
EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY AND ITS LIMITATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

The Christian idea of solidarity was recognized as the basis for the process of European integration because it enabled reconciliation and cooperation between countries, that until recently were at odds, for the common good. Solidarity has been recognized as one of the key principles of the European Union. It is exemplified not only by the EU's redistributive policies such as the Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion policy and the EU budget, but also by the admission of less developed countries to the EU, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the European development policy. The article presents an analysis of solidarity as a fundamental value of the EU, the form of its institutionalization, and attempts to answer the question of how the EU principle of solidarity is respected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research introduces a thesis that the coronavirus pandemic crisis has significantly weakened the importance of European solidarity. Particularly in the first period of the pandemic, the deficit of solidarity between Member States was clearly visible, even though Europeans expected cooperation and mutual assistance. Also within the EU's recovery plan and financial support under the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan, divisions and conflicts between countries have shaken European solidarity.

Keywords: solidarity, European Union, COVID-19 pandemic, Christian, values

1. Introduction

Solidarity is one of the basic principles of social life at different levels: interpersonal, intergroup, national and international. Solidarity is not only about support and assistance, but it creates a group bond and a sense of community. The European principle of solidarity stems from the Christian tradition and is firmly rooted in the social and political life of Europe. It has become one of the fundamental principles of the European Union.

Although the principle of solidarity was not expressed *explicitly* in the founding treaties, it has been the basis of European integration from the beginning - we all act together and bear the costs together, because together we will achieve more than alone. The establishment of the European Communities,

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the development of the European Union, the single market, the Economic and Monetary Union and EU policies are based on the joint solidarity of the member states. However, a number of recent crises in the Union, including the financial crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit and now the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have seriously undermined this principle. The article presents an analysis of the meaning of solidarity as a fundamental value of the EU, also the form and process of its institutionalization and attempts to answer the question about the solidarity of EU member states during the coronavirus pandemic crisis. It can be assumed that the crisis situations, the border states that reveal the real motives and attitudes, show the weaknesses and faults of the European project. The question then arises whether the coronavirus pandemic crisis is not also a crisis of European solidarity? The research posits that the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has seriously undermined the importance of the principle of European solidarity. Despite declaring solidarity to be a fundamental value, EU member states did not respect it during the pandemic. The solidarity deficit was particularly evident during the first period of the pandemic and during the negotiation of the financial support program: the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan. The research made use of qualitative analysis methods of data available, i.e. the EU treaties and official documents of the EU institutions, documents of the Catholic Church institutions, expert opinions and reports of Eurostat, Eurobarometer and other research centres (e.g. ECFR), and carried out an in-depth critical analysis of the existing scientific literature on European solidarity.

Numerous studies on the principle of solidarity in the EU focus primarily on its enshrinement in EU law [1-3] and on social solidarity understood as leveling out social inequalities [4], including in particular the implementation of the welfare state model [5]. Their conclusions point to the systematically growing income inequality in Europe [6], the problem of poverty and social exclusion, lack of integration and social cohesion [7]. Social and economic disparities in Europe are constantly increasing and the concentration of resources and capital is progressing. Although everyone benefits from the process of European integration, it is the richest who gain the most. The benefits of economic growth between 1980 and 2010 were concentrated in the hands of just 10% of people in Europe [8]. A lack of social solidarity is also evident towards refugees, immigrants, national and ethnic minorities [9]. The problem of the Christian roots of the idea of European solidarity is studied mainly from the perspective of the Sociology of religion and Theology [10, 11]. One points to the Christian values which were the foundation of the creation of a united Europe [12, 13]. Most studies examine charitable and volunteer behaviours between individuals and groups, as well as social capital [14]. There is little analysis of the importance of the principle of solidarity between the member states [15, 16], especially during crises [J. Habermas, *Democracy, Solidarity and The European Crisis*, Lecture at University of Leuven, 26th April 2013]. Few studies on the subject indicate that successive divisions and conflicts within the Union weaken European solidarity, and that the very principle of EU solidarity regulated by the

treaties is poorly respected and rarely practiced [17]. There is no research to explain the stature of European solidarity during the current crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The article presented here aims to fill a gap in research on the importance of the principle of solidarity in the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic and its related crisis.

