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Article

"There is a high level of willingness to show solidarity": Seven questions to Holger Lengfeld

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Prof. Dr. Holger Lengfeld, Leipzig University, Research Fellow at the Research Infrastructure Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study at DIW Berlin

SEVEN QUESTIONS TO HOLGER LENGFELD

»There is a high level of willingness to show solidarity«

1. Professor Lengfeld, you conducted a representative survey of Germany's population on the subject of fiscal solidarity in Europe. What questions were asked? First, we asked respondents to what extent they believe the country they live in should provide financial aid to other EU countries facing severe economic hardship. This provides a general measure of people's attitudes to their country's willingness to show solidarity, since it is not, of course, the individuals themselves who act in solidarity but rather it is the individual countries and the EU that have created the institutions and that regulate financial transactions so that aid can be made available. Second, we were interested in ascertaining whether people would be prepared to make a contribution out of their own pockets. With this purpose in mind, we drew on the idea of Germany's solidarity contribution and asked the hypothetical question as to how respondents would feel about a similar solidarity tax at European level.
2. How many people in Germany are in favor of providing financial aid to EU crisis countries? According to the data we collected in 2015 using the Socio-Economic Panel study, around half of Germany's population would be in favor of showing solidarity in this way. We can also draw on older data from other surveys conducted in Germany which included identical or very similar questions. These data show that the level of solidarity in Germany has remained more or less stable since 2010. This means that, despite the considerable escalation of the crisis in a number of southern European countries since then, willingness to show solidarity remains high.
3. How many people are against providing such aid, and how many are undecided? Almost one-third of respondents oppose their own country providing financial assistance to crisis countries and a good 20 percent are indifferent with no clear position on the issue.
4. Does this willingness to help also apply to non-EU countries facing difficulties? This was a pivotal question for us since the willingness to help EU countries doesn't tell us anything about whether the EU can be considered a community of solidarity unless we compare it with potential assistance to non-EU countries. Bearing this in mind, we included a second question on aid to European countries that are not members of the EU. We found that the majority of German respondents are against providing financial assistance to crisis countries outside the EU. This means that the willingness to support EU countries is much greater than the willingness to support non-EU countries in Europe.
5. How willing are people to make their own financial contribution? We asked respondents to consider how they would react to a form of solidarity tax to be paid out of people's own pockets. For this purpose, we formulated three proposals with different tax rates of three, two, and 0.5 percent and surveyed respondents' agreement with these different taxes. The result was that there was no majority in support of any one of these three tax rates. Our survey does not therefore reveal a majority in support of paying a voluntary hypothetical solidarity tax but what we do see is a good third of all respondents in favor of the 0.5-percent tax being levied within Europe. It is important to add here that this tax would only work if it were levied on all Europeans and contributions were paid in line with personal income.
6. Do respondents expect anything in return for their contribution? We established that a large number of respondents in Germany approve of many of the austerity requirements imposed on the crisis countries by the EU and the International Monetary Fund. Surprisingly though, our survey reveals that some austerity measures were in fact rejected by the majority.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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