

The Legitimacy and Strength of National, European, and Global Solidarity

Philosophical Arguments and Empirical Findings

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Introduction¹

In the last two decades, a series of crises have hit the European Union (i.e., the Eurozone crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, the Great Recession, the refugee crisis, Brexit, and finally the COVID-19 pandemic). All crises have challenged the solidarity between member states of the European Union as well as between European citizens and have put the question to the fore: How strong is European solidarity? Are the member states of the EU and European citizens ready to help each other? Or do they think first and foremost of the interests of their country and the citizens of their nation state?

By European solidarity, we understand a form of solidarity that goes beyond one's own nation state, and where the recipients of solidarity are either other EU countries or citizens of other EU member states. We assume that the strength of European solidarity can only be relationally determined in comparison to other territorial spaces. The comparison with national solidarity is especially relevant, because historically the nation state has been the central institution of solidarity – and in many ways still is. Simultaneously, globalization processes may have led to the fact that the entire world has become the frame of reference for solidarity. We thereby differentiate between three different territorial spaces of solidarity: solidarity between citizens of the same nation state, solidarity between member

¹ This article is based on the presentation made together with Holger Lengfeld (Universität Leipzig) in the plenary session „Europa inmitten globaler Spannungen“. The paper strongly refers to chapter 2 of a co-authored monograph (Gerhards et al. 2019).

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states and their citizens within the EU, and global solidarity in the sense of solidarity with countries and citizens outside of the EU.

Estimating the strength of European solidarity in relation to national and global solidarity is, however, not only an empirical research question, but touches on the normative question of the legitimacy of different solidarity spaces. Is it legitimate to favor citizens of one's own nation state over citizens of Europe and over people outside of Europe? Does it not follow from the fact that all people are equal that no distinction should be made between different solidarity spaces, so that all people, no matter in which country they live, have the same right to solidarity? The legitimacy of different solidarity spaces is a controversial topic in social philosophy. As we will see in the next section, two camps can be distinguished. Cosmopolitans argue that support for people in need should have a global outreach and not stop at any border, while communitarians assume that solidarity is based on connectedness and requires common institutions. The stronger the connectedness and the denser the institutional network, the stronger solidarity will be empirically, which at the same time is normatively justified.

In section three we explore the question of whether European citizens' attitudes toward solidarity tend to follow the cosmopolitan or the communitarian position. Based on a survey we conducted in 13 EU countries, we examine the extent to which citizens are willing to support people within the three solidarity spaces. The results support the communitarian view of solidarity. Solidarity with citizens of one's own country receives the greatest support. At the same time, the majority of respondents are also in favor of European solidarity, although the level of solidarity at the European level is below the level of nation-state support. Finally, the results show that European solidarity enjoys significantly higher support than universal, global solidarity. In the conclusion (section four) we will summarize the results by relating the empirical findings to the philosophical debate. Overall, the empirical data support more of a communitarian than a cosmopolitan position.

Legitimate spaces of solidarity: cosmopolitans versus communitarians

The reference point in the philosophical debate for evaluating the legitimacy of different spaces of solidarity are usually social justice theories. We follow Andrea Sangiovanni's (2012, 2013) summary of the discussion and distinguish between cosmopolitans on the one hand and communitarians on the other.

Cosmopolitans argue that support for people in need should not stop at any territorial border. They are therefore in favor of global solidarity (Pogge 2008). For example, if two people find themselves in a similar plight, the first person in their own country and the other person in a foreign country, then both have the same legitimate right to solidarity. The rationale for cosmopolitan global solidarity refers to the idea of equality of all people. Because all human beings are born equal and because the place of birth and thus the territory where they will grow up and probably spend their life is determined by pure coincidence, there is no legitimate reason to justify advantaging or disadvantaging people based on their territorial location. This principle of equal treatment applies not only to fundamental human rights, but also to the distribution of resources to people in need, that is, it also applies to an ethic of solidarity (Sangiovanni 2013).

The idea of cosmopolitan solidarity implies in turn that the existing interactions between people, the concentration and institutionalization of interactions as manifested in the nation state, for exam-

ple, should be irrelevant for the question of solidarity. Accordingly, cosmopolitans criticize theories that assume solidarity should be bound to the existence of a social community.

