

Does Social Europe Matter? Turning points and dynamics of public support the EU in the Mediterranean countries confronting external shocks

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Over the past two decades, unprecedented exogenous shocks – notably the 2008 global economic depression and the multifaceted crises underway since 2011 in the EU, from sovereign debt to migration and security, till the COVID-19 pandemic more recently – have generated at the same time pressures for austerity and need for increasing social spending in order to cushion their economic and social consequences, making tensions about intra-EU redistribution and solidarity more salient.

Parallel to this, in the turmoil of the crisis scenario the perception of citizens and their attitudes towards the EU have been changing, over time and across countries and social groups. Remarkably, Mediterranean countries, after being among the most EU-enthusiast member states, with a clearly supportive attitude towards the Union, have turned to be increasingly Eurosceptic, especially since the outbreak of the sovereign debt crisis.

Against this backdrop, the paper intersects two different streams of the literature, the one dealing with EU attitudes and the one addressing the development of EU solidarity, with a twofold goal. First, the paper aims at disentangling, cross-nationally and longitudinally, support towards the EU, its institutions and policy prerogatives since the early 1970s, to test whether Mediterranean countries present a specific pattern as regards peaks of trust-distrust towards the EU, and whether they occurred in correspondence of specific events in time, i.e. key ‘turning points’, such as crises and new Treaties. Second, the paper aims at testing the “Social Europe matters hypothesis”, questioning the potentials in terms of political re-legitimation and re-stabilization of the EU polity played by policy initiatives meant at strengthening EU solidarity. More precisely, building on Ferrera and Vandenbroucke (2019), the core expectation put to test is that some level of organized solidarity in a polity can be conceived as a “basic political good”, serving the purpose of facilitating social cooperation and providing legitimacy to political institutions, captured in terms of diffuse and specific support.

From an empirical standpoint, the paper mostly relies on macro-level public opinion data obtained by updating the Guinaudeau and Schnattener (2019) dataset on “European mood” for the 1973-2020 period with the aim to reconstruct the

longitudinal trends of public attitudes towards the EU and investigate whether and how the economic, social and political consequences of the multiple crises affected how citizens trust EU institutions and evaluate their policy-making performance. By employing a cross-country comparison of EU27 countries, we focus on Mediterranean countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) that were hardly hit by the multiple crises and thus lend themselves to be treated as “pathway cases” (cf. Seawright and Gerring, 2008), for an in-depth exploration of mechanisms at play. Our main expectation is that after the peaks of the crises, in particular the Eurozone crisis, we observe a decrease in EU institutional trust but an increase of public support for the strengthening of a “social integration” with particular reference to intra-EU redistribution mechanisms.