2. Christian roots of solidarity in the European Union

Although the treaties of the European Union do not strictly refer to Christian values, the very idea of the European integration process and its axiological foundations derive from the heritage and tradition of Christianity. This applies to values such as freedom, justice, equality, subsidiarity and solidarity [18]. John Paul II made solidarity a dominant theme in the social teaching of the Catholic Church. He expanded the concept and declared that solidarity was a key value for the Church. The message of the Church's social doctrine regarding solidarity clearly shows that there is an intimate bond between solidarity and the common good, between solidarity and the universal destination of goods, between solidarity and equality among peoples, between solidarity and peace in the world [John Paul II, *Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 17, 39, 45: AAS 80 (1988)]. The new relationships of interdependence between individuals and peoples, which are de facto forms of solidarity, have to be transformed into relations tending towards genuine ethical-social solidarity. Therefore, solidarity is seen under two complementary aspects: that of a social principle and that of a moral virtue [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1939-1941].

The Christian idea of solidarity was recognized as the basis of the European integration process, as Robert Schuman called it - the *raison de 'etre* of the European Communities [19]. A united Europe was to be more than just a cooperation of countries, because it appealed to such values as selflessness, forgiveness and reconciliation, it set the goal of maintaining peace between the hitherto conflicted states [20]. The axiological dimension of the unifying Europe was extremely important. The Preamble to the Treaty Establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (1951) recognized that "Europe can be built only through real practical achievements which will first of all create real solidarity and through the establishment of common bases for economic development" [21]. The founding fathers of the European Community - Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Alcide De Gasperi were Christian democrats and were active supporters of the establishment of the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. From the beginning, the party declared that its basic values are the core values of Catholic social teaching - personalism, freedom and responsibility, equality, justice, subsidiarity and solidarity [22].

3. What is solidarity in the European Union?

The idea of solidarity has been interpreted in two ways in the EU. On the one hand, it was understood from a pan-European perspective - as solidarity between states and regions, on the other - in a national dimension - as solidarity between individuals and social groups, between the more and less privileged. Both approaches assumed fair access to opportunities - that is, access to free trade and the common market for member states and access to freedom of movement for citizens [F. Vandenbroucke and D. Rinaldi, *Social Inequalities in Europe - The Challenge of Convergence and Cohesion*, Notre Europe Policy Paper 147, 2015, 5.]. Today, European solidarity has a broad meaning - it means mutual support and cooperation among member states, as well as sharing public goods in solidarity within the European model of a welfare state and bearing in solidarity the risk of various crises and challenges. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the debt crisis of member states, migration crisis or climate crisis clearly show that today the principle of solidarity in the Union is primarily a shared responsibility for global risks.

Initially, little was said about solidarity, assuming that it was a rudimentary value in the European Communities and that it was so self-evident that it did not require legal regulation. It was only in the nineties that the process of its institutionalization began - it was entered into the Treaty on European Union (Article 4(3)), which declares that member states shall respect each other and assist each other in carrying out the tasks arising from the Treaties [*Treaty on European Union (Consolidated Version)*, OJ EU C 202/13, 7.06.2016]. The Lisbon Treaty provides its broader interpretation - it is a value that unites states and an idea that integrates the citizens of those states [23]. Currently, the principle of solidarity enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) in Article 222 declares that the Union and its member states shall act jointly in a spirit of solidarity if any member state is the object of a terrorist attack or the victim of a natural or man-made disaster [*Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (consolidated version)*, OJ C 326/47, 26.10.2012, 102]. Then, the Union and other countries mobilize all the instruments at their disposal. The enumerations of possibilities for action are quite detailed, but the principle of solidarity should be interpreted much more broadly - as acting for the common good, in the name of trust and reciprocity.

