

Together we stand? Transnational solidarity in the EU in times of crises

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Abstract

After more than a decade of consecutive crises, the issue of transnational solidarity is becoming increasingly relevant for the European Union. This research note compares the current coronavirus disease-2019 crisis to previous ones and investigates the willingness of European Union citizens to show solidarity towards fellow member states. We test the influence of socio-political attitudes of citizens on solidarity preferences in three crisis scenarios. We analyse Greece and Germany as cases differently affected by the past decade's crises and cases that chose different crisis management strategies when facing the novel virus. Our findings indicate that solidarity is highest in a pandemic, while for all crisis scenarios it is higher in Greece than in Germany. Despite variations in the degree of solidarity associated relationships with socio-political attitudes remain consistent.

Keywords

COVID-19, crisis, European Union, transnational solidarity

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Introduction

For more than a decade, the European Union (EU) has been in a state of (almost) permanent crisis, the so-called polycrisis (Zeitlin et al., 2019). These crises have, on the one hand, threatened the community's well-being and even went as far as to endanger cohesion among its members. On the other hand, they have served as catalysts in opening up new windows of opportunity for further EU integration. These crises had one thing in common; even though economic redistribution was not always the core of the problem (e.g. migration and coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) crises), it certainly helped towards the crisis solution. During the European Sovereign Debt Crisis, several bailout packages for indebted states were introduced and later the EU implemented a financial compensation scheme to lessen the financial burden on countries willing to host refugees. In addition to that, the COVID-19 pandemic as the most recent crisis has given rise to more profound solidarity policies. This is also to be found outside the field of financial redistribution (e.g. vaccination procurement). Through this the EU has become an even stronger community of fate. This is of major importance, as the future of the EU is highly dependent on the willingness of its member states and citizens to share risks among each other (Baute et al., 2019). Furthermore, as Pellegata and Visconti (2021) show in another contribution of this special issue, citizens' preferences for transnational solidarity are also relevant for voting decisions, for instance, in European parliamentary and national elections; so, a change in these preferences could substantially alter the political direction of the EU. Consequently, transnational solidarity in the EU context in the times of crises is topical in academic research.

In this research note, we analyze two countries, Germany, and Greece, which were at the center stage of the three major crises mentioned above. The choice of those two cases is guided by applying the principle of the 'Most Different System Design'. Germany is chosen as a case where citizens can hardly imagine ever being at the receiving end of economic transnational solidarity. Greece offers a case with the exact opposite experience, as citizens have never experienced and cannot project themselves in a situation where they are not net beneficiaries of EU-wide financial risk sharing. Employing original public opinion data from a cross-sectional online survey conducted in July and August 2020, we study respondents' willingness to support transnational solidarity in three crisis scenarios – a national bankruptcy, a high influx of migrants and a pandemic – and connect transnational solidarity to individuals' sociopolitical attitudes. Our research is guided by the questions of whether citizens' transnational solidarity is *identical for various sorts of crises* or whether we come upon hitherto undetected patterns, particularly regarding the most recent crisis, the COVID pandemic. Furthermore, are preferences for transnational solidarity always *based on identical individual attitudes*? Our findings show significant variations between countries, with Greece being more solidary than Germany, and among crises scenarios hinting towards an influence of accountability for the causes of the crisis. The attitudinal basis of transnational solidarity remains stable across countries and crises. Finally, the research note provides new insights into citizens' visions of transnational solidarity in the aftermath of the pandemic and relates the anticipated outcome of this crisis to the respondents' expectations about the very future of the EU community.

Transnational solidarity and crises experiences

Solidarity in the EU can take several forms. We encounter ‘principles of national solidarity (which define obligations among citizens and residents of member states), principles of member state solidarity (which define obligations among member states), and principles of transnational solidarity (which define obligations among EU citizens as such)’ (Sangiovanni, 2013: 5). The present article takes an individual level perspective with EU citizens as holders of solidary attitudes. We focus on the concept of transnational solidarity, which here translates into solidarity with other EU member states and their populations and, most often, into public support for financial assistance for fellow EU states in trouble.

