Debating European burden-sharing.  
National debates in the aftermath of European crises

Abstract

In the recent past, the European Union has been shaken by several crises (e.g. the European debt crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the refugee crisis, a new series of terrorist attacks, the Brexit). National and European publics discussed the extent of their engagement and the conditions for supporting other member states. Thus, the future direction of European integration reached the top of the public agenda. Against this background, the study is interested in the reactions of national societies to European crises in the context of which European burden-sharing is discussed. Following a discursive approach, which is interested in the arguments used within public discourse, the study asks which positions, framings and arguments concerning European burden-sharing are used and perceived as legitimate by different actors within a national sphere. Therefore, a broad variety of public statements by different national actors (government, political parties, unions, employer’s association, church, civil society etc.) will be analysed. Due to their crucial importance to the European project, the analysis will focus on the national debates in Germany and France. It will start with the national debates on the European debt crisis and European aid measures for Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain.

Introduction

In the history of the European Union (EU), crises have often served as drivers of change and led to further integration. In the recent past, the EU has been shaken by several crises (e.g. the European debt crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the refugee crisis, a new series of terrorist attacks, the Brexit). While some of these crises led to stronger European cooperation, others failed to produce a common response and, in contrast, led to alienation between the member states.

In this context, national and European publics discussed the extent of their engagement and the conditions for supporting other member states. Thus, the future direction of European integration reached the top of the public agenda. While, on the one hand, a multitude of actors are calling for “European solidarity” in support struggling member states, on the other hand, nationalist reflexes by actors disappointed with crisis management or European integration in general are increasing.

Is the assumption that European crises lead to further integration still valid or do recent crisis dynamics endanger European cohesion and, thus, the European project? Are we already on the road to renationalization? Or, can the resulting politicization be understood as an opportunity for a political struggle which could lead to a deepening of the EU (Zürn 2016b)? And is it true that only solidarity keeps the European project from disintegrating?

Against this background, the study at hand is interested in the reactions of national societies to European crises in the context of which European burden-sharing is discussed. In addition to the
investigation of the general framing of the subjects at hand and national perspectives concerning European burden-sharing in specific cases, the study aims to examine the reasons that are given by national actors to support or deny actual proposals for European burden-sharing and which conditions are requested for such measures in specific cases.

The term European “burden-sharing” is understood as “the question how the costs of common initiatives or the provision of international public goods should be shared between states” (Thielemann 2003: 253). It is preferred to the often cited notion of European “solidarity” because burden-sharing is theoretically broader in so far as, unlike solidarity which is commonly normatively justified (Stjernø 2009), it can be based on a norm-based logic as well as on a cost-benefit logic (Thielemann 2003). The question if burden-sharing within the EU is mainly based on a normative spirit of solidarity, on a rational self-interest, or a mixture of these two explanations, will be examined in the proposed study. Thus, a questioning of whether solidary attitudes are decreasing or rather increasing after recent crises in the examined societies can be addressed as well.

Based on current research emphasizing the persisting dominance of national frameworks in public debates about Europe instead of the existence of an overall pan-European debate (Risse 2015a; Díez Medrano 2003), the level of national debates seems promising to examine existing positions towards deepened European cooperation and burden-sharing within Europe. Following a discursive approach, interested in the expressed arguments within public discourse, the study asks which positions, framings and arguments concerning European burden-sharing are used and perceived as legitimate by different actors within a national sphere. Therefore, a broad variety of public statements by different national actors (government, political parties, unions, employer’s association, church, civil society etc.) made public in parliamentary documents and press statements will be analysed.

To sum up, the overall research interest is how different national societies react to European crises in which context European burden-sharing is discussed. The research question is: Which positions, framing and arguments relating to European burden-sharing are used and perceived as legitimate by different national actors within the public debate?

The analysis will take a close look at the relation of cost-benefit considerations and norm-based identity concerns in framing and argumentation used in discourse. Due to the often made argument that the feeling of “European identity” is a crucial prerequisite for the formation of solidary attitudes in Europe, a special focus will be on indications of a collective European identity such as the expression of a feeling of community (“we-ness”) as well as understanding and empathy with other Europeans.
Exploring this question will enhance our understanding of national attitudes concerning European cooperation and burden-sharing in the aftermath of recent crises in Europe, expose the existing foundations of the often cited “European solidarity” within national societies and, thus, show obstacles and chances for further European integration.