Many scholars and intellectuals have tried to define European solidarity and delineate its boundaries. Jurgen Habermas defines it as “the mutually trusting relationship between two actors who have become part of a joint political project of their own free will. Solidarity is not charity, and it certainly is not a form of conditioning for the advantage of one of the actors. Those who engage in solidarity are willing to accept short-term disadvantage in the service of their long-term self-interest and in the knowledge that the other will behave the same way in a similar situation. Reciprocal trust - in our case, trust across national borders - is just as important a variable as long-term self-interest.” [J. Habermas, *Are We Still Good Europeans?*, Social Europe, 3.07.2018, 1-6]

Solidarity is thus a means to enact (imagined) political communities with shared missions, ideas and beliefs. Christian Lahusen point out that European solidarity is when people in some countries are aware about and support public claims by citizens of other European countries, their organisational representatives or government officials, and when they actively help them to speak up and make their voices heard [24]. However, this type of solidarity is not enshrined in the treaties, even though it is the basis for the functioning of the Union.

Sangiovanni distinguishes three types of solidarity in the EU: principles of national solidarity - which define obligations among citizens of member states, principles of member state solidarity - which define obligations among member states, and principles of transnational solidarity - obligations among EU citizens as such [23]. They are all important and strengthen the sense of unity of political, social and economic interests in the Union, build European identity, improve the functioning of the internal market, strengthen the EU's negotiating position on the global stage [25].

Solidarity can be static, related to the distribution of income and wealth, or dynamic - in which case it is interpreted much more broadly - as taking on new challenges in solidarity [26]. There are many examples in the history of the EU where the idea of solidarity has been put into practice. The very establishment of the Communities and the subsequent development of the Union is an exemplification of the idea of dynamic solidarity. It was the first ever project that successfully united European countries on the basis of voluntary cooperation rather than conquest and violence. The post-war reconstruction of Europe, the introduction of successive EU policies or the single market, the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union all testify of solidarity in working together for the common good. Solidarity at the EU level has been institutionalized in the form of EU legislation, EU sectoral and horizontal policies, and the EU budget.

European solidarity is exemplified primarily by the EU's redistributive policies, such as cohesion policy, the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU budget, but also by the European Neighborhood Policy, European development policy and successive enlargements of the EU to include new countries, especially the admission of 13 countries from Central and Eastern Europe. The most obvious example of European solidarity is the Common Agricultural Policy, which is financed from the Union's budget. Half of the EU budget is allocated to help agriculture, which is unable to compete on the European market on the same terms as other sectors. Farmers need support, but all Europeans benefit, mainly from the high quality of food products, their enormous variety and availability. The supply chain also benefits from this policy, including European manufacturers of agricultural equipment and technology, the European food industry, and agricultural regions across Europe that develop thanks to this policy. So the benefits are varied and possible for everyone.

The situation is similar with the EU cohesion policy, whose financial support and convergence mechanisms are dedicated to less developed regions. The aim is to reduce economic and social disparities in the EU by providing financial assistance to backward and less developed regions. These actions contribute to economic growth, strengthen the competitiveness of the Union economy and employment, and aim to ensure the harmonious, balanced and sustainable development of the Union. A total of €352 billion has been allocated to support poorer regions over the period 2014-2020 [27], mainly for infrastructure development, business and environmental protection. It is a support for less developed regions, but wealthy ones also benefit through e.g. foreign investments, export of new technologies, know-how consulting. Both examples clearly demonstrate that European solidarity within sectoral redistributive policies offers support to those in need, but benefits everyone.

However, there are examples of inadequate or even non-existent European solidarity. During recent crises, when solidarity was the very basis of survival, many countries broke away from cooperation and mutual aid. This is certainly the situation of the migration crisis in 2015 when countries exposed to a huge wave of migrants and refugees, mainly Greece and Italy, were left without help from the others. Due to the opposition of Hungary and Poland, the EU could not introduce a fair burden-sharing mechanism under the national quotas and refugee relocation program. Also during the financial crisis in 2008, support for Greece or Italy was only applied to a limited extent. The crisis related to coronavirus pandemic further illustrates the fragility and limitations of European solidarity.