Solidarity had been a matter of European political debates for decades, as there often was a clear division between supporters and opponents of financial redistribution policies (Carrubba, 1997; Gabel, 1998; McLaren, 2005). The European Sovereign Debt Crisis emerging in late 2009 further fueled this already existing dissent on transnational solidarity. EU member states struggling to ensure creditworthiness on the international financial market received loans from the European Central Bank (ECB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as from more solvent EU member states. To institutionalize this regime, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) was created. All member states were obliged to contribute to its joint budget allowing members in need to borrow from it. While these actions could be described as solidarity measures, they were judged with suspicion in creditors and debtor states alike. In creditor states, many citizens feared that the loans would be misused or not paid back (Gerhards et al., 2019: 246) and thus supported the introduction of austerity measures (Ferrera and Pellegata, 2017: 7–8). Conversely, numerous citizens in debtor states opposed such deals precisely because of the austerity measures attached to them (Vanhercke et al., 2016).

The high influx of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016 revealed further attitudinal divisions and put transnational solidarity to another test. In 2015, EU member states received over 1.3 million first-time asylum seekers (Eurostat, 2021), which was more than twice as many as in previous years. This time, the dissent was between first-point-of-entry countries, which faced considerably higher numbers of asylum applications than others (Thielemann, 2018), and the rest of the community. The other countries either acted in solidarity – accepting their fair share of migrants like Germany and Sweden – or tried to keep numbers low by enforcing stricter national immigration policies like some Eastern European countries. The countries refusing to accept migrants were quite successful with their strategy because EU agreements supported their stance. For instance, the Dublin Regulation transfers responsibilities for processing asylum seekers to the respective first-point-of-entry country into the EU (Hatton, 2015).

In early 2020, COVID-19 quickly spread around the globe and caused a global pandemic. What distinguishes this crisis from previous ones is that it was completely unexpected, national ownership was low and the political, social, economic and health-related (mid- and long-term) consequences of the pandemic are still difficult to assess. At the state- and EU -level, solidarity was a major issue from the very beginning. While some states, including those that were severely hit by the first wave, demanded substantial

financial support from the EU institutions and fellow member states, others tried to invoke established crisis instruments (such as the ESM) and national protectionism to combat the virus, amongst others the so-called ‘frugal four’. At the EU summit in July 2020, the EU members agreed upon the biggest recovery package in the history of the community. In addition to an unprecedented EU-budget of €1074 billion for the budget period of 2021–2027, agreement was also reached on the introduction of the NextGenerationEU fund with a total volume of €750 billion (European Council, 2020). Furthermore, the EU members agreed to collaborate on ordering and distributing the novel vaccines to ensure timely availability in all member states.

Sociopolitical attitudes and preferences for transnational solidarity

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management in the EU most often equaled financial redistribution amongst its member states. Consequently, a large strand of literature focuses on public support for monetary intra-EU redistribution policies. This research shows that individuals placing themselves on the left side of the socioeconomic policy continuum tend to be more supportive of notions of transnational solidarity in the form of intra-EU money transfers (for instance Baute et al., 2019; Daniele and Geys, 2015; Gerhards et al., 2019; Kuhn et al., 2018).

In addition to citizens’ self-positioning on the left-right axis, transnational solidarity policies transcend national borders; so, individual support for EU membership should underpin willingness to show solidarity. This connection has already been revealed in earlier studies on the topic. While Eurosceptic attitudes promote rather negative preferences for transnational solidarity, positive feelings towards the EU foster the desire to demonstrate solidarity (Baute et al., 2019; Gerhards et al., 2019). According to Kuhn et al. (2020), two conditions seem to be necessary for individuals to support transnational redistribution within the EU: left-leaning economic attitudes and support for EU integration.

In view of the polycrisis affecting the EU in the past decade, the question arises as to whether these observations are context independent and thus applicable to different crisis scenarios. In this research note, we therefore ask: Is citizens’ transnational solidarity *identical for various sorts of crises* or do we come upon hitherto undetected patterns, particularly regarding the most recent crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic? Does the same set of *individual attitudes* always inform preferences for transnational solidarity, regardless of the type of crisis?