**Structure of this paper**

In the proposed paper, I begin with a short overview of the strands of research most pertinent to my research interest – mainly research on European and international burden-sharing, research on European or transnational solidarity and research on the Europeanization of public spheres – and outline my contribution to that literature. In the second part, I describe the qualitative case study design and enlarge on the planned methods (a combination of qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis), as well as on the case selection (Germany and France; European debt crisis).

**Part I – Theory Section**

My analysis of national societies debating European burden-sharing is based on a constructivist understanding of discourse and public debate. It builds mainly on research on burden-sharing in Europe, research on European and transnational solidarity and research on the Europeanization of public spheres.

**Constructivist assumptions**

Following constructivist research, this study understands social “facts” like the perception of a crisis, the legitimacy of an argument, or the feeling of we-ness as a socially constructed phenomenon dependent on intersubjective meanings (Hurd 2009). Only through social interaction, e.g. through the use of language or through social practices, can a claim be framed as “legitimate” or a “European” crisis comes into being. “Talking or doing politics” can therefore challenge or (re-)produce a specific social interpretation of the world. Thus, public discourse can have constitutive power in so far as it can change existing perceptions and create new ones: “social solidarity ... is constructed through a public sphere of discourse and cultural interpretation” (Gould 2007: 152).

This understanding of the co-constitution of actors and structure explains why the struggle for interpretations between actors regarding the debate about European burden-sharing is that important: The actors involved enter a struggle over interpretations of a given social setting, e.g. the legitimacy and conditionality of European burden-sharing. The successful framing of a given situation as a “national” or a “European” problem, an action as “legitimate” or “illegitimate” or an actor belonging to an “us” or not can be decisive for further debate.
Research on European and international burden-sharing

Existing research on international burden-sharing is interested in the motivations, mechanisms and patterns of international practices of burden-sharing in various fields. Most of the studies focus on burden-sharing of international peacekeeping or collective security within the NATO or the EU (Sandler and Shimizu 2014; Foucault and Mérand 2012; Fang and Ramsay 2010; Dorussen et al. 2009; Hartley and Sandler 1999; Oneal 1990) or European and international immigration and asylum policy (Thielemann 2005; 2003; Boswell 2003; Suhrke 1998; Thoburn 1995), whereby others fields like fiscal burden-sharing during financial crises (Goodhart and Schoenmaker 2009) or the management of food aid (Hasenclever et al. 1998) are examined as well.

The literature distinguishes two principal logics of social action explaining the emergence of burden-sharing: norm-based action and interest-based action (Thielemann 2003). While the first logic underlines the social embeddedness of an actor who is influenced in his preferences by the legitimacy and social adequacy of an action, the functionalist logic explains the preferences of an actor mainly with rational cost-benefit calculations; largely independent of moral beliefs. Despite their diverging logics, the two logics are not mutually exclusive, but rather occur quite often together.

Due to the fact that these theoretical explanations are well-known and established in International Relations, e.g. used to explain the emergence of international cooperation or the design of international institutions (Koremenos et al. 2001; Barnett and Finnemore 1999), no further explanations will be made at this point.

At this stage, it should merely be pointed out that Following Martial Foucault and Frédéric Mérand (Foucault and Mérand 2012), research on burden-sharing has for the most part neglected the way of how a “culture of burden-sharing” was generated and maintained. The fact that “notions of appropriateness and justice [relating to burden-sharing] differ from one context to another” and “the debate on burden-sharing is also a struggle to reach agreement on the purpose, the objectives and the priorities of an international organization” (Foucault and Mérand 2012: 428) have not yet received sufficient attention.

Research on European and international solidarity

Regarding its fuzzy nature, solidarity can be understood as an “active work-in progress” (Borgmann-Prebil and Ross 2010: 7). The interpretation of what solidarity actually means and who it includes depends on the involved actors and the given context. In his detailed historical analysis of the history of the term “solidarity”, Steinar Stjernø distinguishes seven concepts of solidarity, pointing out their significant differences. He states that considering its multifaceted nature and its often nebulous use in the political discourse, “solidarity can most fruitfully be defined as the preparedness to share
resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or in need” (Stjernø 2009: 2). Similarly, Michael Zürn defines solidarity as “the willingness of individuals to give up things they value for the sake of the collectivity, and the acceptance of re-distributive policies is the best indicator for this” (Zürn 2000: 199).