From the perspective of cosmopolitans, the institutionalization of European solidarity is the first step in the right direction, because it is here that the national container is being broken open and extended toward the 'world'. All Europeans, and not just the citizens of a nation state, should be treated as equals, and everyone has an equal right to solidarity. This replaces national communitarianism with European communitarianism. And this is to be welcomed, but it is not enough from the cosmopolitan point of view because solidarity should not stop at the borders of Europe either, but should embrace the citizens of all countries (Benhabib 2004). With regard to our study, a cosmopolitan perspective leads to the following conclusions: national solidarity can claim the lowest legitimacy for itself and global solidarity the highest, while European solidarity can be located between the two poles.

Communitarians, by contrast, assume that there are not only empirically different boundaries and thus different social spaces of solidarity, but that these spaces can also claim different legitimacy for themselves. Solidarity between people only arises when people are connected, when there is interaction between them, and when a system of norms and institutions and a feeling of *communitas* emerges on the basis of these interactions. Some communitarians assume that the state is needed to create such communities (Nagel 2005). Depending on the density of the interactions and the strength of the community, solidarity will vary in intensity.

The argument that the extent of solidarity is linked to an existing community is in substance an empirical statement and not a normative justification. Yet, norms cannot be derived from empirical facts. In this respect, a normatively more plausible communitarian justification is the one developed by Andrea Sangiovanni (2012, 2013; see also Singer 2016). He described his own position as 'reciprocity-based internationalism'. His core argument is the following: the creation of communities, such as that of a family, a nation state, or the European Union, occurs for a specific purpose; people enter into relationships and interactions in order to produce collective goods. By being willing to produce such collective goods and by participating in their production, people acquire the right to be supported by the other members of the community if necessary. Hence, the claim to solidarity arises as a result of participation in the production of collective goods. A legitimate claim to solidarity arises when people have participated in the production of collective goods. Accordingly, demands for social solidarity at all levels of governance can be understood as demands for a fair return on the mutual production of important collective goods (Sangiovanni 2013, S. 217).

Sangiovanni applies this general principle to different types of communities. For example, the modern nation state consists of institutions that guarantee internal and external securities and provide people with access to the labor market, education, and health care. Citizens of a country participate in the production of these collective goods, for instance by completing compulsory military service or being prepared to defend their country in the event of war and by being willing to obey the laws and to pay taxes so that the state can also guarantee the safety, education, and health of its citizens.

Sangiovanni interprets European integration as a process of new community building with the aim of producing collective goods. Above all, the creation of a common European market and a single currency was carried out with the aim and promise of increasing the prosperity of all European citizens. At the same time, however, the risks have changed with the European integration process. For example, the free movement of workers in Europe can lead to an increase in unemployment in some countries as a consequence of intra-European migration. Also, the introduction of the euro can lead to currency and economic crises. Since it is not known in advance how high such risks are and who will be particularly affected by the risks, the insurance principle of solidarity applies here too: all those who

are involved in the project of integration and who have participated in its realization have a right to solidarity in 'case of accident', just as they are entitled to 'consume' the fruits of the collective property.

For our study, this argument leads to the following conclusion: despite globalization and Europeanization processes, the nation state remains the dominant space of interactions in the production of collective goods. It is therefore empirically reasonable to expect that national solidarity will be more pronounced than European or global solidarity. And since the European Union has a much denser network of interactions and institutions than the global world society, European solidarity will be stronger than global solidarity. From the point of view of communitarians, however, the empirically expected ranking of the three solidarity groups is also a normatively justified ranking. Citizens give more to the nation state than to the European Union, and they give more to the EU than to world society. In the following section, we will discuss whether the empirical data support more of a communitarian perspective or more of a cosmopolitan view.

Empirical findings: The strength of national, European, and global solidarity

The empirical findings are based on a comparative survey, the "Transnational European Solidarity Study" (TESS) that was conducted using computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) in 13 European countries (Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, France, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden) in 2016. Respondents in the survey are citizens eligible to vote in national elections in the respective country. The final sample consists of 12,500 respondents (for more detailed information see Gerhards et al. 2019).