While the fight against the virus clearly has strong economic as well as financial aspects, it adds a novel layer to European solidarity, namely health issues. Previous research has shown that citizens tend to support a more central role of the EU when it comes to health policies (De Ruijter et al., 2020). Therefore, public willingness to share risks at the EU level seems to be relatively high in this respect. Concerning the situation during the COVID-19 pandemic, findings from a German-wide survey conducted in May 2020 indicate that citizens are more willing to support medical solidarity than financial solidarity towards other EU member states (Koos and Leuffen, 2020). However, a large share of citizens in five EU member states evaluates the recovery

fund NextGenerationEU positively (Bremer et al., 2020). According to a public opinion survey conducted in 13 EU countries in May 2020, when facing a pandemic transnational solidarity is comparatively higher than in times of an economic crisis or a high number of incoming asylum seekers (Bremer and Genschel, 2020).

In our analyses, we therefore investigate whether this occurred after the first COVID-19 wave abated in summer 2020 and analyse which differences in sociopolitical motivations between crises can be mapped.

Transnational solidarity in times of crisis: the case of Germany and Greece

The southern EU countries that were hit hardest by the European Sovereign Debt Crisis are also most often the first-point-of-entry countries for asylum seekers. Therefore, transnational solidarity as a preference could be expected to be higher within the population of the debtor and first-point-of-entry countries than within creditor and non-first-point-of-entry ones, simply because the latter do not have a common experience of need. To answer our research questions, we chose two countries that played significant, but different, roles in both crises: Germany and Greece. While Greece was severely hit by the European Sovereign Debt Crisis and needed international financial support, Germany was one of the creditor states. Thus, the two countries were/represented the two opposed ends of the solidarity question. As a main entry point into the EU, Greece also faces large numbers of asylum seekers along its shoreline. Germany was a popular destination state and chose to open its borders to welcome large numbers of asylum seekers. However, the number of asylum seekers relative to its population size remained lower than in other EU countries (Eurostat, 2021). Regarding the latest crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, Greece and Germany had very different starting points. The Greek health system was under significant pressure already due to several years of austerity measures and could not handle a severe COVID-19 wave. For this reason, in March 2020 Greece opted for a strict lock-down lasting 42 days. The measures were amongst the strictest in the EU and kept infection rates low. By contrast, Germany features a comparatively high number of intensive care units (ICUs) in relation to its population size. The country chose a less strict and shorter lock-down in March 2020, which resulted in higher infection numbers than in Greece but was in general judged as success since the country coped with the crisis quite well. Following this, we could expect transnational solidarity to be more attractive for Greeks than for Germans in the aftermath of the first COVID-19 wave. Whether this assumption is empirically supportable is examined in the following section.

Data and operationalization

We rely on original public opinion data by the survey *Sociopolitical attitudes and preferences in Germany and Greece in times of COVID-19* (Katsanidou et al., 2021) collected in Germany and Greece in late July and August 2020.¹ Thus, the survey ran immediately after the European Council agreed to increase the common budget to a historic level and to install the crisis fund NextGenerationEU.² Our research interest lies in studying and

comparing transnational solidarity in various crisis scenarios. To be more precise, we capture respondents' willingness to grant financial assistance to fellow EU members under the imprint of three crises: a national bankruptcy, a high influx of migrants,³ and a pandemic. It is important to note that we did not pose questions on (retrospective) assessments of actual crises but formulated the items rather broad talking about hypothetical crisis events (see the Online appendix). In both countries, solidarity measures correlate significantly moderate to high. For the German sample, correlation is strongest between solidarity in an economic crisis and high migration pressure (correlation coefficient equals 0.67), whereas correlation is lowest between solidarity in times of high migration influx and a pandemic situation (correlation coefficient equals 0.59). For Greece, correlation is also strongest between an economic disaster and high migration pressure (correlation coefficient equals 0.61) while we find the lowest correlation between a scenario of high migration pressure and a pandemic (correlation coefficient equals 0.47).