4. European solidarity deficit during Covid-19 pandemic

During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, the greatest weaknesses of the Union became apparent - the lack of solidarity and cooperation between member states, which were focused on individual actions and their own interests. The internal and external borders of the Union were quickly closed, each country tried to deal itself in the crisis. One of the first signs of the lack of solidarity was the refusal of Germany and France to provide Italy with protective equipment at the very beginning of the crisis. Although Lombardy was the most affected region by the coronavirus in Europe and its situation was extremely dramatic, no European country offered help. The Italian government requested medical assistance and protective supplies in early March 2020. Even then, more than 7,000 infections a day were reported there. However, other countries, including neighbouring ones like Germany and France, have not only refused to help, but have banned the export of such equipment across borders. At the time, China exploited the gap by offering protective measures and expert assistance. This was an important part of China's 'mask diplomacy' and propaganda efforts. Aid was also offered by Russia and Cuba that took advantage of the situation for ideological warfare and to manifest their position as the leader in humanitarian aid to Europe [S. Maillard and T.

Chopin, *Pandemia koronawirusa: Unia Europejska zda egzamin z solidarności?*, Euractiv, 25.06.2020]. Only later European countries (mainly Germany) offered aid to Italy, which was supposed to soften the harsh criticism of the lack of solidarity and balance the propaganda declarations of China and Russia.

More consistent action has been taken by the European Commission, which in early March 2020 adopted temporary rules allowing countries to provide state aid to support the European economy. Germany, Italy, Denmark, France and Portugal have taken advantage of this opportunity. It has also initiated and co-financed mass repatriation of EU citizens to their countries of origin, coordinated joint purchases of protective and medical equipment (20 countries), launched joint public procurement for the purchase of personal protective and medical equipment (20 countries), and most recently - joint purchases of COVID-19 vaccines. Even so, the Union's response to the pandemic outbreak seemed inadequate. This is due to its limited public health responsibilities. According to Art. 168 TFEU, the Union can only replenish and coordinate national action and serve as a platform for the exchange of information.

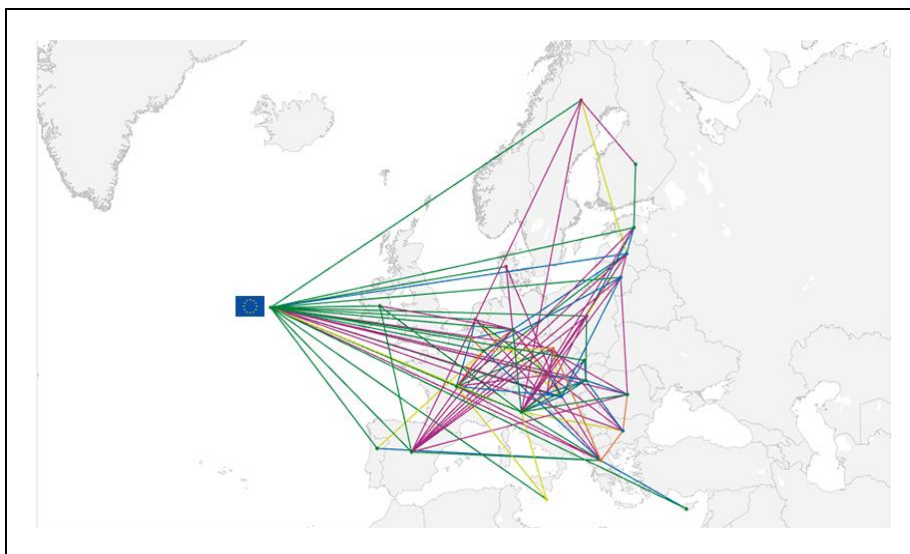


Figure 1. EU solidarity network during the coronavirus pandemic (4.03.-31.05.2020) [ECFR, European Solidarity Tracker <https://www.ecfr.eu/solidaritytracker>, 5.06.2020].