Stjernø claims that “the identification of an individual with others” and “the feeling of community” between an individual and some others – in other words, a collective identity – are necessary ingredients of solidarity. Due to the fact that the solidary group is positioned against an “other”, Malcom Ross (2010) understands an “element of exclusion” as an integral part of solidarity.

While Stjernø claims that solidarity is not based on personal interest, but on political altruism, emphasizing empathy and cognition (Stjernø 2009), other authors put greater emphasize on the expectation of reciprocity in this regard. Referring to Carol C. Gould (2007), transnational solidarity “involves an affective element combined with an effort to understand the specifics of others’ concrete situation and to imaginatively construct for oneself their feelings and needs” at best through listening to people’s own accounts (Gould 2007: 156). But while understanding and empathy are important elements in this context, in requiring “the readiness to take action in support of others”, solidarity goes beyond empathy and entails, unlike humanitarian aid, “a certain reciprocal expectation of aid from the others” (Gould 2007: 157). Based on a similar understanding, Malcom Ross (2010) describes mutuality as an integral part of solidarity. With regard to the definition of conditions, Stjernø (2011) underlines that the insisting on the strict adherence of several conditions by the recipients of “solidary contributions” fits only to specific interpretations of solidarity (namely the Christian democratic concept emphasizing personal responsibility) and contradicts others emphasizing the voluntary nature of solidarity.

Concerning the preconditions for the emergence of solidarity, differing opinions exist in the literature. Whereas some voices state that the emergence of solidarity is dependent on a collective identity, which is only imaginable at the national level, others underline that it can be stretched above the national state and gain a transnational scope (Gould 2007; Beckert et al. 2004; Calhoun 2002).

When Michael Zürn (2000) says that “democratic institutions are not only dependent on social prerequisites, they are also a generative source of them” (Zürn 2000: 211), he is referring to the constitutive power of political practices. In this regard, the communicative context has a special role to play because solidarity is thought to be developed through communicative action and “conducted in, or mediated by, a public sphere” (Ross 2010: 29). Especially with a transnational orientation, the role of direct communication and the constitutive quality of public debate play an important role: “solidarities [...] are seen as constructed through the interactions and understandings of groups or
individuals over time” (Gould 2007: 159). In a nutshell, transnational communication can lead to a collective identity, enabling the formation of solidary attitudes in Europe and, thus, an important question to answer is how far the “Europeanization” of the public sphere is already advanced.

*Research on the Europeanization of public spheres*

Research on European public spheres analyses the impact of the European integration on national and transnational public spheres1 in Europe. It seeks to answer the questions of how “Europeanized”2 national public spheres are and in what sense a European public sphere (“Öffentlichkeit”) is yet realised. Based on the assumption that media plays a crucial role in the political deliberation of modern mass societies, most empirical work focuses on the “mediated deliberation” about European issues in international or national mass media; sometimes neglecting the wider institutional context (Bärenreuter et al. 2009). The first “wave” of research has come quite unanimously to the conclusion that the emergence of a supranational public sphere is improbable in the nearer future due to the fact that the impact of transnational media is significantly smaller than the impact of national mass media in shaping the public sphere and “even with the Internet that is per se a transnational medium, political communications have, up to now, remained to a highly degree nationalized” (Bärenreuter et al. 2009: 12); except for elitist circles. Therefore, current research seeks the roots of a European public sphere primarily within the national level (Tatur 2009; Risse 2015a).

*Research on politicisation in Europe*

Adopting a different perspective, research on politicisation in Europe explains the spread of public debates on European governance with the increase in political authority of the EU. Politicisation is understood here as an increase in the salience of European governance, a polarisation of opinion and an expansion of actors and audiences discussing European issues; which, if put on the right track, can be a catalyst for the European project (Zürn 2016a).

In their analysis of the Eurozone crisis in six West European countries, Edgar Grande and Hans-Peter Kriesi (2015) are re-examining widespread theoretical assumptions of politicisation research. While noticing a significantly varying level of politicisation across states and settings, they can neither confirm the often theoretically assumed connection between the level of Europeanization and the

---

1 A public sphere is broadly defined as “an intersubjectively shared, communicatively constructed system of mutual observance without a concrete social order or membership” (Bärenreuter et al. 2009: 9). Empirically, it is usually distinguished in particular public arenas or spheres, a distinction is made between elite and mass publics and its existence and functionality are judged by the density of communicative activity (Bärenreuter et al. 2009).