Our comparative analysis of transnational solidarity across crisis scenarios proceeds in three steps: first, we analyse public support for financial assistance in each of the described crisis scenarios and compare respondents' willingness to act in solidarity across countries and crisis events. Second, we run linear regression analyses to check which sociopolitical attitudes relate to respondents' transnational solidarity and once again, whether differences exist across the crises and countries studied. In the last step of our analyses, we investigate participants' evaluation of transnational solidarity after COVID-19 and their assessment of whether the EU will suffer long-term damage from this latest crisis or not.

For our regression analyses, we add several independent variables to our empirical models, namely a variable measuring left-right socio-economic self-placement, respondents' identification with the EU, information on attitudes towards immigration, political interest, as well as sociodemographic variables (gender, age and education). To control for general attitudes towards redistribution policies, we further include a variable asking for respondents' willingness to show fiscal solidarity towards another region in their home country. For an overview on question wordings and more descriptive statistics see the Online appendix.⁴

Results

Before turning to the results of our linear regression models, we first take a look at public support for transnational solidarity in the two countries under investigation. Figure 1 graphically presents evidence for transnational solidarity in the event of a national bankruptcy (a), during times of high migration numbers (b) and in the case of a pandemic (c). For both countries, solidarity is highest in times of a pandemic and rather low when fellow EU member states face high migration pressure. Moreover, when looking at Germany, support for monetary assistance within the EU is almost identical for the economic crisis and the high migration scenario. These findings are in line with data collected during Europe's first COVID-19 wave in April 2020, which shows that solidarity during a pandemic was relatively higher than for any other time period (Bremer and Genschel, 2020).

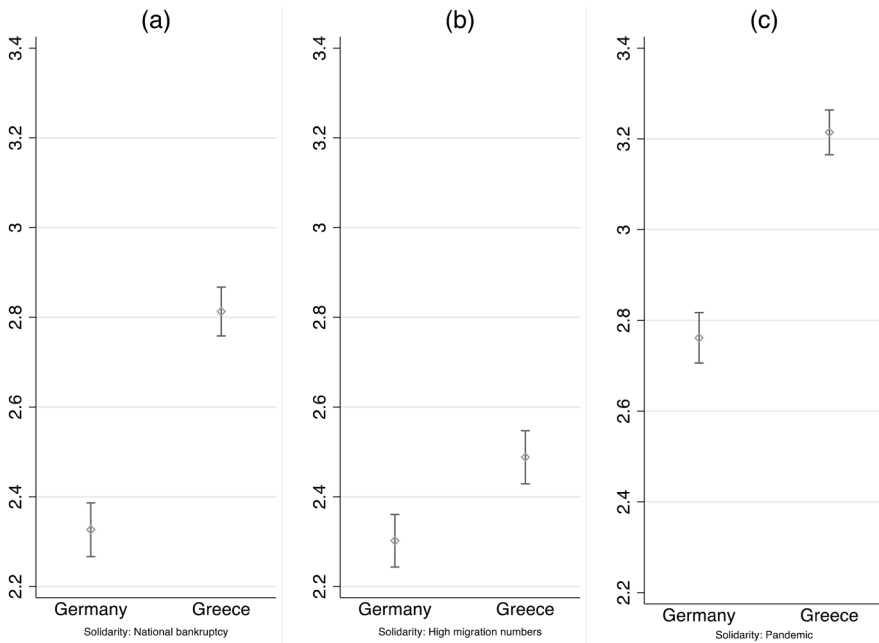


Figure 1. Public support for transnational solidarity (per crisis and country) in July and August 2020. National bankruptcy (a), high migration numbers (b), pandemic (c).

Note: Means and confidence intervals. All variables range from 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree). Weighted presentation: Weighted by age and sex. Respondents were surveyed about hypothetical crisis scenarios, not about retrospective assessments of actual crises.