We do not only distinguish between different spaces of solidarity but also between different domains of solidarity. In the context of this paper, we focus on two domains of solidarity only: Fiscal solidarity, defined as citizens' willingness to support indebted regions and countries financially (1). Welfare state solidarity, defined as citizens' agreement to support those in need – unemployed, sick, and the elderly (2).²

Fiscal Solidarity: Solidarity with countries facing economic hardship

Fiscal solidarity is defined as citizens' willingness to show solidarity with regions and countries facing serious economic hardship. Following our theoretical considerations, we measured attitudes toward fiscal solidarity on three spatial levels: solidarity between regions within a nation state, between EU member states, and between EU member states and countries outside the EU.³

² The two other domains are: Territorial solidarity, defined as peoples' willingness to reduce inequality between poor and rich countries and solidarity with refugees defined as the support to grant asylum to refugees.

³ The wording of the questions was the following: *We have learned in recent years that regions within countries as well as entire countries can fall into a severe debt crisis. Please tell me to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.*

(1) *In times of crisis, the better off regions in [COUNTRY] should give financial help to other regions in [COUNTRY] facing severe economic difficulties.*

(2) *In times of crisis, [COUNTRY] should give financial help to other EU countries facing severe economic difficulties.*

(3) *In times of crisis, [COUNTRY] should give financial help to other countries outside of the European Union facing severe economic difficulties.*

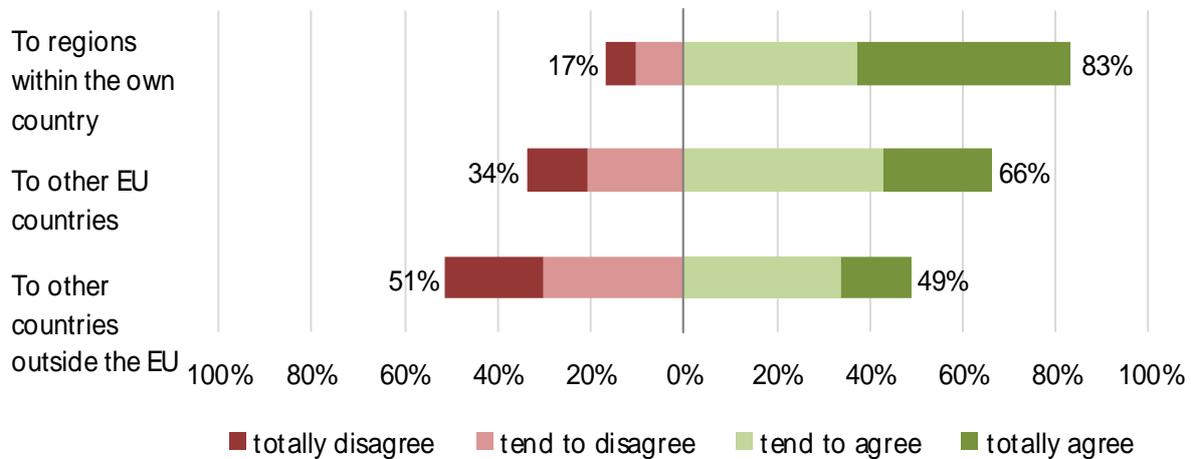


Figure 1: Fiscal solidarity by different spatial levels

As Figure 1 shows, the nation state is still the space with the highest legitimacy. A huge majority of 83% of respondents want to give financial help to suffering regions within their own country. But surprisingly, the majority of European citizens also see the EU as a legitimate space of solidarity. Two thirds of all respondents agree with their country providing financial aid to EU countries. Fiscal solidarity with countries outside of the EU is significantly lower than fiscal solidarity with EU countries and the support is not shared by a majority of respondents.

The fact that we asked respondents to evaluate the three different items at the same time might lead to an overestimation of respondents' willingness to engage in solidarity, as they were not prompted to favor one space of solidarity over the others. Therefore, we asked respondents a second question that puts them into a decision-making situation by requiring them to decide which of the three spaces they would help first and which second.⁴

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the differences between the three solidarity spaces are much more pronounced compared to Figure 1. The overwhelming majority of EU citizens would choose to help the regions within their own country first. Yet, in the second scenario, where we asked respondents which space should be the second priority, the picture changed considerably. Here, the majority of respondents opted in favor of assisting crisis-affected EU countries. Only a small number of respondents took a purely cosmopolitan position of choosing to help countries outside of the EU. We will discuss how to interpret these findings in relation to the philosophical debate after having presented the empirical results concerning the second domain of solidarity.

