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THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY, EUROPEAN COHESION AND A EUROPEAN PUBLIC SPHERE

Beyond the doom and gloom that has dominated media coverage of the EU in recent years, there is another story to tell: the story of a strong and resilient European cohesion, which held Europeans together like a powerful glue during the past decade of crises. In particular, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic has released a stream of European solidarity from the earliest days of the crisis. The negative impression that many EU citizens had of EU crisis management is not fully justified: a dense network of mutual help and cooperation throughout Europe is blooming. If this crisis is to be used as an opportunity to build a wider European public sphere, there is an urgent need for a change in reporting. A European public sphere is crucial for the emergence of a European identity beyond national borders. Without it, there is little basis for mutual assistance and solidarity. European solidarity and cohesion are not the only things that are linked: the existence of a European public sphere is both a precondition for and a consequence of solidarity and cohesion.

In April 2020, as the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic firmly engulfed Europe, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called for solidarity in the face of the virus, [writing](#): “Without solidarity there can be no cohesion, without cohesion there will be disaffection and the credibility of the European project will be severely damaged.” European solidarity and cohesion are thus deeply interdependent. **If the European member states and their citizens do not stand together and act in solidarity in light of crisis, European cohesion inevitably suffers.** At the same time, a lack of European cohesion also leads to actors feeling less connected and thus less inclined to support each other in solidarity.

But solidarity and cohesion are not the only things that are linked: the existence of a European public sphere is both a precondition for and a consequence of solidarity and cohesion¹. A European public sphere is crucial for the emergence of a European identity beyond national borders. Without this identity - the awareness of others and the feeling of attachment to them - there is little basis for mutual assistance and solidarity. On the one hand, solidarity-based measures, such as joint borrowing under the European Recovery Fund, foster European

cohesion – and must be supported and legitimised by citizens who hold their governments accountable. On the other hand, solidarity in action among Europeans can lead to truly pan-European experiences of shared problems and solutions, which in turn encourages the emergence of a European public sphere.

As the pandemic’s second wave is now heavily weighing on Europeans, this paper analyses the current trends of solidarity and cohesion in the European Union. It examines the state of European cohesion before and during the coronavirus crisis and shows how the pandemic has so far affected solidarity amongst the member states, between member states and EU institutions, and amongst civil society in Europe. The focus is on how the pandemic has changed or might change citizens’ attitudes towards the EU and whether, as a shared experience, it might strengthen a sense of European identity and create a window of opportunity for the emergence of a stronger European public sphere. The analysis is built on several data-based projects carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations in 2020, namely the [European Solidarity Tracker](#), the fourth edition of the European Cohesion Monitor as well as a pan-European poll on

¹ The definition of and the functions ascribed to the public sphere differ according to the democratic theories they are based on. Prevailing consensus is that a unified and truly European public sphere would require a common language, a shared identity and a common infrastructure, i.e. European media - and that neither of these vital elements are seen as fully present or likely to fully develop in the EU within the near future. As a result, this paper adopts the notion of national, but Europeanised and connected, public spheres.

citizen perceptions of the coronavirus crisis conducted by the ECFR in April 2020. Finally, the paper gives recommendations, based on the lessons learned from ECFR’s data projects, on how the European public sphere could be strengthened.²

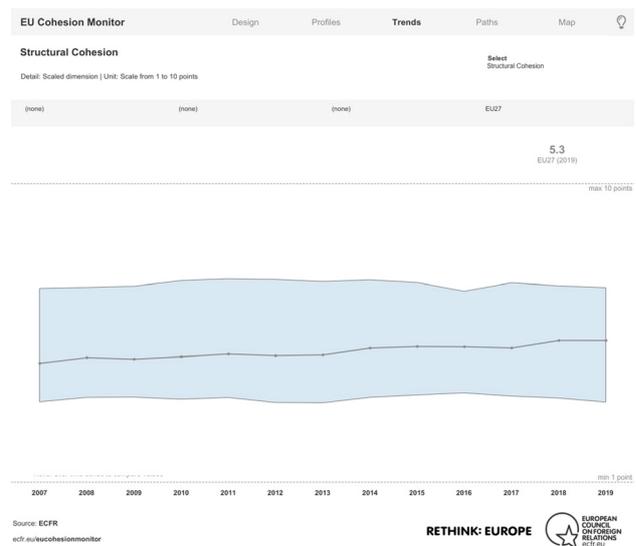
EUROPEAN COHESION IN LIGHT OF A DECADE OF CRISES

Even before the Covid-19 crisis hit Europe, the financial, debt and refugee crises as well as Brexit had all strained the European project to an unprecedented degree. On many fronts the Union has struggled to mobilise collective action – be it with regard to eurozone reform or the joint management of migration. Significant portions of electorates in almost all member states increasingly backed sovereigntist and anti-EU parties. “Never before have I seen so much fragmentation, and so little commonality in our Union”, [said](#) the former EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union Address in 2016.