Comparing transnational solidarity across countries, we find significant differences between the two states and for all crisis scenarios. Transnational solidarity is always significantly higher in Greece. This may reflect the previous experience of Greek respondents as net recipients of financial assistance since Greece was hit harder by previous crises and its health system was more at risk of collapsing in the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Germany, the situation is reverse. Whereas during the European Sovereign Debt Crisis the country was the largest creditor country and voluntarily accepted high numbers of asylum seekers during the ‘long summer of migration’ (Della Porta, 2018); the COVID-19 pandemic puts the country to a severe test as well. Consequently, international cooperation to battle the virus might seem more attractive for German respondents in this time of high uncertainty. However, during the first COVID-19 wave in spring, the number of infections and fatalities were comparatively lower and the health system was not at the brink of collapse in Germany compared to surrounding countries, which might, once again, explain the significant discrepancy between the respondents in the two countries.

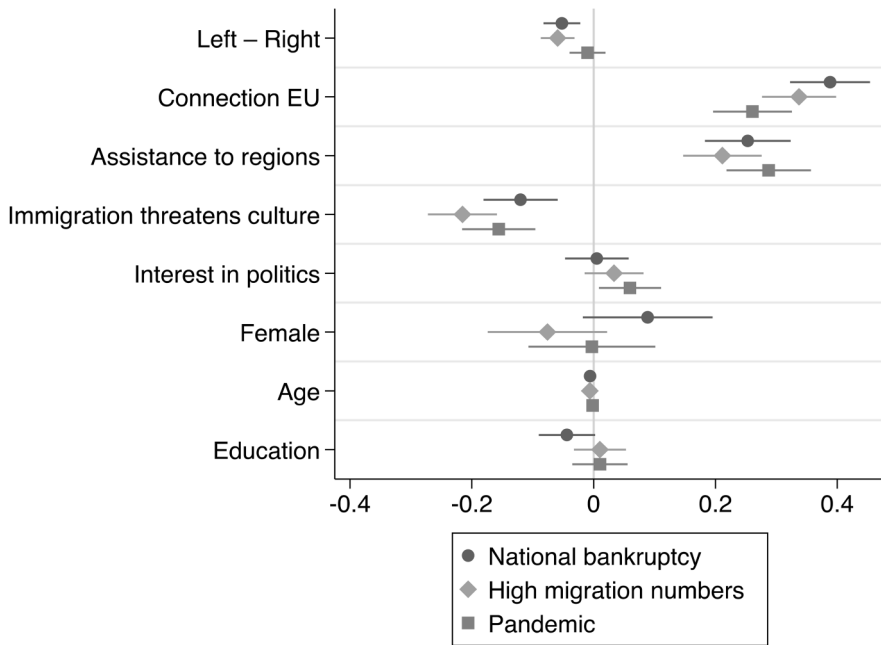


Figure 2. Linear regression analysis (per crisis scenario) for Germany.

Note: Regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. For more information see the Online appendix.

Turning from these first insights to citizens' underlying motivations to support financial crisis aid, we begin with presenting our regression results for Germany (Figure 2). For all three crisis scenarios and in line with the literature, transnational solidarity is higher among self-identifying left-wing and pro-EU citizens. Moreover, being in favor of redistribution policies within Germany increases respondents' transnational solidarity while having adverse attitudes towards migrants shows a negative effect. Despite different levels of transnational solidarity (Figure 1), regression effects do not differ significantly between the scenarios. What we can say, however, is that in times of a pandemic, German respondents tend to base their support for financial assistance to a lesser extent on their economic left-right placement, and more on their support for intra-state redistribution or on their interest in politics – even though these differences are not significant compared to other hypothetical crisis scenarios.

For the Greek respondents (Figure 3), a similar picture emerges: here, we also do not find significant differences in the regression coefficients between the crisis scenarios. What distinguishes the Greek data from the German data, however, is that transnational solidarity is not related to the left-right self-positioning of the respondents in any crisis scenario.⁵ This is in line with findings on dimensionality of the Greek political space (Katsanidou and Otjes, 2016).

