

# EIGHT

VIRGINIE GUIRAUDON

## Towards European Solidarity

As we reflect today on the challenges facing Europe, the organizers of this ALEA conference asked us all to discuss the reality and possibility of European solidarity. It is appropriate to discuss this concept in Warsaw, almost 40 years after the creation of the independent trade union *Solidarność* and the massive strikes that would pave the way to the fall of the Iron Curtain. So much seems to have changed. As Ivan Krastev has argued, “Eastern European societies have lost the three sources of their “Solidarity moment,” namely the communist state they opposed, the economy of deficit that brought them together on a day-to-day basis, and the sense of national dignity they preserved against the internationalist orthodoxy of official Marxism.” (2005: 43) This progressive disintegration of the social bonds in the East has benefitted populist governments that exploit jingoism and contest the basis of the European project – a “de facto solidarity” between states and societies, to paraphrase the famous 1950 Schuman declaration. The collapse of solidarity in the West and South of Europe within societies and across states has also been acute for decades.

Before formulating ways to “mend the cracks” and move beyond polarization, it is important to recall how the architects of European integration viewed solidarity as a means to a stable pacified Europe, this being their end, and then to interrogate the premises of their vision. I shall thereafter briefly revisit the succession of recent crises in order to analyse the devaluation of solidarity.

In the history of European integration, the term ‘solidarity’ is ubiquitous. The preamble of the 1951 Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) thus states that its signatories are “CONSCIOUS of the fact that Europe can be built only by concrete actions which create a *real solidarity* and by the establishment of common bases for economic development”. In politicians’ minds, “real solidarity” stood in contrast with the fragile or superficial alliances between states that led to the First World War in “the age of nationalism.”

This was a prominent narrative at the time in political declarations and academic writings on European integration. It may be useful to remember the context. Behavioralist and functionalist scholars such as Karl Deutsch and Ernst Haas

believed that institutions such as the ECSC and the European Economic Community could create incentives for both organized interests and for individuals to cooperate across borders and increase social interaction. In brief, European political cooperation was a project fostered by elites to engineer a feeling of solidarity amongst peoples: if (and perhaps only if) they reaped the benefits of transborder exchanges, this would mean stability.

To understand the roots of this vision of solidarity, some heuristics are necessary – namely, we need to go back to the nineteenth century and the seminal work of sociologist Emile Durkheim. In his 1893 doctoral dissertation on the social division of labour, he defined two forms of solidarity: “mechanical solidarity” based on kinship and proximity in traditional societies, and “organic solidarity”, which is typical of modern industrial societies. In the latter case, individuals do not interact face-to-face or engage in closely-knit networks. They perform different tasks and are interdependent (e.g., the worker in the factory relies on the farmer for sustenance and, in turn, he makes agricultural equipment used on the farm). This type of solidarity does not stem from sharing a common identity but rather a common interest: people are better off together than on their own and this creates a reciprocal obligation to help one another. This utilitarian version of solidarity is still relevant to understand the tensions within and across EU member states. We have seen repeatedly during recent crises the limits of interest-based arguments about solidarity in the EU.

First, basing support for European-wide solidarity on the idea that “*L’Union fait la force*” or “united we stand” does not work so well in hard times that hit certain groups more than others. Rather, it creates cleavages within member states between those that benefit from European integration and those who do not. The first warning took place in 2005 when voters in French and Dutch referenda rejected the “Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.” European leaders and institutions went back to the more traditional mode of treaty revision with a new Intergovernmental Conference and eventually the signing of the Lisbon Treaty. Opponents to the Treaty in the referendum campaigns invoked solidarity as constitutive of the post-war “European social model.” In their view, “social Europe” was an unfulfilled promise and intra-EU “social dumping” a reality that threatened solidarity-based welfare states.

“Solidarity” is the title of a fourth chapter of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. It contains many articles on social protection and labour relations. The issue is whether the EU market-making project is in fact threatening these rights. The EU neoliberal ethos does not protect from global competition and, in the Eurozone, EU budgetary rules have reinforced permanent austerity, with dramatic consequences in certain countries after the 2008 crisis. The Greek-bashing of German leaders reflected in public opinion at the time also proved that interstate solidarity was an empty vessel.

Solidarity based on interdependence or mutual interest also showed its limits in later EU crises. Typically, social scientists and historians have presented the UK government’s relationship to the EU as framed by utilitarian concerns (Medrano 2010). Yet the 2016 referendum showed that most of the British citizens who voted

*Leave* did not do so out of narrow self-interest. Exit polls revealed that a small minority of Leavers thought Brexit would be “good for the economy.” They chose (national) identity over broader interests.

In the current EU treaty, solidarity is a key goal of the European Union. In the preamble, member states express their desire “to deepen solidarity amongst its peoples while respecting their history, their culture and their traditions”. The formulation is ambiguous as it suggests that cross-European solidarity could be at the detriment of national identity. This means that governments could refuse to show solidarity based on arguments emphasizing their “culture” or “history”.

This is essentially what happened in 2015 when the Council agreed on a Decision to relocate 160,000 applicants for international protection from Greece and Italy to other member states. The Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary did not follow the decisions, invoking *inter alia* security risks. As the European Court of Justice examines their refusal to abide to the reallocation scheme, the Advocate General stated in his opinion: “Solidarity is the lifeblood of the European project. Through their participation in that project and their citizenship of the European Union, member states and their nationals have obligations as well as benefits, duties as well as rights” (Curia, 2019: para. 251–255).

