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what is the citizens' view?

Busemeyer, M.R.; Eick, G.M.; Burgoon, B.

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10. The future of European social citizenship: what is the citizens' view?

Marius R. Busemeyer, Gianna Maria Eick and Brian Burgoon

INTRODUCTION

The future of European social citizenship is a contested issue, and expert observers disagree to some extent as to whether the project of a "Social Europe" or a "European Social Union" is making progress or not. On the one hand, the necessity of strengthening the social dimension of the European integration process has long been recognized by policy-makers – for instance by former EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, when he emphasized his ambition to achieve a "Social Triple A" rating for the EU in a speech to the European Parliament in 2014 (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2018: 162). Recent policy initiatives in this regard include the Social Investment Package (2013), the strengthening of the employment and social policy dimension in the European semester, the enactment of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) in 2017, and, more recently in 2024, the EU Directive on platform workers.

To critics, these initiatives amount to window-dressing rather than genuine progress toward the establishment of Social Europe. Looking at actual regulations rather than policy initiatives, Graziano and Hartlapp (2019), for instance, note a decline of Social Europe, which they associate with a transformation of the overall balance of political power in the EU from the center-left toward the right. De la Porte and Natali (2018) also note a similar decline, which they explain with the departure of a number of policy entrepreneurs who had been instrumental in promoting Social Europe in earlier periods. In contrast, Zeitlin and Vanhercke (2018) adopt a more optimistic perspective as the new initiatives and the remodeling of the "European semester" offer new opportunities for policy learning and genuine, though gradual, progress toward Social Europe. This cautiously more optimistic perspective is also reflected in more recent contributions to the debate about the implementation of the pillar (Keune et al., 2023; Kilpatrick, 2023), even though some remain skeptical

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whether the pillar can change the fundamental logic of European integration privileging market-enabling rather than market-correcting policies (Keune & Pochet, 2023).

Much of the debate about the future of Social Europe takes place at the level of political elites, both at the EU and at the national level. But what are citizens' views on these issues? Do they see progress or decline in the development of Social Europe? Would they want the EU to play a stronger role in the harmonization and financing of social policy in the first place? And if yes, do they associate particular social policy types (e.g. social investment) with the EU and others (e.g. traditional compensatory social policies) with national welfare states? And lastly, what do citizens think about the role of the EU in facilitating access to social citizenship rights at the national level?

In the next section, we review a still very recent but growing literature on the study of public opinion on Social Europe, which has started to produce important insights into these issues. However, given that research in this field works with quantitative survey data, it has inherent limitations that are partly related to the quality of the available data as well as the (necessarily) selective approach of how attitudes toward Social Europe are measured in surveys. This chapter provides a complementary perspective by enriching quantitative data with qualitative data from focus groups, which were conducted in four European countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain) in the spring of 2022. The qualitative data add perspective and depth to the findings from quantitative studies, because they give researchers a more fine-grained and comprehensive perspective on citizens' attitudes on Social Europe.

To shortly preview our main findings: First, on the one hand, the focus group data mirror previous findings from quantitative surveys that document widespread support for the general concept of Social Europe throughout the European Union. On the other hand, however, digging a little deeper also reveals an undeniable degree of skepticism regarding the future of Social Europe. This skepticism is partly related to lingering concerns about distributive justice and solidarity in the EU and the continued large divergence of welfare states. Second, the qualitative data also hint that citizens have more universalist preferences for more equal rights, like a minimum income, and that citizens have more conditional preferences for social benefits and transfers, such as unemployment benefits. Third, our findings also show that citizens tend to associate social investment policies with the EU and more traditional, transfer-heavy social policies with national welfare states. This broad division of labor is also congruent with representative survey findings as well as the actual policy trajectories of social citizenship policy outputs (Eick et al., 2021, 2023a; see also Chapter 7 in this volume). Overall, it appears as if citizens are often ill-informed about the state of social rights in the EU, which may partly explain low take-up rates in some programs. Addressing the information

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deficit – both on the current state of social citizenship rights and the EU's role in securing these rights – could help to boost support for the EU as well as to improve socio-economic outcomes.