And yet, beyond the doom and gloom that has dominated media coverage of the EU in recent years, there is another story to tell: the story of a strong and resilient

European cohesion, which held Europeans together like a powerful glue during the past decade of crisis. This is the central finding of the fourth edition of ECFR’s EU Cohesion Monitor. In 2015, ECFR set out to better understand what makes EU countries and societies stick together. We developed a data-based tool which tracks a range of socio-economic and political variables that contribute to cohesion. The tool analyses EU citizens’ experiences, expectations, beliefs, levels of well-being, and voting patterns as contributing to “individual cohesion” – the degree to which individuals in member states are prepared to stick together as part of the EU. The member states’ economic and political ties and practices within the EU make up “structural cohesion” – the degree to which countries work as an integrated part of the EU. The fourth edition of the EU cohesion monitor covers the years 2007 to 2019, just before Covid-19 reached the continent.

Our findings show that despite the rise of Eurosceptic parties in the European and national parliaments, the binding forces of the EU have generally been strong in the 13-year period covered by the monitor. Although the level of individual cohesion has fallen somewhat in the wake of both the eurozone crisis and the migration crisis, it has always recovered thereafter, and member states and their societies have remained densely interconnected. In 2018



[Click to explore the interactive visualisations of these data.](#)

2 This analysis is based on previous and forthcoming analyses by the Rethink-Europe Team of ECFR. I would especially like to thank Rafael Loss and Pawel Zerka for their helpful ideas.

European cohesion has returned to levels of strength not seen since before the pre-crisis year of 2007; and has in fact become even stronger. In 2019 both individual and structural cohesion were at an all-time high.

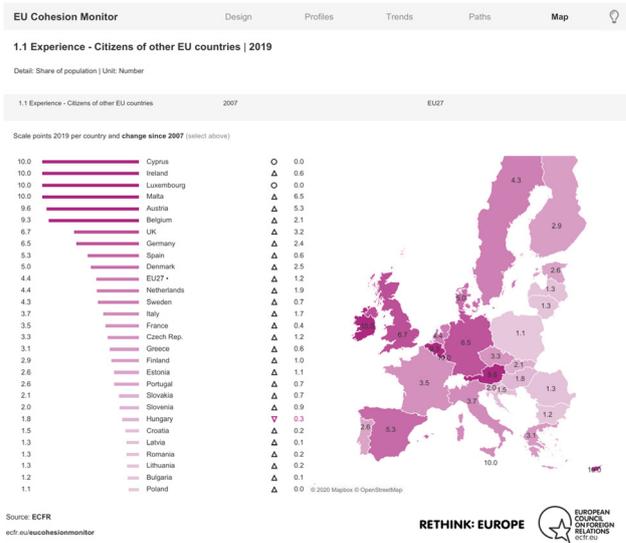
For the argument of this paper, focus lies on individual cohesion and how it relates to the state of the European public sphere.

Individual cohesion (made up of people’s experiences of interacting with other EU citizens, attitudes towards the EU, engagement with EU elections, and their general well-being) was stronger in 2019 than at any time since we started collecting data. Many of the indicators around individual cohesion displayed a steady upward trend across the EU.

EXPERIENCE

Looking at the “experience” indicator since 2007, more EU citizens visited or lived in other EU countries; cross-border contacts rose, as did participation in educational exchange programmes. It can be assumed that exchanges with other EU citizens raise awareness and interest in European issues and favour the emergence of a European realm of joint action and experience– and therefore also of a European public sphere.

On closer inspection, however, it is noticeable that in some member states there are significantly fewer citizens residing from other EU member states. This is particularly the case in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which all rank below the EU average. Citizens from countries in Southern or South-Eastern Europe and parts of Eastern Europe have visited fewer EU countries and socialised less with other EU citizens than those citizens from Western and Northern EU member states. Although Covid-19 has now decreased opportunities to “experience” Europe for all EU citizens alike, because of the national lockdowns, border controls, and other barriers to mobility (quarantine), citizens in the East and the South of Europe who were already previously less connected to other European citizens, now are even more so. The longer the travel restrictions continue, the greater the risk that even the recent modest experiences will be lost.