⁴ The wording of the question was the following: *Assuming a decision about priority has to be made: in your opinion, where should financial support be provided to first:*
 (1) To a region within [COUNTRY].
 (2) To another country in the European Union.
 (3) To another country outside of the European Union.
And where should it be provided to second?
 (1) To a region within [COUNTRY].
 (2) To another country in the European Union.
 (3) To another country outside of the European Union.

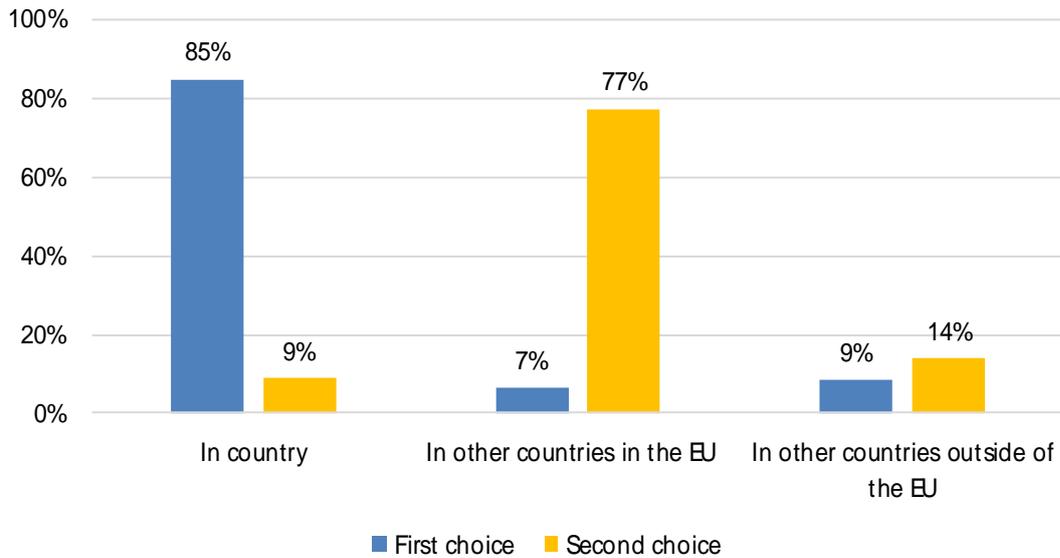


Figure 2: Fiscal solidarity and spaces of solidarity: first and second priority

Welfare solidarity: Solidarity with people in need

One of the key tasks of welfare states is to establish a social security system in order to protect people from market and social risks. This predominantly affects those who are ill, unemployed, unfit for work, old, or poor. Providing such protection was traditionally the domain of the national welfare state. In contrast to national welfare solidarity, European welfare solidarity means that the EU or EU countries jointly take responsibility for vulnerable individuals if they are EU citizens and reside in any of the member states.

We tested to what degree citizens think that their nation state⁵ on the one hand and the European Union⁶ on the other should be responsible for guaranteeing social security to the following vulnerable groups: (1) the sick, (2) the elderly, and (3) the unemployed. These social groups are typical recipients of welfare state support and encompass individuals who are in need.

⁵ The wording of the question was the following: *People have different views on what the [NATIONAL] government should be responsible for. Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you totally agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree or totally disagree.*

(1) *The [NATIONAL] government should guarantee access to health care for everyone in [COUNTRY].*

(2) *The [NATIONAL] government should guarantee a decent standard of living for the elderly in [COUNTRY].*

(3) *The [NATIONAL] government should guarantee a decent standard of living for the unemployed in [COUNTRY].*

⁶ The wording of question was the following: *Now please don't think about [COUNTRY], but about the European Union in Brussels and its responsibilities. Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you totally agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree or totally disagree.*

(1) *The European Union should guarantee access to health care for everyone in the EU.*

(2) *The European Union should guarantee a decent standard of living for the elderly in the EU.*

(3) *The European Union should guarantee a decent standard of living for the unemployed in the EU.*