SOCIAL EUROPE FROM THE CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE: REVIEW OF THE DEBATE SO FAR

The bulk of research on welfare state attitudes and preferences refers to the national level of social policy-making (see Svallfors, 2012; Kumlin et al., 2021; Busemeyer, 2024, for recent reviews). The body of scholarship that is particularly devoted to the study of public opinion on Social Europe has only begun to grow recently. Early studies in this field used data from the Eurobarometer (Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Mau, 2005), complemented later on with data from the 2016 wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), which included an item on support for an EU-wide minimum income scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021; Eick, 2024) and general perceptions of Social Europe (Baute, 2022). Further studies collected their own survey data (Gerhards et al., 2016; Kuhn et al., 2020; Nicoli et al., 2020) or used national studies (Baute et al., 2019). There is also a range of studies that analyze support for fiscal and other forms of cross-national solidarity within the EU (Bechtel et al., 2014; Genschel & Hemerijck, 2018; Ferrera & Pellegata, 2018; Heermann et al., 2023; Kleider & Stoeckel, 2019), including support for the EU's cohesion policy (Bauhr & Charron, 2020).

Related to the last issue, a first important insight of this body of work is that attitudes relating to Social Europe are multi-faceted and multi-dimensional (Baute et al., 2018). Hence, the notion of Social Europe does not only and simply refer to the question at which level of decision-making competencies for social policy should be located (i.e. the national vs. the EU level). As Baute et al. (2018) find in their analysis, this dimension is actually less related to other dimensions of EU social citizenship even though it is at the center of academic research. For Baute et al. (2018), Social Europe also refers to transnational and interpersonal solidarity within the EU as well as the goal of harmonizing EU legislation and the "granting of social rights to EU citizens or a Europeanization of social rights" (ibid.: 356). This broader conception of Social Europe is also in line with the conception of social citizenship rights as bundles of resources in this volume.

A second important finding in the existing survey literature is that overall, support for Social Europe is relatively strong. Gerhards et al. (2016) find high levels of support for EU provision of a range of social policies. Other studies find strong majorities in favor of introducing an EU-wide minimum income scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020: 410; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021: 175), with two-thirds being in favor, as well as strong support for an EU-level

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unemployment scheme, although particularities of policy design matter in this case (Nicoli et al., 2020; Kuhn et al., 2020). However, and this is a crucial limitation of quantitative surveys, respondents might not fully understand abstract concepts such as Social Europe and social citizenship rights and, if unsure, potentially express confirming opinions (i.e. the so-called social desirability bias). Hence, the support for Social Europe might be overestimated in quantitative surveys. This has also been highlighted in Eick (2024), who analyzes the usual survey findings more critically and in light of what several new publications from the same author coin as "welfare Euroscepticism," i.e. the opposition to the harmonization of social policies and financial instruments at the EU level. The added value of focus groups then is to probe deeper to what extent citizens really support strengthening the social dimension of the EU.

Third, regarding the determinants and correlates of support, studies find that individuals subscribing to left-wing post-materialist values and nurturing a strong European identity are generally more supportive of Social Europe (Gerhards et al., 2016; Nicoli et al., 2020). Support for Social Europe, therefore, correlates to some extent with the emerging transnational cleavage between opponents and supporters of European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2018). This ambivalence also shows up in the way the individual-level socio-economic background is associated with support for Social Europe. On the one hand, lower socio-economic status groups are found to be less supportive (Gerhards et al., 2016), arguably because they may be more Euroskeptic in general and fear resource competition between the national and EU levels. On the other hand, other studies have found lower socio-economic status groups to be more supportive of Social Europe, in this case of an EU-wide minimum income scheme (Eick, 2024), for the simple reason that lower socio-economic status groups have greater needs for social assistance. Bringing these conflicting findings together, Kleider and Stoeckel (2019) note how individual socio-economic status, partisan ideology, and national contexts interact in complex ways: They find that economically left-wing poor citizens in poor countries are least supportive of fiscal solidarity within the EU, whereas economically left-wing high-income citizens in rich countries are most supportive (ibid.: 22). This finding highlights that the dynamics of public opinion on Social Europe are more complex and multi-faceted compared with attitudes on national welfare states.

Fourth, and related to the last topic, studies have found strong contextual effects on attitudes toward Social Europe. These contextual effects are quite consistent across a range of different studies. The gist of work on this issue is that national and EU-level social policy seems to be connected to some extent in citizens' minds (Burgoon, 2009). People are generally more supportive of a strong EU social policy if their respective welfare states (are perceived to) perform less well (Beaudonnet, 2013; Baute, 2022; Baute & Meuleman, 2020;

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Mau, 2005; Roosma & van Oorschot, 2021). Besides the welfare state regime, the economic context also matters (Beaudonnet, 2013) as well as the level of domestic corruption (Bauhr & Charron, 2020). As Bauhr and Charron (2020) show, perceptions of domestic corruption can increase support for EU action (acting as "a savior and a saint", ibid.: 509) in low-performing country contexts, but in well-performing countries, perceptions of domestic corruption can trigger anti-establishment attitudes and thereby also Euroskepticism as European integration is perceived as being strongly associated with the "establishment."