[Click to explore the interactive visualisations of these data.](#)

What is more, during lockdown, people’s sense of being part of a pan-European moment relies heavily on the media that they consume, which serve more than ever as a window to the outside world. Media debates about European issues have the potential to activate, reinforce and change the climate of opinion. If press freedom is weak – as in several countries of the EU’s South and East, particularly Bulgaria, Hungary, Malta, Greece, and Poland – then, rather than feeling part of a pan-European

moment, people may be exposed to the nationalist narratives that have proliferated during the pandemic. Since 2007, the level of press freedom has fallen in all five countries mentioned. In Hungary and Malta, it has fallen the most compared to all EU countries.



Source: ECFR
ecfr.eu/cohesionmonitor

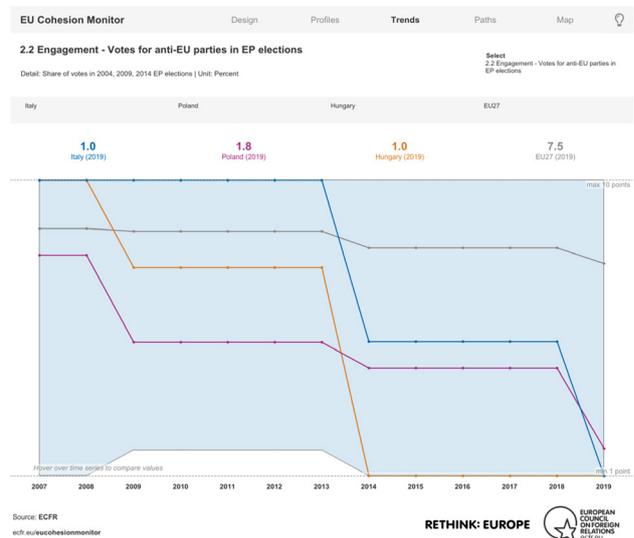
RETHINK: EUROPE

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An analysis of the Polish public debate during the Covid 19 pandemic [in the framework of ECFR's Solidarity Tracker](#) has shown that the Polish Ombudsman Adam Bodnar even sent an official letter to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki calling upon him and his ministers to refrain from unjust and untrue criticism of the EU's performance in its fight against the coronavirus crisis. In Malta, the government has deliberately introduced a debate on the EU's failure to provide meaningful solidarity. This threatens to distort the picture that Hungarians, Maltese, Greeks, or Poles receive about the EU's handling of the crisis – and about the extent of pan-European solidarity. Such re-nationalisation of the media landscape and targeted EU-bashing are undermining the emergence of a European public sphere. Instead of using the crisis as a collective experience, some national politicians deliberately seek to blame their poor crisis management on the EU and to distract attention from their own failures. Free and pluralistic media are the backbone of European democracy - without them, there can be no European public sphere.

ENGAGEMENT

On the positive side, the turnout in the 2019 European Parliament elections was significantly higher than in 2014 and 2009. However, looking at the support for anti-European parties both in the European Parliament elections and in national elections, there has been a steadily declining trend since 2007 in terms of individual cohesion. Hungary, Poland and Italy in particular have seen increasing support for populist parties over the last thirteen years, bringing down these countries' scores for "engagement" with the EU to rock-bottom.



Source: ECFR
ecfr.eu/cohesionmonitor

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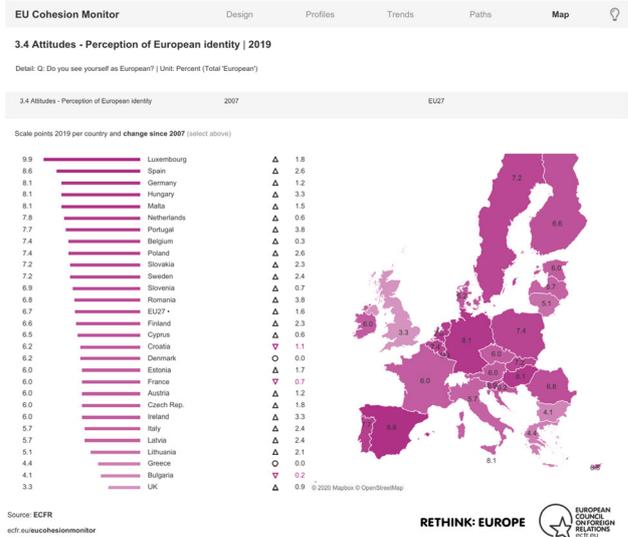
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ATTITUDES

With the "Attitudes" indicator, the Cohesion Monitor examines six factors closely linked to the emergence and/or existence of a European public sphere: EU citizens' trust in the EU, the image the EU amongst citizens, the question whether national interests are well taken into account in the EU, the perception of a European identity, the level of satisfaction with democracy in the EU, and a feeling of attachment to the EU. The analysis shows a mixed picture.