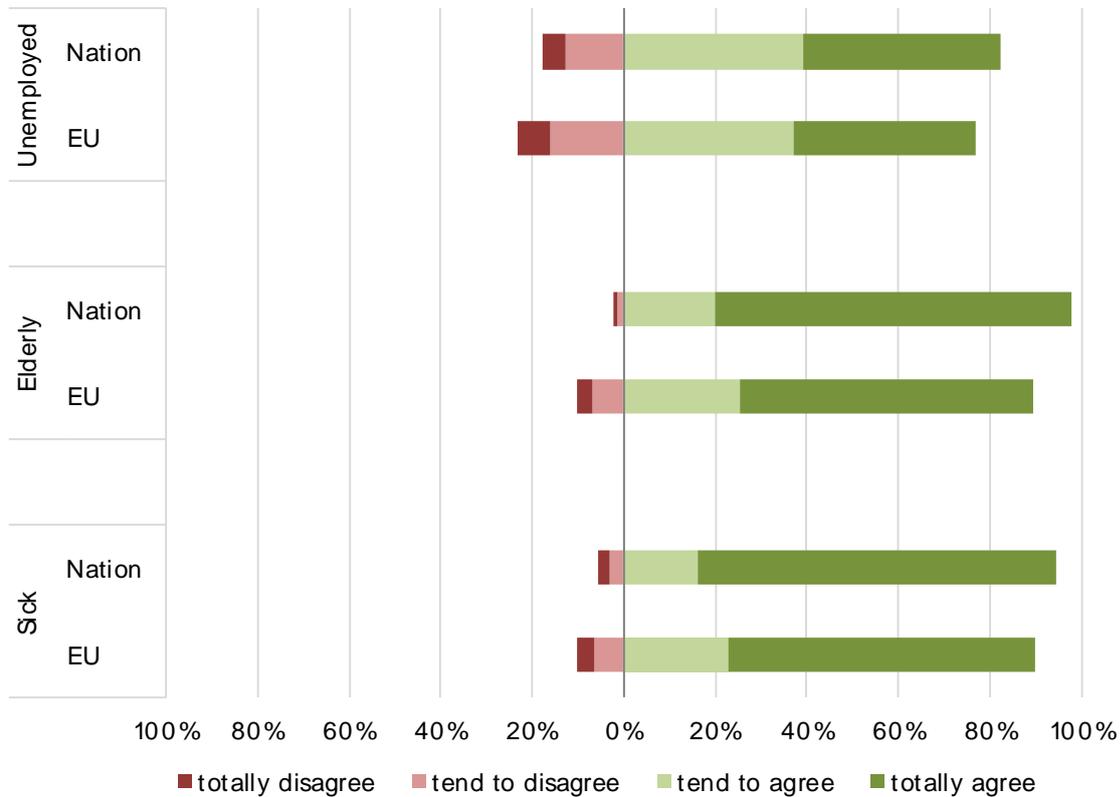


Figure 3: Welfare solidarity nationwide and in the EU

Figure 3 depicts the distribution of answers aggregated across the 13 surveyed countries. An overwhelming majority of respondents believe that the nation state should be responsible for the well-being of individuals from the three mentioned social groups, irrespective of the reason for their vulnerability. Ninety-four percent of individuals support the idea that national governments should guarantee sick people health care and 98% of individuals agree that national governments should guarantee the elderly decent living circumstances. On the other hand, only 82% of respondents want national governments to guarantee the unemployed a decent standard of living. Findings also demonstrate that the two territorial levels do not differ very much from each other. Ninety percent of respondents agree that the European Union should be responsible for sick and elderly Europeans. In contrast, 77% of respondents support the notion that the European Union needs to secure the standard of living of all unemployed Europeans. Despite the lower level of agreement, the latter rate still exceeds a two-thirds majority. Hence, Europe seems to be a similar space of solidarity as the nation state.

As in the case of fiscal solidarity, we asked respondents again to identify their territorial priority (national, European, or global) about where people in need should be helped first. By doing so, we forced respondents to clearly state their territorial preferences.⁷

⁷ The wording of the question was the following: *There are people in need not only in [COUNTRY] and in the EU, but all over the world. Assuming a decision about priority has to be made: in your opinion, where should people in need be helped first?*
 (1) In [COUNTRY].
 (2) In other countries in the European Union.
 (3) In other countries outside of the European Union.
 And where should they be helped second?