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been widespread criticism of the lack of solidarity among European countries during the crisis. Indeed, there were aid measures, but they were sparse and insignificant. Only later there were more of them. According to the European Solidarity Tracker, in the first three months of the pandemic 259 solidarity actions were identified by EU institutions and countries for those most in need [28]. Majority of them (116) are medical aid such as providing medical and protective equipment, training

medical personnel, receiving patients from other countries, volunteering, joint research on Covid-19 vaccine. Figure 1 shows the network of solidarity actions by EU institutions and countries for the benefit of others in the period of March-May 2020.

It is interesting to note that not only wealthy countries such as Luxembourg, France and Germany offered assistance, but also less wealthy ones. E.g. Romania contributed €200,000 to the EC's global response to the coronavirus, Bulgaria set up additional checkpoints at the EU's external borders, the Czech Republic purchased €1.6 million worth of humanitarian security equipment for refugee camps in Greece [28]. In the following months there were many more solidarity initiatives of this type (515), but they were still isolated, sporadic actions of selected countries, EU institutions or NGOs. There was a definite lack of joint coordinated actions to support in solidarity the countries and regions most affected by the pandemic.

The lack of solidarity in a crisis situation provoked a lot of criticism from Europeans themselves, who expected more cooperation and joint programs, not just sporadic initiatives by individual states. Solidarity during the EU crisis cannot be reduced to supplies of medical equipment and promises of financial support. An opinion poll in the EU in April 2020 showed that 53% of Europeans were dissatisfied with the solidarity of member states, including 39% who were very dissatisfied [29]. Italians, Spaniards and Greeks are most disappointed by the lack of solidarity (76-81% of citizens dissatisfied). At the same time, 70% said the EU should have more competences to deal with crises. These results clearly signal Europeans' disillusionment with the Union's solidarity deficit, which is particularly prevalent among southern Europeans. It should be noted, however, that the disappointment of Europeans does not correlate with resentment towards the EU as such, there are no signs of increased Euroscepticism or populism in most countries [I. Krastev and M. Leonard, *Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview*, ECFR Policy Brief, 326 June 2020, 10-11]. Only in Italy, which was severely affected by the earlier financial and migration crisis, did the lack of support during the pandemic from the EU and member states seriously reinforce anti-EU moods [*The EU and the coronavirus outbreak*, Standard Eurobarometer, 93, 2020, 14]. Moreover, intra-EU disputes between northern and southern states over financial and economic aid to the countries most affected by the pandemic have reinforced Italians' belief that "the Union has left Italy to itself" [F. Loewer and M. Mioni, *European Solidarity in the Covid-crisis: Italy and the discursive dimension of the European public space*, *Politique Européenne*, 30 October 2020, 1].

5. Disputes and conflicts over economic solidarity in the European Union

Unfortunately, during the initial period of the pandemic, there was no decisive and timely adapted Union's joint strategy to counteract negative economic consequences. The lack of common solidarity actions can lead to deep

distortions in the single market and to deep economic and social disparities between countries, which is contrary to the EU's main objective of economic and social cohesion. There is a risk that the pandemic could lead to permanent changes in global value chains and international cooperation, with significant implications for the Union's open and interconnected economy [30].

The pandemic and its associated restrictions have a tremendous impact on the European economy, the labor market, transformation of corporate ownership, and the increase in bankruptcies of many economic entities. In 2020 the Union experienced a deep recession, the economic and social consequences of which are very severe. According to European Commission forecasts in 2020 Union's GDP fell by 7.4%, with the Eurozone's GDP declining by 7.8%, with Germany's GDP falling by 5.6%, in France by 9.4%, in Spain by 12.4%, in Italy by 9.9%, in Portugal by 9.3%, and in Greece by 9.07% [European Economic Forecast Autumn 2020, European Commission, Institutional Paper 136, November 2020, 37].