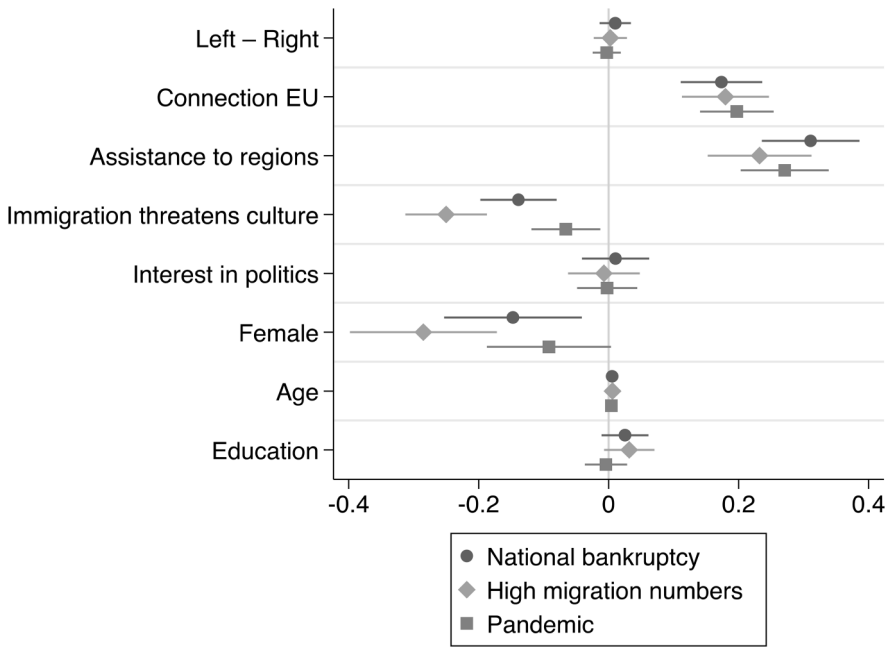


Figure 3. Linear regression analysis (per crisis event) for Greece.

Note: Regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals. For more information see the Online appendix.

Transnational solidarity and the future of the European integration project

Finally, we turn our attention to the question of how people in the two countries envision the EU community post COVID-19. The pandemic is often described as a crossroad for the future of Europe (Tzannatos, 2020). The president of the European Council, Charles Michel, claimed that the EU will emerge from the crisis stronger than before (Diffley, 2020) but does the EU population share this appraisal? Figure 4 portrays respondents' backing for an EU-wide solution to fight an economic crisis following the pandemic (a) and presents their thoughts on the state of the EU after COVID-19 (b).⁶ Keeping in mind that the survey was conducted shortly after the adoption of an EU-wide common approach to crisis management on the 21 July 2020, the following picture emerges.

Starting with part (a) we notice again a significantly higher willingness to participate in an EU-wide solution to combat an economic crisis following the pandemic for Greek respondents than German respondents – although support seems to be quite high in both countries. The high level of support in Germany comes as a surprise because the proposed joint EU-level solution implies imposing a heavier financial burden on richer member states. This can be interpreted as a positive signal for the EU and for the future cohesion within the community.