When referring to the benefits of membership, the magistrate was perhaps referring to EU redistributive policies including structural and investment funds that are based on Article 3 of the Treaty that states that the EU seeks to “promote economic, social, and territorial cohesion and solidarity among member states”. In fact, in 2017, Chancellor Merkel also pointed out that states could not choose which solidarity mechanism they liked when Hungary reiterated that they would not welcome refugees: “Anyone who rejects this solidarity must accept that this will not be without consequences, including for negotiations over future financial support” (Reuters 2019). Hungary, after all, are due to receive 25 billion euros of structural funds between 2014 and 2020. This language of rights and duties, of financial responsibility led to fiery clashes with the populist rhetoric of the nationalist leaders who stirred emotions of fear and hatred among their publics by portraying refugees as cultural and security threats.

However, I believe that this example also points out a misunderstanding on the part of old member states or EU personnel regarding the drivers and consequences of solidarity. Their implicit reasoning is as follows: the states and citizens that benefit from EU solidarity should be grateful, bound to the EU, and thus adhere to the European project and abide by the rules. This can happen but it is not mechanical no matter how many billboards are put up on the side of roads or building sites in disadvantaged regions to remind inhabitants and visitors that they received EU funds.

We have had some hard evidence in recent years coming from the polls. I have already mentioned Brexit. You may remember that Wales voted for to Leave the European Union in 2016 (53% did). With its high poverty rate, Wales is a net beneficiary of EU funds: the EU has invested 5 billion euros since 2007 in many sectors and financed urban regeneration projects and new university campuses. Yet this did not translate into a majoritarian support for the EU and did not trump clas-

sical socioeconomic determinants of the vote (age, education). Policy feedbacks whereby policies create new politics are not automatic.

In other parts of Europe that also benefit from EU solidarity, we see the same pattern. In Poland, the largest net beneficiary of EU funds, there is a feeling of loss, a literal loss of population with emigration in poor regions, and a sense of relative deprivation, as inhabitants compare themselves to better-off parts of Europe or better-off members of the diaspora. Nationalist narratives drawing on nativist and populist rhetoric have had more success than the narrative of European integration that promises prosperity.

The principle of solidarity has historically been the opposite of charity, when the privileged classes helped the poor to ease their conscience and perpetuate the status quo. It supposes mutual help amongst equals. Yet, there are signs that many citizens, especially in the countries that joined the EU in 2004, feel that the West is condescending and they listen to political leaders that say that the EU imposes rules with contempt. Here we are in the politics of emotion. Axel Honneth has long insisted on the importance of recognition by exploring the moral experiences of disrespect (2007). His work alerts us to the drivers of the current polarization in Europe with discourses that talk past each other: a discourse calling for responsibility and the respect of mutual duties vs. a discourse demanding dignity and recognition.

We can sum up the situation as referring to two intellectual traditions. Functionalist perspectives envisaged that adherence to the European project would be based on the cooperation of elites aiming at first to make their economies interdependent and creating over time “de facto solidarity”. Constructivist perspectives, in turn, have emphasized the importance of “political work” and the framing of European integration by various opinion leaders and interest groups.

For instance, EU political institutions have long invested in symbolic politics to forge a sense of common belonging. Some are symbols literally mimicking national ones: the EU has an anthem, a flag, a Europe Day, etc. Since Maastricht, “European citizenship” is described in the Treaty, compounding the right of free movement for EU nationals with new rights such as voting rights in local and EP elections. It is unclear whether these have created a “we”. In *We, the people of Europe?*, philosopher Etienne Balibar (2004) has argued that the EU has mostly fostered an “us” vs. “them” mentality that opposes first class citizens and “third country nationals” within its territory and buffers the Schengen’s external border to prevent the arrival of unwanted “others”. He alerted us to this negative construction of European solidarity based on exclusion and the current climate of polarization around migration and Europe.

It is perhaps time to return to a sociological understanding of European integration and ask under what circumstances Europeans experience togetherness (Favell and Guiraudon 2010). For a long time, surveys suggested that most European citizens were not “for” or “against” the EU but indifferent, the so-called “permissive consensus”. This is not surprising. The effects of European political integration on socioeconomic practices are often diffuse and not concentrated. This may be obvious for some individuals such as farmers or free movers. Still, many Europeans

do not feel concerned or are not necessarily fully aware that EU rules indirectly shape part of their behaviour; they do not know to what extent it really does and whether the effects are positive or not.

Our conversation takes place in a context of distrust. There is distrust of political institutions and of the policy process in many parts of Europe. Institutions guarantee that promises made are promises kept. This is crucial when discussing solidarity. You need to believe that the other party will keep their end of the bargain, will not default or free ride. This has consequences at the individual level. If you think that you have lost your job to EU posted workers or lower labour standards and wages in other EU countries where your company relocated, chances are you will identify the EU with social dumping – not social cohesion. And, conversely, if you live in a country with low wages and labour standards, you are sceptical and wonder if and when you will reap the benefits of European integration. Local and national politicians regardless of their attitude towards the EU will not take the blame for your situation and thus will feed your distrust.

We can list the collective challenges that European citizens face. Some, such as climate change, will require collective mobilization – but may also be divisive. We know the shortcomings of the current EU system and the problems linked to incomplete political integration, with some policy domains remaining national and others supranational. Yet, as participants in this roundtable focus on challenges, they must reflect on how we can de-escalate interstate posturing but also restore trust among residents within member states along with a sense of reciprocal obligation.

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