

Political leaders of the EU increasingly believe that a “Social Europe” is indispensable for the continuation of the European project. The proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which serves as a compass for the overall convergence process, reflects the EU’s ambition to strengthen its social dimension. Nevertheless, **the increasing involvement of the EU in social policy affects the boundaries of the concept of solidarity, which have been defined by national welfare states for a long time.** Social Europe can therefore result in increased competition for scarce resources and create a new societal conflict between winners and losers of European integration. This raises the question to what extent European citizens support the development of EU-level policies to protect and enhance social rights in the European Union. This focus article provides insight into how Social Europe is understood by citizens, based on survey data of the Belgian National Election Study 2014.

## **Making sense of citizens’ attitudes to Social Europe**

How do citizens interpret Social Europe? Social Europe is an ambiguous concept that admits different interpretations. **To understand what the demand for a Social Europe actually means, it is necessary to disambiguate the concept of Social Europe itself.** To this end, different policy principles and instruments that currently exist as well as policy proposals that are being debated at the EU-level were translated into survey items in the Belgian National Election Study 2014. Belgian voters were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with various specific statements about European social policies.

Figure 1a indicates that almost nine out of ten Belgian voters express support for EU regulations that impose employers to protect the health and safety of workers. That the large majority thinks this is a good or a very good thing is probably because these EU regulations reinforce popular national social protection measures while leaving the boundaries of the welfare state untouched. Such universal high level of support stands in sharp contrast with Figure 1b, showing that Belgians are more divided when it comes to practices of member state solidarity. Only 27.7 percent of the respondents believe that rich EU countries should always support other member states that experience serious economic difficulties.

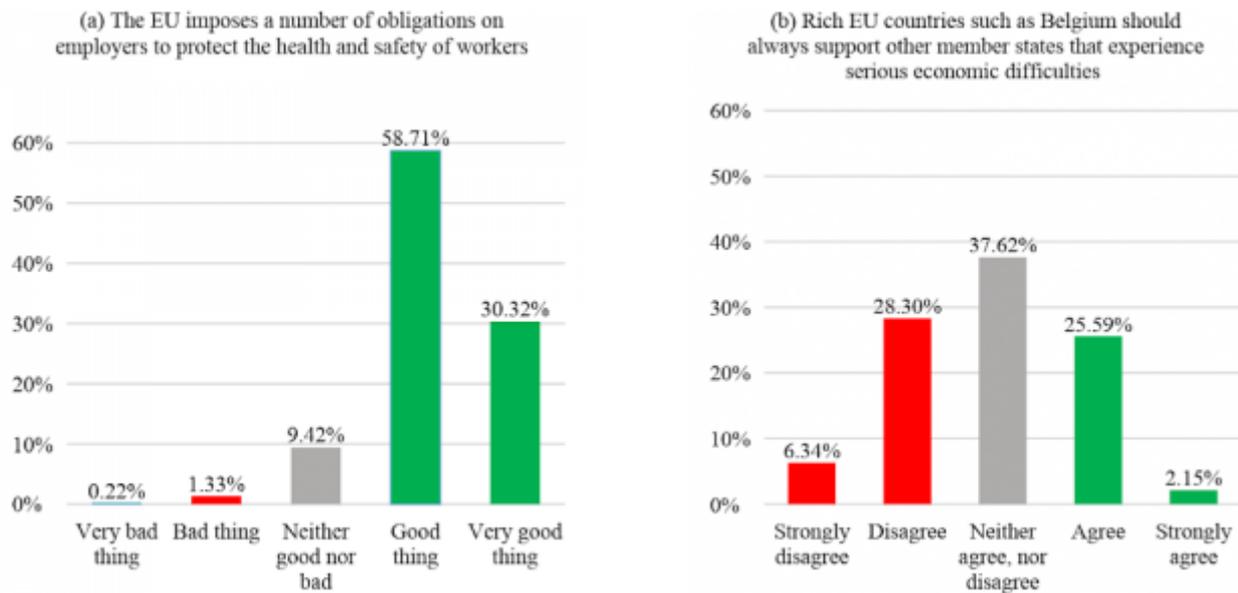


Figure 1: Support for (a) EU social regulations versus (b) member state solidarity. Source: BNES 2014

**Social Europe is not only a multidimensional concept at the policy level, but also in the minds of citizens**, as shown by confirmatory factor analyses on the survey data. As displayed by Figure 2, people differentiate between various policy principles and instruments, but some components are more central to citizens' interpretation of Social Europe than others. The thickness of the lines represent the strength of the relationship between each component and citizens' general attitude to Social Europe. When citizens think about Social Europe, they do not give equal weight to the various policy principles and instruments that were surveyed, such as those in Figure 1.