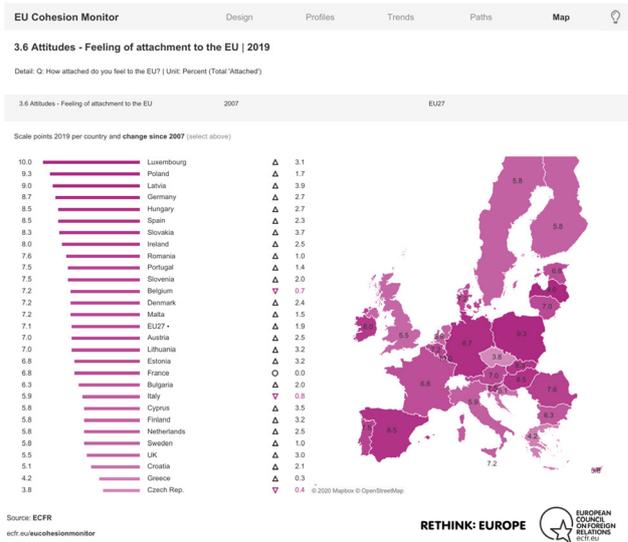
Trust in the Union had not been fully restored by 2019. Although it recovered from its low in 2015, it remained well below the 2007 level. The “Southern Seven” (Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain) have seen a sharp fall in levels of trust in the EU since 2009, and despite some improvement since 2015, the group came in below the EU average on this front in 2019. Greece saw the biggest decrease in trust levels between 2007 and 2019. In the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia numbers are also still well below the EU27 average. In all these countries the image of the EU among citizens is also not positive.

 [Click to explore the interactive visualisations of these data.](#)



Source: ECFR
ecfr.eu/ucocohesionmonitor

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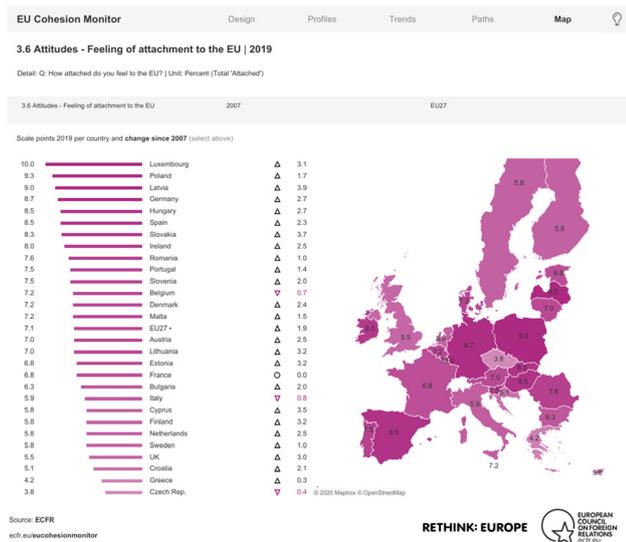
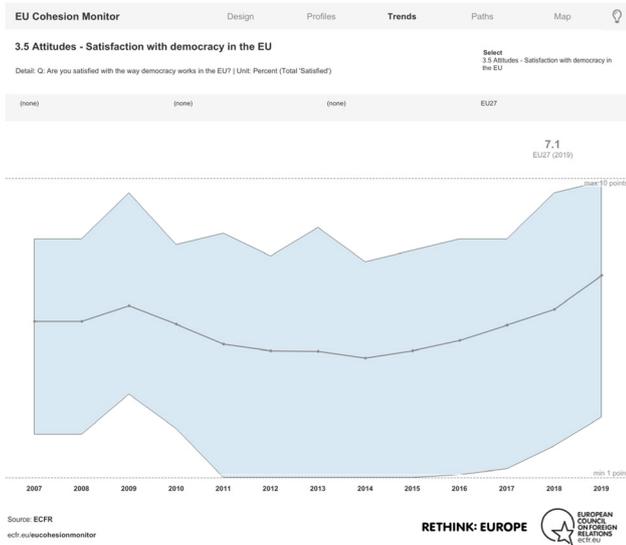
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The picture is different in Poland and Hungary. In both countries, despite the successes for Eurosceptic parties, there is still a great deal of trust in the EU. The image of the EU is also much more positive than the EU average. Polish citizens in particular see the interests of Poland well taken into account in the EU. In both countries, citizens see themselves as European and are satisfied with the way democracy works in Europe.