At the same time, there has been a sharp increase in unemployment in the Union to 7.7%, however in some countries unemployment is dramatically high, e.g. in Greece - 18.0%, in Spain - 16.7%, in Italy - 9.9%, in France - 8.5%. The domestic support programs introduced in 2020 have resulted in a significant increase in public spending, leading to a deepening of the budget deficit and public debt. The budget deficit in the Union rose to 8.3%, in Germany by 6.0%, in Spain by 12.2%, in France by 10.5%, in Italy by 10.8, and in Greece by 6.9% [European Economic Forecast Autumn 2020, Overview, European Commission, November 2020, 1-2]. Although in 2021 and 2022 the European economy will be recovering from recession with an annual growth of 3.0-4.1% of GDP, the pandemic is a huge shock to the Union.

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis affects all states of the Union, but the effects will be unevenly distributed. For some, the consequence will only be an economic slowdown; for others - it will be a dramatic collapse in the economy. However, all it takes is for just a few of them to experience an economic collapse, and it will spread and seriously weaken economic growth throughout the Union. Support programs for the European economy are therefore necessary, especially for the countries in the most difficult situation. Therefore, all countries agreed to pass a new financial package worth a total of €1.8 trillion that will help rebuild a post-Covid-19 Europe. The package consists of two components: Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (€1074 billion) and European Recovery Plan known as Next Generation EU (NGEU - €750 billion). It is the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget. Next Generation EU is a temporary recovery instrument to help repair the immediate economic and social damage brought by the pandemic. The majority of the funding, €500 billion, is expected to take the form of grants to member states while €250 billion would be made available in loans to finance investment projects and reforms [31]. The plan is a completely new and unique anti-crisis policy instrument because its funding will come from the issue of bonds. Until now, the EU has never incurred debts. The decision to issue EU bonds marks a

change in the definition of the principle of European solidarity. And this is not just about the Union's debt, but above all about all member states sharing responsibility for the consequences of the pandemic crisis.

Almost from the beginning of the pandemic, there was a fierce political dispute in the EU between the countries of the north and south concerning the scope of economic solidarity and the methods of financing anti-crisis measures. Southern countries, including Italy, Spain, Greece, France, among others, demanded a common anti-crisis policy and financial transfers, arguing that they bear the greatest costs of the pandemic. Moreover, during previous crises, such as the global financial crisis or the migrant crisis, they were the most heavily burdened, which is why they demanded solidarity support from the entire EU.

The countries of the north - the so-called 'frugal four', i.e. the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and Sweden - agreed on the idea of the Next Generation Plan, but from the beginning they objected to joint indebtedness and subsidizing other countries, demanding greater budgetary discipline. They proposed financial support in the form of loans rather than non-refundable subsidies, and in addition - only possible for a period of two years, no longer [A. Wolska, *Piątkowy wideoszczyt Unii Europejskiej bez rozstrzygnięcia*, Euractiv 19 June 2020, 1-2].

Issuing common bonds and subsidy policies means that the wealthiest countries, mainly those in the north of Europe, have to bear most of the cost of the Community debt. Therefore, these countries made a condition to link NGEU support with structural reforms and compliance with the rule of law, which would be monitored by the European Commission as part of the 'European Semester'. Germany and France demanded the funds to be allocated not only to health policy and rebuilding economies, but also to investments in green technologies and the digital economy. This proposal was in line with the expectations of the 'frugal four'.

The disputes over the distribution of NGEU funds also occurred between new and old member states. The countries of the Visegrad group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) demanded the NGEU plan to be more flexible, taking into account differences in economic development. They strongly criticized the countries of the south for excessive and uncontrolled debt and high budget deficits. They argued that less wealthy countries should not be negatively affected in their recovery in relation to richer ones and called for the distribution of funds to be based primarily on GDP and not on unemployment, as taking into account the drop in GDP during the crisis and not net GDP 'punishes' these countries for their high economic growth before the crisis [A. Wolska, *Grupa Wyszehradzka: Jaka odbudowa gospodarki po pandemii?* Euractiv 4 July 2020, 1-5.]. These countries have a relatively good economic situation - the recession is much shallower than the EU average, the GDP has decreased by 4.3-7.0% and the unemployment level is 2.4-6.7% - and therefore they demand fairer criteria for the distribution of funds. They refer to axiological arguments such as solidarity, justice and morality in the EU's crisis recovery policy.