Figure 2 reveals that the preferred decision-making level over social policy (EU versus national level) is the weakest component of all, whereas this variable has previously been used as a single indicator to measure public support for Social Europe (Mau, 2005). Moreover, this indicator can provide biased results, as the preferred decision-making level over social policy seems to measure support for European policy-making in general, rather than support for Social Europe.



Figure 2: The different components of citizens' attitudes toward Social Europe (confirmatory factor analysis, N= 1403). Source: BNES 2014

The results show very clearly that, **in citizens' view, member state solidarity is at the core of Social Europe**. In other words, a general pro-Social Europe attitude is mainly an expression of citizens' idea that the richest member states of the EU should support the less-affluent ones and those countries facing economic difficulties. The central role of financial support between member states indicates that citizens interpret Social Europe primarily as something interstate related, instead of a socially integrated European space without national boundaries. The intense media attention paid to the bailouts of over-indebted Eurozone countries in recent years quite probably also activated member state solidarity as the primary aspect of Social Europe in citizens' minds.

Furthermore, public support for Social Europe also hinges on support for at least four additional dimensions, which are ranked from more to less salient. First, it relates to attitudes on the implementation of a European social security system, which are measured by support for European protection schemes in specific policy areas (unemployment benefits, minimum income benefits, child allowances) as well as for an overall European welfare state. Second, a

European social citizenship, which is measured by statements on whether or not mobile EU citizens should be granted equal access to social security. Third, the principle of interpersonal solidarity, based on support for EU measures to reduce income disparities and support for a system of solidarity among all EU citizens. Fourth, harmonization by means of EU social regulations, measured by items on EU regulations to protect health and safety at work, regarding maximum weekly working hours, minimum terms of paid leave, and minimum terms of maternity leave.

## Social Europe as a sophisticated notion

This contribution is based on the first study that analyses the structure of citizens' attitudes toward Social Europe. It reveals that **public attitudes toward different dimensions of the EU-level social policy cannot be reduced to a single underlying pro-versus anti-Social Europe attitude**. The multidimensional nature of the attitudinal structure contains important implications for future research as well as regarding the democratic basis for Social Europe as a political mission. If we aim to understand citizens' attitudes towards Social Europe, it is important to acknowledge that citizens can make reference to different constitutive dimensions, which impede making general claims about support among the population. Policy-makers who aim to build a stronger Social Europe should not focus exclusively on expanding the EU's competences over social policy-making as such, but stimulate instead and engage actively in the debate on what kind of Social Europe is desirable in terms of policy objectives and by which policy instruments these can be achieved. Support is likely to vary strongly on the specific constellation of Social Europe put forward.

The salience of member state solidarity in citizens' understanding of Social Europe implies that public opinion towards it is crucial for the democratic legitimacy of Social Europe as a political project. The centrality of member state solidarity also underlines the relevance of studies analysing citizens' motivations to support financial transfers within the EU and their opinions on the conditions under which countries should receive financial support ([Bechtel, 2014](#); [Kleider & Stoeckel, 2018](#); [Kuhn, Solaz & van Elsas, 2017](#); [Lengfeld, Schmidt & Häuberer, 2016](#)). Still, our knowledge on what degree of member state solidarity is considered desirable by the European public is limited. Public attitudes towards practices of member state solidarity outside crisis context, such as the EU's structural funds, have rarely been studied to date ([Baute et al., forthcoming](#)), despite the fact that these funds are a key component of the current design of Social Europe and represent about one third of the EU's

expenditures ([European Commission, 2018](#)). Citizens' opinions towards such practices of member state solidarity, aimed at reducing regional disparities in income, employment, investment and growth, deserve far more attention.

## Diverging interpretations and support across Europe?

The attitudinal structure of Social Europe revealed in this contribution could unfortunately not be tested across EU member states. In the light of increasing divergence in social and economic outcomes between member states in the aftermath of the crisis, some questions remain open. Which idea of Social Europe do Spanish and Greek people have in mind? Does their idea evoke financial solidarity between member states, cross-border access to social welfare benefits, or does it even go beyond this, including risk-sharing at the interpersonal level? **Due to the diversity in social and economic realities in the EU's member states, it is not inconceivable to expect somewhat diverging interpretations of Social Europe across European populations.** In less developed welfare states, net-receiving and crisis-hit countries, the salience of Social Europe's different components may be more balanced in citizens' minds, as citizens may be exposed to more diversified debates on how the EU (can) takes responsibility to protect social rights of European citizens.

To get the full picture of what specific designs of Social Europe are politically viable and legitimate, knowledge is needed on whether citizens' interpretations of Social Europe are similar or vary across EU member states. In addition, cross-national studies would also allow identifying potential differences in support levels of different EU-level social policies between European populations, which can help us to understand what coalitions between countries can be formed in the future development of Social Europe. Most notably, empirical evidence is missing on whether the diversity of national welfare systems constitutes a stumbling block for the democratic support of implementing an ambitious social agenda for the European Union.

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