Overall, after slumps in 2010 and 2013, EU citizens in 2019 increasingly saw themselves as “European”. Only in France, Bulgaria and Croatia have the numbers fallen compared to 2007. In Bulgaria, Greece and Lithuania people feel least European. Citizens also felt more attached to the EU in all but three countries: the Czech Republic, Italy

and Belgium. In 2019, the EU average score for the factor “Feeling of attachment to the EU” was significantly higher than in 2007; the same applies to the factor “Perception of European identity”. Both are positive developments with regard to the emergence of a European public sphere.

Building a European public sphere and reducing the European democratic deficit go hand in hand. Citizens’ satisfaction with the level of democracy in the EU thus allows conclusions to be drawn about the state of a European public sphere. Having fallen steadily between 2009 and 2014, the score for the factor “satisfaction with democracy” has risen sharply since then. Compared to 2018, the average value for the EU had risen again significantly in 2019.



 [Click to explore the interactive visualisations of these data.](#)

However, Greece, France and Italy are again at the bottom of the ranking. In Greece, the figure has virtually plunged into the abyss compared to 2007. So while the overall development is quite positive, some countries clearly fall outside the general trend.

Looking at the overall trends with regard to European cohesion since 2007, there is no reason for premature farewells to the European project. Contrary to the many swansongs about the EU in recent years, European cohesion is stronger and more solid than commonly assumed.

Covid-19 reached the continent when overall cohesion was at its highest level since 2007. The EU member states and their societies are now so closely interwoven that cohesion has been able to grow again and again after the major crises of recent years. If they remember that they draw their strength precisely from this cohesion, they will also be able to overcome the Covid-19 crisis as a community.

However, the overall very positive picture should not hide the fact that cohesion is not equally strong in all EU countries and that citizens in some member states were already less connected to the rest of the EU before the coronavirus crisis broke out. In this sense, the pandemic is only partly a common European experience: not only are the consequences of the crisis for health systems and national economies different, but also societies in some EU member states are also much more resilient than in others - precisely because individual (and structural) cohesion is stronger. Tragically, the EU's southern neighbours, who already had little confidence in the EU, have been particularly hard hit by the consequences of the pandemic. Covid-19 will strongly reinforce some already existing economic differences, especially between the North and South.

It is the task of the European public sphere, or rather the national media in the member states, to report on this, to raise awareness and to promote greater support for these countries amongst their citizens. Unfortunately, the reports on the national debates in the EU member states collected as part of the Solidarity Tracker show that in many countries precisely this has not happened enough. Instead, the public debate was often dominated by a purely national perspective on the crisis. The situation in other European countries as well as the cooperation between EU member states received only limited attention. This has left many EU citizens with [the impression that the European level was irrelevant in tackling the crisis](#) and that there [was too little solidarity](#). A pan-European survey, conducted by ECFR in spring 2020, has shown that there is a powerful sense amongst citizens in almost all surveyed member states that their country was largely left to fend for itself in dealing with the pandemic. But here too, as with European cohesion, there is a [much more positive story to tell](#) about European solidarity during the pandemic beyond the headlines.

SOLIDARITY IN TIMES OF COVID-19

From early March to the end of September 2020, ECFR tracked European responses to the crisis, collecting a wide range of instances of Europeans showing solidarity with each other across borders. The European Solidarity Tracker illustrates how solidarity between the EU institutions and the 27 member states has been communicated, debated, and put into action. The tool sheds light on which actors pursued which actions at which moments as the coronavirus spread throughout Europe. Contrary to the generally low satisfaction with the level of European solidarity, mirrored in subsequent Eurobarometer polls from [April](#) and [June](#) 2020, European solidarity actually was on display even in the earliest days of the crisis. This is not to say that the measures were always and everywhere sufficient - or fast enough. Nevertheless, **the negative impression that many EU citizens had of EU crisis management is not justified.** Instead, the more than 1,200 items now populating the European Solidarity Tracker paint an impressive picture. The tracker documents a dense network of mutual help and cooperation throughout Europe: every EU member has shown solidarity with other countries and massive actions have been taken by the EU institutions. The data also show that there was a great deal of commitment, solidarity and compassion on the part of the European civil society.