Disputes and conflicts between EU member states regarding anti-crisis policy, especially the Next Generation Plan, show how fragile and uncertain European solidarity is. Although the principle of solidarity is enshrined in the EU treaties, and the very idea of solidarity is recognized by all countries as the basis for the functioning of the Union, a major deficit of solidarity is visible during Covid-19 - the most serious crisis in the history of European integration.

6. Conclusions

The research results presented in this article show the complexity and multidimensionality of European solidarity. The idea of European solidarity can be understood and interpreted in different ways, but its roots are in Christianity. Solidarity applies not only to individuals and social groups, but also to states and international relations. Solidarity between EU countries means helping and cooperating with each other, sharing resources and sharing the risks of crises and challenges. Solidarity understood in this way is extremely important in times of global crises.

Although solidarity is recognized as a fundamental value in the united Europe and has been regulated by treaties, in crisis situations many countries break out of their obligation to support others and mutual help. This is indicated by previous research on the financial and migration crisis in the Union. The analysis of decisions and actions of EU countries during the Covid-19 pandemic presented in the article shows a deep deficit of European solidarity - countries and regions most affected by the pandemic did not receive any help from others at the beginning of the crisis, despite the fact that they badly needed it. It was only the pressure of public opinion in Europe and the threat of populist offers of humanitarian aid ('mask diplomacy') from China and Cuba that forced the wealthiest EU countries to act in greater solidarity. Although Europeans expected international solidarity during the crisis, joint European programs did not emerge until months later. Europeans' disillusionment with the lack of solidarity in the Union may contribute to increased Euroscepticism and populism in Europe. This is already evident in the countries most affected by the pandemic, namely Italy, Spain and Greece. This sentiment was reinforced by conflicts and disputes during the EU negotiations of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan. The pandemic has led to a deep economic recession across the Union, but southern European countries are experiencing a severe economic downturn. This is their next economic crisis in the last decade. Despite this, the northern countries - the so-called thrifty four - very reluctantly agreed to an aid package for them. The success of populist parties in the UK, Italy, Poland, Hungary, etc., the mobilization of Eurosceptic and xenophobic groups raises concerns that European solidarity may be under serious threat.

The article points to a clearly visible solidarity deficit between EU countries in the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic. This lack of solidarity can contribute to some extent to challenging solidarity as a Christian value,

which is the basis of the European integration process. The pandemic crisis raises questions about the axiological foundations of a united Europe - are values that have hitherto been recognised as rudimentary and shared not only by European political and economic elites, but also by ordinary citizens? It is extremely difficult to answer such a question unequivocally. The principle of solidarity is a duty and is closely linked to solidarity as a fundamental moral and social value. It is based on cooperation across divisions to transcend mistrust and prejudices, particularly in international relations. Crises and borderline situations in society can, paradoxically, result in the discovery of solidarity regarded as a primate value, a rudimentary value. This seems to have happened during the first period of the pandemic in Europe. The European Solidarity Tracker data on aid operations during the first months of pandemic in the EU indicate that there are at least some bases for Christian solidarity, but at the level of ordinary citizens, not political or economic elites. These cases of solidarity between countries were initiated by social groups and ordinary people not by EU Member States. This means that Europeans, or at least some of them, continue to regard solidarity as a social principle and as a moral virtue. It can therefore be considered that these acts of solidarity between the citizens of one state and the citizens of another were acts of assistance resulting from moral obligations, and at the same time were also a vehicle for the social ties of Europeans, part of building a community of values in Europe.

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