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What is the future of social and political cohesion in the EU? Evidence from HEUREC research with European citizens

Panel discussion, 28 February 2024, 18:30-21:00,
Representation of Lower Saxony to the European Union, Brussels

Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union states that “In order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion.” Over more than three decades now, the European Union has developed its cohesion policy accordingly and dedicates about one third of its budget to the objective of reducing disparities between its member states and regions.

However, the achievement of this goal is challenged by crises such as the Euro crisis, the “migration crisis”, the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the energy crises resulting from the reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These crises have the potential to create tensions about solidarity among the EU member states and their citizens. Between 2021 and 2024, the HEUREC project has looked into citizens’ perceptions of cohesion, solidarity, and of the EU in general through focus groups, which were conducted in nine countries of the Eurozone. This event will include a panel to present the project’s findings and to put them into the context of the debate about the future of cohesion policy and the EU in general. Members of the panel are:

- Hubert Heinelt, HEUREC project, TU Darmstadt, Germany,
- Inga Gaizauskaite, HEUREC project, TU Darmstadt, Germany,
- Anna Lenka Schlosser, Lower Saxony Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development, Germany,
- Till Spannagel, Permanent Representation of Germany to the EU, Brussels,
- Thomas Wobben, European Committee of the Regions, Director for Legislative Work 2, Brussels
- Peter Berkowitz, European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, Director for Policy, Brussels

Moderator: Wolfgang Petzold, former EU official

Event language: English

The event is hosted by the Representation of Lower Saxony to the European Union, Rue Montoyer 61.

Background

Funded by the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and conducted by researchers at the Institute of Political Science at the Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany, between April 2021 and March 2024, the HEUREC project addressed the question of how “How Europeans understand fairness, reciprocity and cohesion” (HEUREC). The research was conducted in nine Eurozone countries: Finland, Germany, Netherlands (as examples for “traditional” net payer countries), Greece, Portugal, Spain (as examples for “traditional” net recipients), Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia (as example of member states which are net recipients but could become net payers in the future).

What is special about this research project is that it was based on focus group discussions – and not only on survey results. Through such discussions, it was possible to determine how citizens of different social milieus in nine EU member states think about transnational solidarity in the European Union and which arguments for and against solidarity-based action are put forward in the context of the EU.


In each of the nine EU member states three focus group discussions were conducted. Each of these focus group discussions brought together people from three different socio-demographic groups – namely either high skilled and high paid participants, lower skilled and paid as well as unemployed participants or young adults (at the age of 25 or less). They were *not* asked to discuss issues of solidarity at EU, country or individual level in general. Instead, they discussed what they expect (or not) from the EU, other member states, their government and from fellow EU citizens in the case of three particular scenarios – namely a natural disaster, the occurrence of a financial crisis, and the reduction of social disparities, in particular through an EU unemployment insurance scheme.

Why can the results of the HEUREC project be interesting for political decision makers at regional level?

The research of the HEUREC project unfolds the reasoning behind citizens willingness or hesitance in various member states and from different social groups to commit to transnational solidarity and identifies the “sensitive points” or patterns of argumentation that either question or advocate the EU's cohesion objective. These “sensitive points” or patterns of argumentation have to be considered by political decision makers in any attempt to foster European integration and to achieve economic, social and political cohesion.

In the context of the debate about the future of EU cohesion policy and the EU more generally, the panel discussion will serve to share and critically discuss the project's findings with European policy makers and practitioners. The project found, for example, that

- solidarity-based support in the event of natural disasters was seen as a humanitarian obligation
- by participants in all focus group discussions (in all member states) and was therefore unanimously advocated;
- the situation is different when help is needed in the event of a financial crisis or spatial and social disparities. In these cases, most participants in the focus groups' discussions across member states raised questions of deservingness and possible self-infliction of distress – thus questioning solidarity-based support;
- though citizens pertain the wishful idea of a fairer and more equal Europe, they also have various doubts about the practical side of implementing European redistributive schemes;

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- there is more support for solutions of economic and social problems at the national or even local level whereas EU is perceived as having a guiding and/or funding role;
 - “subsidiarity” is supported by most participants across member states;
 - “conditionality” combined with EU funding is considered necessary, in particular by citizens from net recipient countries in order to prevent fraud and corruption in the context EU funds;
 - details of such “conditionality” should nevertheless take concerns of governments more into account than in the past.