals that citizens value direct commitments to reciprocity – they were more likely to support medical and financial aid for other member states when these states committed themselves to return such favours (Heermann, Koos, Leuffen, in press). A key feature of the EU is that it bundles a large number of policy areas. Reciprocal solidarity does not, therefore, need to be limited to a specific crisis or policy area. The role of the benefactor and beneficiary may depend on the problem at hand. Today's energy crisis, triggered by Russia's attack on Ukraine, provides a striking example. Germany, traditionally a donor state, now feels the need to ask its fellow EU member states for energy solidarity. This, for the moment rather unpleasant, experience, may strengthen solidarity in the longer run, as it underlines that helping others can pay off for all member states in times of crisis.

In fact, we find that citizens too value reciprocal support across issue areas. If we inform them that a country has previously participated in the admission and relocation of refugees, citizens are more likely to support help during the pandemic. In contrast, if a member state has failed to live up to its European commitments, for example regarding respect for the rule of law, citizens are less willing to support it in times of need. This logic of reciprocity thus also touches on the disturbing issue of democratic backsliding. In short, our research shows that citizens become more generous to those recipients who contribute to the European collective good and who honour the EU's community norms (Heermann, Koos, Leuffen, in press).

## **Political narratives, leadership and public support**

Solidarity is nothing fixed. Instead, public support for solidarity is conditional on citizens' perceptions of a particular crisis, as well as their relationship with those in need. Political leaders spin narratives about solidarity, reciprocity, and blame – and these narratives have significant effects on Europeans' willingness to share risks and resources with others in the EU.

Advocating for European solidarity therefore can take two forms. First, partisan elites can send a strong signal to their political supporters. Citizens often possess little knowledge of complex issues such as EU redistribution and therefore respond favourably to party cues by adopting the position of their preferred party or trusted leader. Second, beyond one's own camp, well-reasoned arguments can convince the undecided or reluctant moderates who, despite popular claims about rising polarisation, constitute large parts of national constituencies. Explaining complex issues to citizens may be cumbersome but it pays off. For example, informing citizens about how distributing vaccines to poorer countries reduces future virus mutations increases their support for vaccine solidarity.

It is therefore paramount for politicians to engage in ideational leadership. Those in support of European solidarity must be perseverant in shaping a European discourse that avoids

simplified and judgemental narratives about blame. All sides must respect reciprocity and common interests must be stressed, both in donor and recipient states. A [TV interview](#) by Germany's Minister of Economic Affairs [Robert Habeck](#) in July 2022 is a laudable illustration. In his call for European energy solidarity, Habeck openly admitted that Germany had neglected to diversify its gas imports in the past and is therefore at least partly to blame for its current predicaments. This is not only a clever diplomatic statement but may also – over time – convince German citizens that they themselves would profit from strengthening European solidarity. While other factors, such as in-group [identity and financial costs](#), also play a role in citizens' willingness to show European solidarity, these conditions are typically more difficult to change in the short run. By contrast, political leaders can shape public perceptions of blame and reciprocity more easily. By placing these two criteria at the centre of their narratives about European solidarity, they can build public support for a better integrated, and more social, Europe.

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