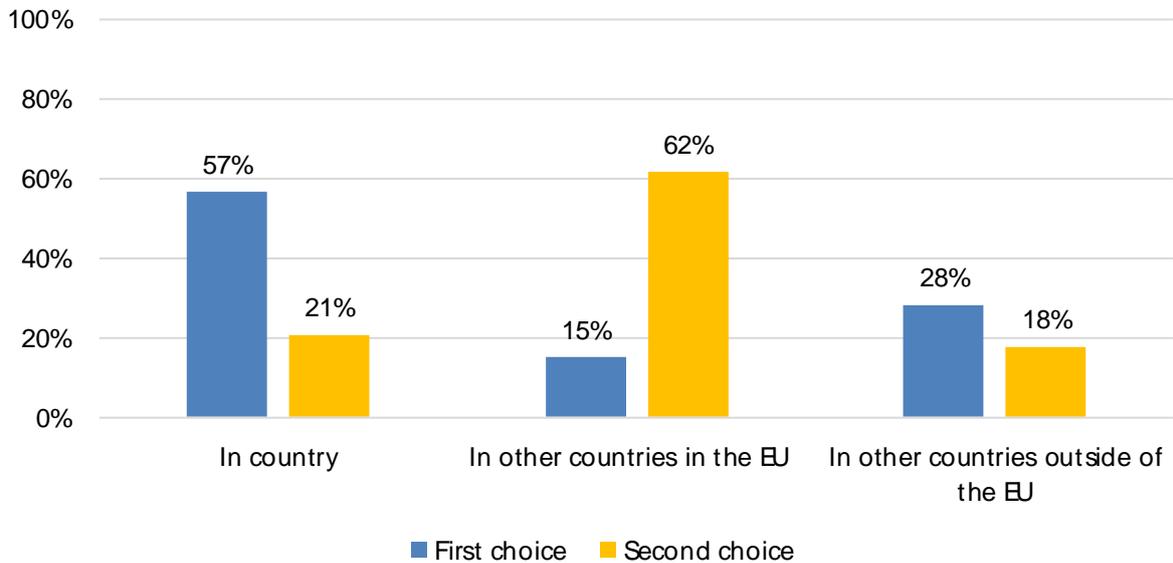


Figure 4: Welfare solidarity and spaces of solidarity: first and second priority

Figure 4 depicts the responses for the first and second choices to the questions. The majority of individuals (57%) chose to support people in need in their own country first. Fifteen percent of respondents picked other Europeans in need first, while 28% prioritized helping individuals from countries outside of the EU. In regard to respondents' second priority, findings show that for the majority of respondents (62%), their second choice is clearly to help Europeans in need, while 21% picked helping their fellow citizens second, and a slightly lower proportion of respondents (18%) chose to help individuals outside of the EU as a second priority.

Comparing the results of Figure 2 with those of Figure 4 shows that the differences between the three solidarity spaces are less pronounced in the case of welfare solidarity, a result we discuss in more detail elsewhere (Gerhards et al. 2019). In both cases, however, the majority of EU citizens choose to help the regions and the people who are in need within their own country first. And in both domains of solidarity, Europe lies between the world and the nation state as European solidarity comes second whereas only a small number of respondents took a purely cosmopolitan position of choosing to help countries and people outside of the EU.

Conclusion

What do the results presented in the last section mean in light of the philosophical debate between communitarians and cosmopolitans sketched out in the second section? While the cosmopolitans contend that, in its normative essence, solidarity is and should be a universal phenomenon, the communitarians argue that solidarity should always be expressed in relation to a real, existing community. According to them, the more strongly established a community is, the more solidarity can be expected

(1) In [COUNTRY].

(2) In other countries in the European Union.

(3) In other countries outside of the European Union.

from members of this community. As the nation state persists as the social space with the thickest net of institutions and interactions between people in spite of processes of globalization and Europeanization, it seems legitimate from a communitarian point of view for national solidarity to be more pronounced than European or global solidarity.

At the same time, the net of institutions on the European level and interactions of citizens in the European Union territory are significantly thicker than the net of institutions and the interconnectedness between the citizens and nation states on the global level. Therefore, from a communitarian perspective, it is normatively justifiable when citizens also wish to show more solidarity with their European neighbors, as they give more to the nation state than to the European Union, and they give more to the EU than to world society.

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