Fifth, in closing this short review, it is important to ask why public attitudes toward Social Europe should matter at all, in particular since the EU is often perceived to be (for good reasons) quite detached from the everyday experiences of individual citizens. As briefly indicated above, the progress of Social Europe at the level of policy-making is characterized by gradual incremental changes and persistent lingering imbalances between the economic and the social dimension of the European integration process (Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019; de la Porte & Natali, 2018; Scharpf, 2002). Complex, multi-dimensional cleavage patterns have emerged on the future development of Social Europe (Vesan & Corti, 2019), making progress dependent on agreement across a wide range of actors and issues. Against this background, broad support for the notion of Social Europe on the part of European citizens can become and serve as an important force for progressive change, legitimizing further integration steps at the EU level (Gerhards & Lengfeld, 2013; Gerhards et al., 2016). However, if support for Social Europe is found to be lacking, e.g. if citizens prefer to keep the provision and financing of social policy in the hands of national governments and/or reject any notion of a European model of social citizenship rights, the legitimacy of further action on Social Europe would be severely circumscribed. Eventually, the level and kind of support for Social Europe is a matter for empirical investigation, which we turn to in the following sections.

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS AND DESCRIPTIVE QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE: MEASURING SUPPORT FOR A SOCIAL DIMENSION WITH QUANTITATIVE DATA

In this brief section, we turn from the more abstract review of existing research discussed in the previous case to some concrete empirical data on citizens' views about Social Europe, which in turn generate and motivate theoretical expectations for the focus group interviews. For the most part, we draw on the Special Eurobarometer 509 (Wave EB94.2) on Social Issues from 2020 (European Commission, 2020), but we also add some insights from comparative surveys run by different groups of researchers on European solidarity

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and particular EU social policies (Ferrera & Pellegata, 2018; Genschel & Hemerijck, 2018; Heermann et al., 2023; Nicoli et al., 2020).

To start, the Eurobarometer (EB) data show that overall, an overwhelming majority of EU citizens state that a social Europe – defined as "a Europe that is committed to equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion" (European Commission, 2020: 6) – is important to them. Forty-six percent state it's "fairly" important, and an additional 42 percent say it is "very" important. The definitional characteristics of "a social Europe" mentioned in the question wording of the survey match well with the priorities of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). At the same time, 71 percent of respondents across the EU countries regard the current lack of social rights to be a "serious problem" (ibid.: 17). Hence, the message seems clear: A large majority would like to see a strengthening of the social dimension in the EU, but currently see rather a lack of genuine social rights.

Of course, these questions remain at a rather abstract level and there is likely to be some social desirability bias in the responses as mentioned above. People may have vague and ill-defined attitudes on Social Europe more narrowly, but associate positive things with the policy goals included in the framing above. In spite of these limitations, there seems to be genuine support for a stronger social dimension in the EU as other surveys have come up with similar findings regarding the support for Social Europe. Probing respondents' views on transnational and interpersonal solidarity within the European Union, other studies have found similarly large majorities of EU citizens expressing positive attitudes toward EU-wide solidarity (Ferrera & Pellegata, 2018; Genschel & Hemerijck, 2018; Heermann et al., 2023), although in this case, solidarity depends on the issue area and is highest when supporting other countries to fight natural catastrophes, medical emergencies, or military attacks and lower in cases of self-inflicted indebtedness and economic decline. Regarding concrete policy proposals, studies have found that average support for the introduction of EU-wide minimum income schemes is about two-thirds (Baute & Meuleman, 2020), and support for a joint unemployment reinsurance mechanism may be as high as 70 percent, depending on policy design (Nicoli et al., 2020). These examples indicate genuinely high support for some version of Social Europe across EU countries (cf. also Gerhards et al., 2016).

Now, the next question is, of course, which version of Social Europe would citizens prefer? And does this version fit with the current direction of policy-making on the EU and the national levels? Again, the EB data yield some interesting insights. However, the quantitative data can only provide indicative evidence as the question wordings are partly open to different interpretations. The numbers shown below also do not reflect that attitudes on these matters usually vary significantly across member states.