2 A recent definition by Risse (2015b: 10) defines it as follows: “Europeanization refers to the transformation of domestic as well as transnational discourse arenas, institutions, and policies in such a way that the EU as a multilevel governance system becomes an integral part of the ‘domestic’ as well as the ‘international’ realms.”
level of politicisation nor the expected high salience of redistributive conflicts and nationalist framing in reaction to the Eurozone crisis and explain this in part with their findings of a dominance of EU executives and the low visibility of national parties in European debates.

Analysing the financial crisis in Europe, Michael Zürn and Christian Rauh (2016) do not find any proof of the often claimed renationalization hypothesis either. Instead of blaming deeply rooted national identities, they emphasize the institutional core of the crisis. When arguing that the EU’s future depends on how capable national and European actors are in channelling public debates in institutional terms and underlining the importance of the enabling of genuine political competition at the European level (Rauh and Zürn 2016), they are pushing forward in a similar direction as Grande and Kriesi.

*European identity as a prerequisite for European solidarity?*

Before coming to the existing level of solidarity in today’s EU, the assumption that solidarity beyond the national state is only possible based on a strong collective identity shall be countered by a line of argumentation by Fritz W. Scharpf (2004). After arguing that the Habermasian preconditions for a collective identity legitimizing the implementation of a redistributing policy at the European level are underdeveloped within the EU, he points out that this is only relevant for a supranational enforcement of solidarity. European solidarity could however by legitimized as well through contractual agreements by national governments based on the approval of their national citizen. Here, the difficulties are not democratic-theoretical, but empirical. Not the appeal to the existence of a collective identity but only affirming discourses at the national level could legitimize such an international solidarity (“Solidarität unter Weltbürgern”, Scharpf 2004: 23).

Concerning the actual manifestation of solidarity within the EU, the literature is, despite the awareness of the constant mentioning of the importance of European solidarity in the documents and the political rhetoric of the EU, not too optimistic. The editors of “Promoting solidarity in the European Union” (2010) speak of “solidaristic tendencies” in the EU and leave it to the reader to judge if solidarity “offers a view of the EU’s future”. They conclude that further research needs to engage with “what new solidarities might mean and how they come to be practiced” (Borgmann-Prebil and Ross 2010: 21). Thielemann (2003) is not surprised about finding “strict limits to cross-border solidarity in the Union” (Thielemann 2003: 263) and refers to the controversies of redistribution even in national contexts. But in his summary on European refugee policy, he states that “although there is still little evidence for inter-state solidarity in the EU, norm-based approaches can nonetheless offer a powerful account of European burden-sharing in the area of forced migration” (Thielemann 2003: 253). This is due to the fact that in the absence of a deep concern regarding the disproportionate share of the burden for other member states, “the move towards
burden-sharing appears to have originated [...] out of a concern over potential threats to the European integration project and the system of international refugee protection” (Thielemann 2003: 268). In “The idea of solidarity in Europe” (2009), Steinar Stjernø is arguing along similar lines when stating that the creation of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) is “certainly an expression of solidarity” but it was “based not only on altruism [...] but on the feeling of a common destiny and common interests” (Stjernø 2011).

Contribution to the literature

Based on the above research, often theoretical in nature, the aim of my paper is to bring back empirics when talking about the willingness to European burden-sharing and the state of European solidarity: What are the positions and arguments prevailing in actual debates at the national level after recent crises? What kind of solidarity (and with whom) is being talked about?

The remarks that existing measures of burden-sharing within Europe may often not be based on concern about the situation of other member states (empathy), but rather on concern about the future of the European project, seem very interesting in these regard. How to interpret that in terms of solidarity? When analysing the discursive struggle over European burden-sharing, I will take a closer look at the consideration of “other Europeans” – whether European actors, other member states, or actors from other national societies – within national debates. Based on the above mentioned accounts emphasizing the importance of empathy and “the ability to take the role of ‘the other(s)”’ (Stjernø 2011: 326) for the emergence of solidarity, the study will examine the manifestation of recognition and empathy for the situation and the perspectives of other Europeans within the national debates touching European burden-sharing. A very likely outcome could be that the above mentioned conceptions of solidarity are not applying to the actual debates about European burden-sharing and the use of the term European solidarity might need a critical reflection.

