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Breaking the vicious cycle? Attempting EU solidarity through equality

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Solidarity between member states has unfortunately not been a given in the EU, but rather a precious good to be handled with care. This became most painfully obvious in crisis situations. However, solidarity is urgently needed to navigate the ambitious project of the European Union. Originally founded to ensure lasting peace through interdependence and strong economic relations, the EU presents an almost revolutionary idea. In fact, we have the privilege of living in one of the longest lasting periods of peace in Europe ever. This project has already surpassed the expectations (and probably wildest dreams) of its founders by moving towards a political union.

Currently, in this “post-Brexit vote” time, the EU faces multiple challenges. Multilateralism is questioned, and some choose to return to nationalist ideas. After multiple polarizing elections in the last years the European elections were tensely anticipated. The mixed results that in some parts leaned heavily towards euro-critic parties did little to lessen this tension.

What does solidarity actually mean? And what does it imply for the European Union? Solidarity simply means considering someone else’s problems your own and to assist in managing those. This signifies standing with those that have been dealt a worse hand, especially in cases where it might not necessarily affect you. Solidarity for me is further based on a belief in equality, that people are equal and should be treated accordingly. Nevertheless, the question of solidarity has been the defining problem of multiple policy issues. In the following, I will argue that solidarity is needed to tackle one of the EU’s crucial issues: gender inequality. I will add that gender equality, on the other hand, can also contribute to the status of solidarity in the EU, as it reduces existing discontent. The lack of equality (in general) can be a huge point of criticism towards the EU. Measures that attempt to improve equal representation among others, take this easy target away from Eurosceptics. Of course, gender inequality is only one part of the disparities in the EU. It could be

* All the opinions expressed in this briefing are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of Freie Universität Berlin – Sciences Po Paris nor of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA).

argued that socio-economic inequality is the bigger problem. I do agree with that (and would add that this kind of inequality further affects women disproportionately), but I would like to use this essay to shed light on gender inequality, a topic that has been less mentioned in the context of European solidarity.

In the preamble of the Treaty on the European Union, the idea of solidarity is already mentioned. It is de facto enshrined in the treaties of the EU. However, to be truly effective, the notion of solidarity also needs to be embedded in the mindset of the European citizens.

The EU values have come under a lot of fire in the political turmoil of recent years. Many are now disillusioned with the unfulfilled promises of the EU like a better livelihood or more cooperation and feel left behind. Two issues have especially marked the solidarity debate: the financial/sovereign debt crisis and the “migration/refugee crisis” which followed shortly after.

The 2008 financial crisis, which started with the burst of the real estate bubble and bank collapses in the US, soon took effect in Europe. Especially the Southern European countries such as Spain and Greece were hit hard by the tense economic situation. Greece even feared to default on its debts. The Eurozone members’ discussions that followed, about whether to save Greece were challenging. The famous “no bail-out” clause had people arguing that financial help to the Member States in need, such as Greece, would constitute a breach of EU law¹. While loans were given

to Greece, the country was also subjected to harsh austerity policies under the aegis of the Troika that contributed to a long recession.

The second “solidarity crisis” pertains migration. After the 2011 ousting of multiple North-African authoritarian heads of states and governments, the refugee influx started to increase. Other geopolitical events such as the war in Syria aggravated the situation. Italy, one of the most important points of arrival, ended up in a situation that was barely manageable for one state alone, but demands for help remained unanswered. The EU lost part of its credibility in this crisis, both internally and on the international stage. Needless to say, that furthermore many humanitarian concerns arose. In this case, many states referred to the Dublin regulation to justify their refusal to come to Italy’s aid. However, policies that are inherently unfair cannot be used for such a refusal. When Germany advocated for a fair distribution of refugees a bit later (when it was increasingly affected), it was met with little enthusiasm. This should not have come as a surprise.

The lack of solidarity in prior situations is often at the base (and used for justification) of similar behaviour. Hence, it’s difficult to foster trust or a solidary environment. One country or stakeholder must make the first step. Otherwise, we’ll continue to be stuck in this vicious cycle without reprieve. Nevertheless, solidarity is a difficult feat.

¹ One example can be found here: Kerber, M. C. (2011, April 28). Solidarität ohne Grenzen? Eine juristische Klarstellung aus ökonomischer Sicht | bpb. Retrieved May 10, 2019,

from <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/europa-kontrovers/38230/standpunkt-markus-c-kerber>

First of all, solidarity requires unity. Divergent behaviour of different EU Member States causes confusion during crises. Especially a unified approach from 'central' actors, such as France and Germany, is important to steer difficult climates. This has not been the case in the Greek debt crisis and left lasting marks on the EU. Germany received a lot of criticism for its behaviour during this time which was deemed egoistic and insincere. While common statements have often become the norm and good French-German relations remain on the top of the agenda (as seen by Macron's first official visit as a president to Berlin or the signing of the Aachen treaty), in times of disagreement this is much harder to come by.

Solidarity also requires taking a backseat at times (and not pushing own views on other countries) as much as it means compromising. Furthermore, solidarity needs to be unconditional to some extent. In the EU though it has been scarcely dealt out and tied to compliance with rules and regulations. While this is surely necessary at times to ensure the proper functioning of the European community, it can also backfire. In the Greek situation, support was dependent on compliance with austerity policies, but also, as some argue, to its adherence to less apparent norms, such as the idea of achieving economic success². But solidarity does not need to be framed in such a way as to solely be an act out of altruism. General solidarity is in the best interest of all

of us, even if its application in a specific situation might mean a disadvantage or less profit for one.