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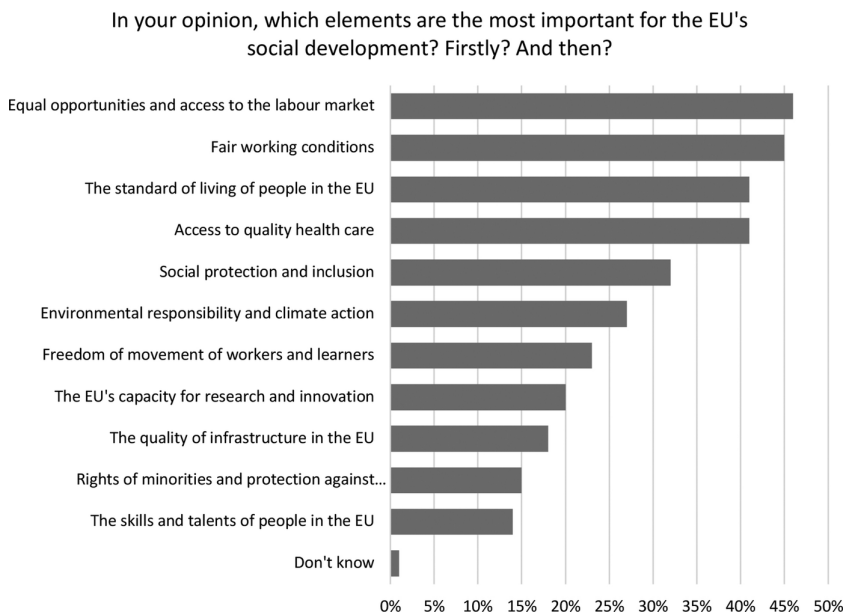
A first example is responses to the question about which elements would be the most important for the EU's economic and social development from the citizens' point of view. In this case, respondents could pick up to 4 out of the 11 items listed in Figure 10.1. Hence, the share of respondents selecting a particular item should be interpreted as an indication of the relative priority of that item compared with the others. The fact that these respondent shares stay below 50 percent in all cases implies that the viewpoints on social policy priorities are quite diverse. Nevertheless, some of the items that are ranked as high priority are to some extent reminiscent of the EPSR's overall priorities, e.g. equal opportunities and access to the labor market, fair working conditions as well as social protection and inclusion. There are, however, some notable exceptions of policy priorities mentioned by citizens that do not feature prominently in the EPSR, e.g. the standard of living of people in the EU or access to quality health care. Furthermore, the EB data also show that very few respondents have actually heard about the EPSR. Merely 8 percent state that they have heard about it and know what it is; an additional 25 percent



Source: Authors.

Figure 10.1 Priorities of EU citizens for the EU's economic and social development

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claim to have heard about this without knowing what it really stands for. Given that there is likely to be significant social desirability bias in these responses, it is fair to conclude that very few citizens have heard about the EPSR, even though they overall tend to support its priorities and goals, in particular when it comes to policies that are related to the labor market such as equal opportunities and fair working conditions. The provision of access to quality health care may be to some extent a side effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was still ongoing at the time of the survey, but the relatively high levels of support for this issue could also signal broader agreement with the pooling of health-related risks and resources at the EU level (Baute & de Ruijter, 2022; Heermann et al., 2023). Tellingly, EU citizens regard "social protection and inclusion" as of lesser importance for the development of the EU's priorities in economic and social policy. This could indicate that citizens associate this responsibility with the national welfare states rather than the EU (see below), but it could also indicate a lower priority rank for this issue in general. The relatively high ranking of the item of the EU's responsibility to maintain the standard of living of people, in contrast, signals that there is some support for EU involvement in creating a basic safety net for all EU citizens – in line with the reported findings on fictitious EU minimum income and unemployment reinsurance schemes.

In a related question, the EB survey asked respondents specifically for their views on the distribution of decision-making competencies between the European and national levels of government (Figure 10.2). At least implicitly, this question gives some insights into the question of which kind of Social Europe citizens would prefer. However, it should be read with caution as the question wording could also be interpreted as a statement about the need for more policy action in general for a particular issue (independent of the governmental level).