Part II – Research Design

Based on the assumption that in modern Western democracies societal beliefs and political conflicts are mirrored best in the struggle for social interpretations within public debate, the study will examine the different reactions of national societies to European crises in which context European burden-sharing is discussed therein. Following a discursive approach interested in the expressed arguments, the study will uncover which positions, framings and arguments concerning European burden-sharing are used and perceived as legitimate by different actors within the national debate. After noting that the media coverage of national quality newspaper might not be sufficient for reconstructing the breadth and depth of actor’s argumentation in a pre-study, the proposed study will now analyse a broad variety of public statements by different national actors (government, political parties, unions, employer’s association, church, civil society etc.) published in parliamentary
documents and press statements. An additional analysis of selected media coverage has not yet been ruled out.

Based on a “thin” constructivist understanding, discourse is seen as an institutionalized, communicative exchange, wherein different logics of action can be observed at the micro level (Holzscheiter 2014). Therefore, concerning the choice of methods, a combination of qualitative content analysis and frame analysis seems appropriate for the analysis. Through the approach of a frame analysis, belonging to the discourse analysis framework, the patterns of meaning structure and argumentation which justify positions and actions and contain normative assessments will be made accessible for further analysis. Performing the qualitative data analysis via MAXQDA, the main focus will lay on the manifestation of three criteria: 1. the overall framing of European burden-sharing (exception or a matter of course, depiction of the overarching objective etc.), 2. the position (including conditions) towards European burden-sharing, 3. the reasons given to support or deny European burden-sharing (e.g. own fault of affected actor, avert danger for Europe, stand by other Europeans).

Moreover, the analysis will capture the general framing of Europe (e.g. economic or political community), the expression of a feeling of community and the general consideration of European actors (visibility, depiction and expressed empathy). Within the content analysis, it will be important to differentiate between the type of actors making claims in the debate to illustrate possible commonalities and differences within one case or between different cases.

**Case Selection**

The universe of cases underlying this study is made out of all national debates, within the EU member states, in the context of which European burden-sharing is discussed. In view of all countries worth considering, I plan to start with the two qualitative case studies of Germany and France, due to their crucial importance for the European project.

Given that Germany has recently become the leading nation in European politics and external expectations concerning Germany’s role in Europe are increasing, I will start by examining the national debate about European burden-sharing in the context of European crises in Germany. The first case under examination will be the German debate about the European debt crisis and European aid measures for Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain. So far, it is planned to consider all parliamentary debates of the German Bundestag explicitly targeting European aid measures from 2010 to 2015 (total number of 12 sessions) and complementing these debates with published press statements of the Confederation of German Trade Unions, the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations, the German Bishops’ Conference, the Evangelical Church in Germany and yet to be
defined civil society organisations; possibly supplemented by selected editorials of the two biggest daily newspaper (BILD, Süddeutsche Zeitung).

Regarding the further case selection, the following cases touching European burden-sharing could be interesting within the German debate as well: 1. the refugee crisis (burden-sharing with Greece, Italy or the Balkan States), 2. the terror attacks (burden-sharing with France or Belgium), 3. the Ukraine crisis/Russian threat (burden-sharing with Poland or the Baltic States).

In a later step, I plan to examine the same cases in the French public debate. This is warranted, firstly due to the fact that Germany and France constitute the “core states” of the EU, recently demonstrated by their proposal to lead the post-Brexit EU-reform (“A strong Europe in a world of uncertainties”, Ayrault and Steinmeier 2016). Secondly, in addition to their political power, the two countries represent diverging societal attitudes towards international burden-sharing and problem-solving. According to a study by the Pew Research Center from June 2016, there is a remarkable divide between the German and the French general public when asked about their willingness “to help other countries deal with their problems” and “to take into account its allies’ interests”. Whereby 67 percent of the German respondents support that their country “should take into account the interest of its allies, even if it means making compromises” (France: 43 percent), 52 percent of the French respondents find that their country “should follow its own national interests, even when its allies strongly disagree” (Germany: 30 percent). Regarding the last question, only Greece and the United Kingdom voiced stronger support for this isolationist attitude (Stokes et al. 2016). Keeping in mind recent events, which seem to confirm data, such as the French hesitation regarding the resettlement of refugees within Europe, a comparison of the German and the French public debate seems to be potentially fruitful. Because if even the two current greatest powers in Europe, Germany and France, have serious reservations concerning European burden-sharing, the future of the European project seems to be in danger.

---

3 Regarding the chosen cases in France, the case of the terrorist attacks (burden-sharing with France) could be replaced with the refugee crisis (burden-sharing with Germany), whereby the general problem of the asymmetric affectedness of the two countries needs to be addressed.
References

Ayrault, Jean-Marc, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier (2016). *A strong Europe in a world of uncertainties*.