If the crisis is to be used as an opportunity to build a wider European public sphere, there is an urgent need for a change in reporting. [Italy](#), for instance, in the early days of the crisis received important medical aid from

smaller member states that are not usually amongst its closest allies, such as Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia. Italy also received medical support from member states whose views on the EU recovery fund are very different from its own. These include members of the Visegrád Group – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia – and fiscally conservative countries such as Sweden and Austria. However, neither of these was reported in great detail in the Italian media. This was not just a missed opportunity to foster the emergence of a European public sphere through the crisis. It also made citizens less trusting of the EU.

The coronavirus crisis clearly has the potential to generate support for the EU among European citizens. The same ECFR poll that revealed how disappointed European citizens were with the EU's performance during the crisis also showed that a majority of people were still placing their hopes in the greater EU cooperation despite this disappointment. This result is also visible in all three major public surveys commissioned by the European Parliament this year. The data of all three surveys shows that a majority of EU citizens call for the EU to have more competencies to deal with crises such as Covid-19, and for a bigger EU budget to overcome the consequences of the pandemic. [The latest report](#), presenting the data collected in September and October 2020, shows that as citizens learn more about EU action, their perception of the EU recovers. Compared to April, citizens' attitude towards the EU has improved again, as did the image of the EU.



EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY TRACKER The European Solidarity Tracker collects and displays instances of pan-European solidarity throughout the coronavirus crisis. Explore the data here: <https://ecfr.eu/special/solidaritytracker/>.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Union has gone through many crises in the last decade. The crisis in the eurozone, the refugee crisis, the rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties and now Covid-19 have all put European cohesion to a severe test. **But despite these many crises, the European Union has shown remarkable resilience. The citizens of the European Union, as well as the member states, are firmly interconnected by a dense network, a “glue” that holds Europe together.** In fact, cohesion in the EU has always recovered and even grown in times of crisis. In 2019, shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was stronger than in the pre-crisis year 2007. Even when people lose their confidence in the EU’s future, or when they start voting for populist parties, or when their national economy tumbles, there are usually several other linking factors that keep them closely connected to the rest of Europe.

This cohesion and their mutual bonds have enabled Europeans to show solidarity in light of the coronavirus crisis - even if it did not initially appear so. The European Solidarity Tracker documents a dense network of mutual aid and cooperation across Europe and illustrates the critical role the EU has played throughout the coronavirus crisis. Even if bad news usually sells better, **the EU must improve in telling and selling its success stories.** In the case of European solidarity actions, the EU has been late in doing so – while China has invested heavily in its “mask diplomacy”.

While cohesion in the EU is very strong, our data also show that individual cohesion is significantly weaker in some member states than in others. The consequences of the eurozone crisis are still clearly felt in Greece, for instance, and the same applies to Italy. Trust in the EU

has eroded in these countries. In France, too, individual cohesion is much weaker today than in 2007. But the EU is only as strong as its weakest link. The coronavirus crisis can be a unifying moment, because all European countries are massively affected by it. On the other hand, the economic consequences are disproportionately greater in the Southern EU countries, which are heavily dependent on tourism and which were still struggling with the consequences of the eurozone crisis anyway. After Covid-19, new divides could grow within societies between winners and losers of the pandemic. It is important that this is discussed in the national debates in the EU countries so that the basis for mutual solidarity can be established. **Too often, only national crisis management is an issue for the public debates in the member states.**

Our data show that many conditions are met that enable a stronger European public sphere to emerge: Overall, after slumps in 2010 and 2013, EU citizens in 2019 increasingly saw themselves as “European”. They also felt more attached to the EU in nearly all European countries. Recent data polls have shown that **the majority of EU citizens want the EU to have more competencies and demand more European cooperation.** This should be taken up by national policy makers as well as the media. However, the Covid-19 crisis once again shows that successes are often nationalised and failures Europeanised. For this to become a moment that forges Europe (and not the one that breaks it apart), national leaders need to be sincere and pay close attention to the way they talk about Europe to voters at home. They should avoid the temptation to use the pandemic to claim that nation states are more important than the European or international cooperation. If they fail to convey this message, they risk being replaced by populists.

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ABOUT

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<https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/daring-new-spaces-policy-paper>



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