Just focusing on the issues that are primarily related to economic and social policy (i.e. excluding the issue of climate change), this figure shows that support for more EU involvement is highest for issues that are immediately related to labor market concerns, including working conditions. Hence, there is a certain link between issues that are regarded as important (Figure 10.1) and the EU's involvement in addressing these issues (Figure 10.2). Again, the promotion of decent working conditions comes out on top when it comes to strengthening the involvement of the EU (74 percent support more European decision-making on this issue), but also of significance is the issue of equal treatment of men and women, which has been an important element of EU social policy-making for a rather long time (Martensen & Vollaard, 2014). The same can be said for education and training policies (where 61 percent demand more European decision-making), although in this case – as figures 10.1 and 10.2 jointly suggest – EU citizens are a bit less enthusiastic about putting the EU in the driver's

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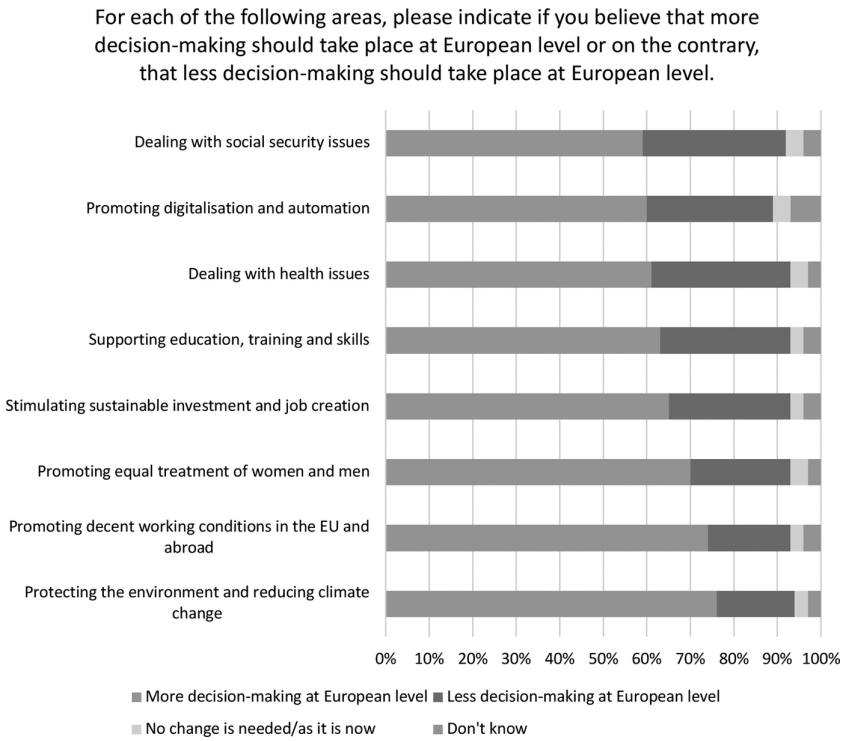

Source: Authors.

Figure 10.2 *Citizens' views on the distribution of decision-making competencies across the European and national levels of government*

seat, potentially because the provision and financing of education remains very much a local and regional issue in many countries.

The last but important thing to note is that, relatively speaking, fewer respondents would like to see more EU decision-making on social security issues, with 33 percent supporting less EU involvement in this domain. Given the continued high support for the welfare state throughout the European Union, this relative lack of support for EU policy action on social security issues should arguably not be read as a lack of general demand for policies, but as an indirect indicator of continued support for national welfare states to stay active in this area, even though the survey data cannot directly speak to that issue. The focus group data below therefore provide an important complementary perspective

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that can partly clear things up. Furthermore, more rigorous statistical analyses by Eick et al. (2023a) confirm the hunch that citizens tend to associate social investment policies more with the EU level and more traditional, social insurance and transfer-based policies with the national welfare states. Eick et al. (2023a) also find that higher socio-economic status on the individual level and more generous welfare state contexts are associated with higher support for social insurance policies on both EU and national levels. These findings also hint again at the possibility that respondents might have a hard time differentiating between social policies provided by national and EU governments. Thus, in general, the findings from analyses using Eurobarometer data should be interpreted with caution in this respect.

Even though these data provide important insights, they suffer from a number of shortcomings. For one, a general observation about the Eurobarometer data is that it is not a purely scientific project, but also an instrument in the hands of European actors, in particular the European Commission, to gather public opinion data on its current policy priorities and projects (Höpner & Jurzyk, 2012). This ambivalence spills over to some extent to the particular question wordings used. A further shortcoming of the particular Eurobarometer data on Social Europe is that the wording of the items still – necessarily – remains rather abstract. "Dealing with social security issues," for instance, might be about aligning social security systems to promote easier mobility of citizens and workers across European borders (which is likely to be widely supported) or about creating some kind of EU-level social insurance scheme (which is likely to be more contested). Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent respondents, depending on their individual backgrounds, have different ideas in mind when prompted to think about "social security issues." Add to this ambivalences and uncertainties resulting from the translation of these items into the multiple languages of the 27 EU member states and it becomes clear that there might be considerable measurement error – some of which can be mediated by the focus group data.