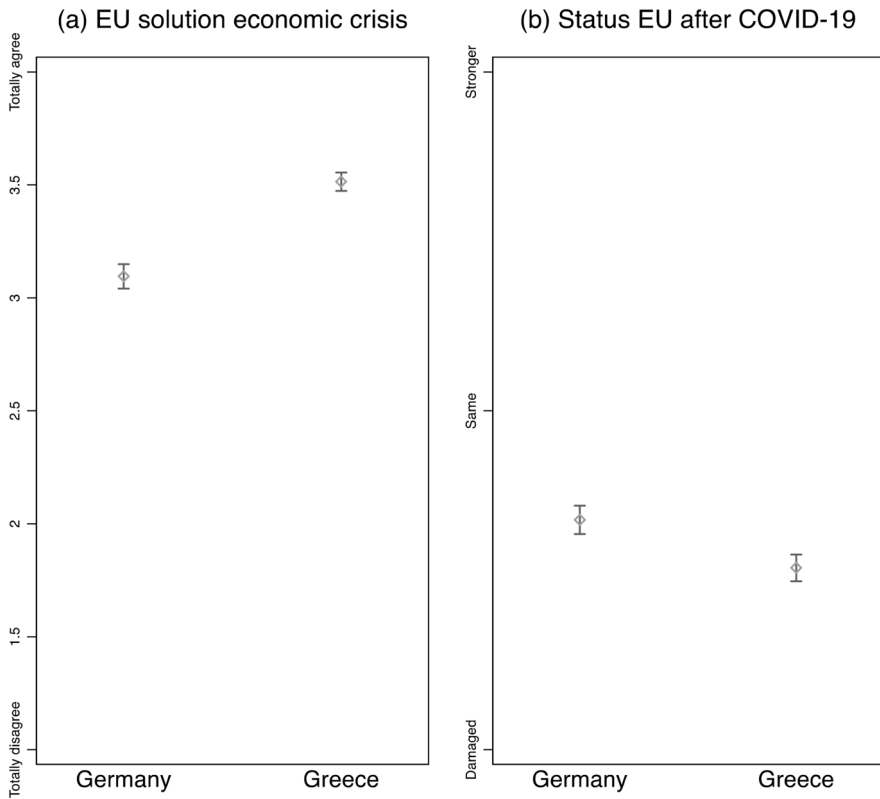


Figure 4. EU's future after COVID-19. (a) EU solution economic crisis, (b) Status EU after COVID-19.

Note: Weighted presentation (weighted by age and sex).

Looking at part (b) of the figure, the data shows that the average of respondents in both countries think that the EU will be more damaged after the crisis than it was before. A direct comparison of the two countries reveals an even gloomier and significantly worse envision for the Greek compared to the German respondents.

Conclusion

Our empirical findings allow us to draw the following conclusions. First, for all crisis scenarios covered in our analyses, transnational solidarity is comparatively higher in Greece than in Germany. These inter-country differences may be due to differing crisis experiences in the past as well as to the respective COVID-19 situation in the countries in summer 2020, when the survey took place. Second, transnational solidarity varies depending on the crisis scenario, which influences the perception of

accountability and deservingness of a country. Despite varying levels of relevance of economic redistribution, relations to socio-economic attitudes seem relatively stable over crisis events and across both states. Third, the willingness to jointly mitigate the economic consequences of the pandemic is generally high in this time of political and economic uncertainty, even if respondents' evaluation of the EU's future looks rather bleak in both countries.

One limitation that should be pointed out is that the selected cases, Greece and Germany, are rather extreme examples and the results are not generalizable to all EU member states. Future studies should build upon this and extend the analysis of transnational solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the comparison between crisis scenarios to more EU states. In addition, it would be desirable to use experimental designs or longitudinal data for more in-depth analyses and over-time effects. This would also enable scientists to study the causal relationship of sociopolitical attitudes and preferences for transnational solidarity in greater detail.

Our study provides a snapshot after the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In summer 2020, when we collected the data, many citizens in Germany and Greece were prepared to collaborate in fighting COVID-19 on the EU level. However, at the same time they were not overly optimistic about the future of the EU. Now the onus is on the national and European politicians to correctly engage citizens on the rocky journey of combating COVID-19. Signaling European unity across all political levels could increase public acceptance for the restrictive COVID-19 measures adopted and may also positively shape people's future assessment of the state of the EU.


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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. $N = 1000$ respondents per country; quota sample, data collected via online access panels by respondi. Data can be accessed through the GESIS data archive (Katsanidou et al., 2021).
2. For more information on the EU's recovery plan see: European Commission (2020).

3. Previous studies also analysed other aspects of solidarity in a migration crisis scenario (for instance Gerhards et al., 2019). However, granting financial support is one possible form of solidarity necessary to help states accommodating refugees.
4. In line with the work of Bartels (2003) and others, we assume that more general attitudes have an effect on specific, context-dependent preferences for transnational solidarity.
5. As robustness checks we ran our regression separately for each attitudinal variable of interest including control variables. The results change only minimally when using this stepwise approach, that is, the effect sizes are usually higher in the more isolated models. The only exceptions are the effect of left-right self-placement in Germany on financial aid during a pandemic and LR's impact in the Greece regression model on solidarity in times of high migration numbers. While the effects are not significant in the overall models, they are significant but rather small when considered in isolation.
6. For more information on the variables, see Table A1 in the Online appendix.

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