In June 1983, when the Declaration on European Union was signed, the then 10 heads of states committed to "[...] progress towards an ever closer union among the peoples and Member States of the European Community". This idea of an ever-closer union requires its citizens to live harmoniously and solidary together. Experiencing belonging, compassion, and a sense of togetherness are prerequisites for such. Another important factor here is equality. However, the situation in the EU regarding equality is far from ideal. There are different forms of inequalities in the EU³:

1. The divergence between the different EU member states (when it comes to GDP, purchasing power, poverty/unemployment levels and political sway etc.)
2. The difference in economic power, social standing etc. between the EU citizens as related to being part of a minority, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and gender

As previously mentioned, I will focus on the latter and specifically on the issue of equality between men and women. It is often pointed out that solidarity is needed to ensure the respect of other founding principles of the EU, such as equality. Multiple organisations and campaigns have attempted to frame the fight against gender inequality in such a way as to transfer

² This is similarly mentioned here: Caro, C. (2011, April 28). Es geht um das Prinzip - aber auch um wesentlich mehr | bpb. Retrieved May 10, 2019, from <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/europa-kontrovers/38227/standpunkt-celine-agathe-caro>

³ This concept could be taken a step further, to also look at the varying economic power and connectivity of the EU's regions or the vast disparity between the cities and the periphery.

responsibility to men, with the most famous one being HeForShe by UN Women. There are many movements rooted in the idea of solidarity that fight to advance gender equality. The idea of men being feminist allies out of solidarity with women has become quite popular and research has shown that men are less reluctant to respect gender equality if they understand that this principle pertains them as well⁴.

Steps have been undertaken to reach greater gender equality in the EU. The EU wants to close the gender pay gap, improve parity in political and economic leadership positions and end gender-based violence. Since 2010 there's been for one a commission post for gender equality, currently occupied by Věra Jourová. Furthermore, the Commission's strategic engagement for gender equality 2016-2019 laid out projects for a more equal EU and has a number of priority areas, among which are "equality in decision making" and "increasing female labour market participation and economic independence of women and men". The EU has further pledged gender mainstreaming in its policies and its funding. The Commission also reports annually on the EU's progress of the framework's implementation⁵.

However, there is still much to be done. The trajectory of some countries regarding gender equality does not look promising. In fact, some seem to go backwards, for instance regarding reproductive health or the

opposition towards the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention. Moreover, the European institutions do not particularly stand out positively when it comes to the number of women in leadership roles either. Ensuring parity in the Parliament and the Commission (but also in its other bodies such as the EEAS and its bureaucracy) would be first vital steps to combat unequal representation, but also for the EU to fulfil its role as a leader and example.

We do now have the first female president of the European Commission with the election of Ursula von der Leyen. While I disagree with the way this decision came about and the de facto undemocratic ignorance of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure, a female president was actually long overdue, especially given the EU's repeated statements on its commitment to gender equality. With this role being quite publicized due to the potential to frame debates, give important impulses and arguably and at least unofficially direct the EU's path, the Commission president can be a driving force for change. Parity in the four "top" positions, as well as in the bodies is an important piece of a truly comprehensive approach to gender equality. Feminist groups such as the European Women's Lobby have published their calls and proposals for a more equal EU. One of their ideas is an "EU Commissioner with sole responsibility for Women's Rights and Equality between Women and Men [...]"⁶. I join them

⁴ "We for She": Mobilising men and women to act in solidarity for gender equality. (2018, February 5). Retrieved from [http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/"we-she"-mobilising-men-and-women-act-solidarity-gender-equality](http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/)

⁵ Gender equality strategy. (2019, March 27). Retrieved May 11, 2019, from

https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en

⁶ Our Manifesto for a feminist Europe. Retrieved May 11, 2019, from <https://www.womenlobby.org/Our-Manifesto-for-a-Feminist-Europe?lang=en>

in this demand. Equality deserves a front seat, a commissioner fully focused on this important and unfortunately controversial topic. The lobby group also highlights the need for the Multiannual Financial Framework to contain gender budgeting. This is another crucial task.

Solidarity is vital for changing this gender status quo. What about the other way around, however? Increased equality between genders might also be (part of) the key to creating lasting solidarity. Linking gender equality to lack of solidarity seems to be quite a stretch at first. On a closer look though, it becomes obvious that this is not the case. In article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, it says: “[...] These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”

Solidarity and equality, equality and solidarity: Both are intertwined and, in my opinion, unattainable one without the other. We need solidarity in the fight for gender equality, but solidarity will also greatly be improved by achieving such an equal state of the EU's citizens. This does, of course, transcend the “mere” level of gender and includes greater equality regarding social and economic aspects. A more equal European community diminishes many of the toughest social conflict lines and might also mitigate the polarized political and social discourses. This would help lead to a more just European Union and in my opinion to more approval of and favourable attitudes towards the EU. Equality does not mean sameness. “United in diversity” remains the EU motto and highlights the commitment

to and appreciation of its different cultures and people. Equality does not take away from this. It rather ensures that this unity is actually no longer an empty promise. The EU has always been an ambitious project in its idea alone. Nonetheless, much of this ambitious attitude has been lost. It is irrefutable, that the EU has improved living conditions and has made it easier to travel. However, mobility in between social standing and equal rights between genders are still ideas of the future. Not only achievements such as the abolition of roaming costs need to be front and centre of our European political discourse. There's more to it. Rethinking European ambition and making gender equality non-negotiable but rather the goal of the next years are vital and cannot happen without solidarity. The well-being and equal access to rights need to be seen as a collective task of all members. If I were to sum up the idea of the EU in one word, I would use solidarity. That is both a great distinction and big challenge.

Let's be truly bold and strive for a feminist EU.

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