As mentioned above, another unfortunate limitation of the EB data, in particular when used to measure relative support for EU vs. national-level decision-making, is that the survey does not force respondents to choose between different levels, so that individuals responding positively to the question from Figure 10.2 can also respond positively to a similar question about whether the national government should do more (or less) in addressing policy issues. Due to this survey design, respondents might express support for taking action on an issue that is important to them on *both* the EU and the national level. This might be helpful for understanding citizens' views on the overall priorities of governmental decision-making, but less helpful when thinking about the different potential roles of the EU and the national governments in strengthening the social dimension of the European integration process.

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QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE FROM FOCUS GROUPS: GAINING A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF CITIZENS' VIEWS

The previous section presented some descriptive evidence on citizens' views on Social Europe, but also highlighted the general limitations of a purely quantitative approach. One of the main contributions of this chapter is to complement quantitative survey data with qualitative data derived from focus group interviews. In this section, we first briefly describe the method and process of data collection, and then findings from the focus groups regarding two issues related to the future of Social Europe: (1) the fundamental views on the future of social rights in the EU in relation to universalism and conditionality; and (2) the distribution of social policy competences between the EU and the national level in relation to different types of social policies.

Method and Data Collection

The added value of focus groups compared with the quantitative analysis of survey data is that they provide a deeper understanding of views of "ordinary citizens," allowing these citizens to express their opinions in a more nuanced and differentiated manner, as is the case in quantitative surveys (Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018). Directly comparing the findings from focus groups with results from quantitative surveys also allows us to probe the robustness of quantitative findings, in particular with regard to the potential risk of measuring "non-attitudes" (i.e. forcing respondents to give a response even though they have no opinion on a particular matter), which is mitigated in group discussions (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012).

For this project, focus groups were conducted in the capitals of four European countries in April and May 2022: Germany (Berlin), the Netherlands (Amsterdam), Poland (Warsaw), and Spain (Madrid). A fuller and much more detailed description of the methods and the research process can be found in Eick et al. (2023b). To provide a short overview: In each country, we conducted four to five focus groups with six to ten participants each (134 participants in total). The overall coordination of the focus groups was handled by a team of researchers at the University of Konstanz; each of the partner institutions (University of Amsterdam, Warsaw School of Economics, and Universidad Carlos III de Madrid) was responsible for the recruitment of their focus group participants, using a country-specific mix of offline and online recruitment and – if necessary – professional recruitment from an external service provider. Each participant received a small compensation for their participation in the form of a voucher. Focus group discussions were recorded on video

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and audio, transcribed in the respective national language, and translated into English.

The focus groups were moderated by a lead and co-moderator, following a previously developed semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix in Eick et al., 2023b). An alternative would have been to update and fine-tune the questionnaire after each focus group discussion, but this approach was not feasible in our project due to time constraints and the need to coordinate among several partners. Standardizing the interview guide, however, ensures that all participants receive the same prompts and questions. Generally speaking, the moderator takes on a rather passive role, focusing on keeping the group discussion going and encouraging speakers to contribute. Different focus groups varied systematically according to their socio-economic composition, aiming at relatively homogeneous groups for the most part, but also including some decidedly mixed groups. The criteria applied were age, educational background, and family status (see details on number of groups and their composition in Eick et al., 2023b).

Once the transcribed and translated data were available, the material was hand-coded, according to a previously agreed coding scheme. This coding scheme includes the two topics mentioned above (social rights in the EU and national vs. EU social policy competencies) as well as three additional categories (income inequality and redistribution, provision of resources related to social rights, and the role of the EU in managing crises), which are not analyzed in this particular chapter but are discussed in Eick et al. (2023b). Individual participants are pseudonymized, i.e. they receive a unique identification that allows them to match quotes from the focus groups with responses from the background questionnaire. To facilitate readability, when quoting respondents in the following, we use made-up names (i.e. not respondents' actual names). Quotes have been lightly edited without changing their meaning in order to improve readability and understanding.

Universal vs. Conditional Social Rights

The first issue to be discussed focuses on the question of the universality vs. conditionality of social rights in the European Union. The prompt given to participants in the focus groups invites them to reflect on whether all EU citizens should be given the same social rights, independent of which EU country they live in, or whether differences between national welfare states should be maintained in terms of social rights. Responses to this question likely capture to some extent the participants' willingness to support the principle of basic social rights. The prompt focuses on EU citizens, but as will become clear below, participants often extended the question to the rights of non-EU citizens, in particular refugees, which is likely due to the fact that countries

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like Germany and Poland were dealing with large influxes of Ukrainian war refugees at the time of the focus group interviews.

A first basic insight is that in the abstract, the notion of universalism in social rights was supported by many respondents throughout. As Horst from Germany put it: "I think that we should do it all the same. If we are going to have a Europe where we all want to be equal, we should have the same social rights." Kalle from Germany stated: "I would not make a difference in human terms, because I don't care which culture, which country you come from, which religion. I don't know what gender. I don't care at all. People should all be treated equally; otherwise, it would actually be a class principle."

However, these generally positive and sometimes enthusiastic expressions for the notion of universal social rights in the EU were often followed by plenty of skepticism regarding the feasibility of implementing the universalist principle. For example, Ana from Spain argued: "It is a bit of a utopia to imagine. Right now, the economies of each country [have] very different social rights, social security, and public health." In a similar vein, Manuela from Germany said: "I wonder how it is supposed to work. I worked in the social sector for a long time, in the benefit sector. I can also think of 18 different types of benefits, for example, from parental allowance to education and participation, education allowance, sickness benefit, unemployment benefits one and two, basic security, and integration assistance for the disabled." And Teun from the Netherlands emphasizes the difficulty of setting common standards amidst radically different work cultures: "We Dutch tend to be 'work, work, work' till your 70th, and 'go, go, go,' and this varies a lot per country, is really different in other places. So I think that such standards need to be looked at and perhaps limited per country. For instance, say you're in Greece, and if you retire when you reach your 50th rather than your 75th here. That complicates matters."

Partly in response to the foreseen difficulties in implementing universal social rights in the EU, some participants expressed support for a more differentiated approach, such as Heinz from Germany: "I think it would be good if there were at least such a legal framework in the EU that you basically have a right to benefits. The level and scope of benefits should then be regulated at the national level until further notice, because there is no other way." This way, a set of universal social rights at the EU level (e.g. right to a minimum income) could be combined with country-specific implementations (e.g. varying levels of this income). Miriam from Germany stated: "I am also of the opinion that there must be uniform basic principles. But that does not mean, let's stay with the minimum wage, that the minimum wage in Poland does not have to be 12 euros in order to achieve an adequate standard of living, as it is in Germany. But all in all, every state would have to ensure certain minimum standards for its employed workers in the first place. These could still deviate at the national

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level, which is why the EU exists, in order to harmonize them, but over a period of years."

In spite of the relative majority expressing support for universal social rights, there were also voices that remain critical in principle, such as Zuzanna from Poland: "Every country has a specific approach to certain services, to certain aspects, spheres of life, right? When it comes to culture and customs, there are completely different countries, so here, the so-called basic rights I think each country should work out for itself." Furthermore, another example from Marianne (Germany) showed that universal basic social rights do not necessarily imply free movement of (EU) citizens across borders, at least for some: "[The same social rights for everyone] is a beautiful vision. […] But then everyone could stay in their own country or not everyone would want to come to Germany. I have nothing against migrants, but then perhaps the flood, which will also increase, would be distributed throughout Europe."

A further issue is the question of the boundaries of (social) citizenship. For many, the notion of universalism in terms of social rights went along with support for an equally universal conception of citizenship that in some cases would even go beyond the boundaries of the European Union in the sense of basic human rights. Mariana from Germany put it like this: "That would be ideal, of course, if everyone [EU citizen/non-EU citizen] were equally well off and had the same resources. […] If someone from Romania or Estonia moves to Latvia, they should have the same rights. Everywhere." Heike from Germany had a similar opinion: "I would not make a distinction at all. Simply for the reason [that] every human life is worth the same. And just because I change my residence, why shouldn't I have the same social rights?"

However, the boundaries of citizenship rights seem to be somewhat more contested than basic support for the notion of universalism in the abstract. Contrasting the view of fully fledged "universalists" such as Mariana and Heike cited above, there were quite a few participants who differentiated between different "levels" or layers of citizenship. They distinguished between basic social rights often related to minimum income and basic human needs, which should be granted unconditionally, on the one hand, and social benefits and transfers on the other. The granting of the latter should be, according to the views of a high number of participants, more conditional on a person's long-term residence in a country and their ability and willingness to contribute to the labor market.

This duality between unconditional basic needs and more conditional social benefits is expressed nicely in these two statements: "First of all, there has to be a needs orientation. And this need is given to everyone, if it is given. It is independent of citizenship or European membership. And in this respect, I would agree with this from the moment of arrival, because the need is simply there" (Heiko from Germany). "But like [someone else] said, to get social

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benefits… You can't expect, I come to Germany and sleep in the next day and make money. You should already go to work, for a certain time. Of course, this would all have to be regulated and checked by law. But it is also important to give people a work permit" (Waltraud from Germany). The conditionality of social rights on the condition of employment (and thereby reciprocity) seemed to be particularly strong in the case of Germany, as the following quote also shows: "If people fulfill the same obligations when they come here, of course, they also have the same rights. […] Five years of contributions are at least required to get the same social rights. […] So work for at least five years, fulfill the same obligations as a German citizen with paying taxes and everything. Then very gladly. Then we'll talk about rights" (Walter from Germany).

This quote from Spain also nicely demonstrates the idea of having different layers of social citizenship: "I would say, first of all, the minimum living wage, a basic insertion income, because from there the building can be built. Then we can include unemployment aid, but the fundamental thing is that there are no children, or families, who do not have electricity to go to school. The minimum income or the minimum living wage is fundamental, and then unemployment, but regulated" (Lucia from Spain). A Polish participant applied similar reasoning, but mentioned the fact that the provision of minimum income schemes might also be conditional on the availability of resources, signaling concerns about potential resource competition: "It is necessary to cover these people with some kind of basic care, at least, some kind of minimum, if Poland can afford it, some kind of minimum allowance, to give care to children, to give some basic conditions for surviving the situation in which these people find themselves at the moment. Of course, I am not talking about some very good or exceptional conditions, but basic ones, so that these people can survive this worst period, and later, if any of these people would like to stay here, they must, of course, fulfill all the additional conditions that need to be fulfilled" (Natalia from Poland). Another participant from Poland put the same idea in harsher words: "I would cut you off. Sorry. You don't […] eat in that case. If you are not working, if you are not willing to work, earn money, return to the common piggy bank, we say sorry" (Julia from Poland).

EU vs. National-level Social Rights

Next, we analyze citizens' views regarding the distribution of social rights competences across the EU and national levels. This question also provides answers with regard to which kind of Social Europe citizens would like to see. As mentioned above, existing work using quantitative data suggests that citizens tend to be more supportive of the EU being in charge of social investment-type policies, whereas more traditional compensatory policies are supposed to be handled by the national welfare state. However, it could also be the

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case that citizens, in general, are skeptical about the delegation of social policy competences to the EU level as they have become attached to national welfare states. In order to complement the rather abstract discussion about the future of social citizenship rights in the EU with more concrete examples, we probed citizens' views regarding the distribution of competencies for three concrete policies: minimum income policies, education policy, and unemployment policy. Looking ahead, we also asked them about their vision regarding the role of the EU 30 years from now. We discuss each of these sub-themes in turn.

Regarding the implementation of an EU-wide minimum income scheme, many views were generally positive, but often immediately came along with doubts about the feasibility of implementing this policy. For Jorge from Spain, implementing an EU-wide minimum income scheme is a "key thing." Markus from Germany agreed: "So I think [an EU-wide minimum income] sounds all good, [it] should be implemented that way. Because by making it more uniform, then there's not so much of an urge or desire within the EU to have to change to another EU country at all, because they're all more similar." As did Peter from Germany: "Education policy and minimum income for all of us who are already in the EU or have arrived, who are already contributing, should be raised to a similar level."

However, as mentioned above, there was a lot of skepticism regarding the feasibility of implementing an EU-wide minimum income scheme. Aleksandra from Poland expressed this view: "In my opinion, it is not possible, but it is possible to even out these differences to some extent, so that the basic income that some people have is not so low." Similar to the more abstract discussion above, a number of participants came up with the idea of defining EU-wide standards and combining these with different ways of implementing these standards nationally. Jana from Germany put it like this: "It's not about everyone having the same standard, but that there is a general package of rules, which then of course differ depending on the country. This means that I cannot compare the minimum wage in Germany with Bulgaria, where the cost of living is completely different." Or Katrin from Germany: "I think the EU should set the framework, that is the standard and the concrete design of the standard. […] How much is paid in the end in minimum wage or how much is paid in the end in unemployment benefits etc., that's a national matter." There were also, however, some individuals who question whether the setting of joint standards is desirable, let alone feasible. As Daniel from the Netherlands said: "There may be a United Europe, and that is whole, but there must be a difference in view of [social welfare standards]. Portugal is not the same as Finland and I think, if you want to make everything the same, all the same laws as that could possibly be, I can't imagine how. What a bureaucracy you would need to have […]. Now it's already ridiculously hard with food and trade regulations – a

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banana must have a curvature of a particular percent? […] No, I say '*vive la difference*'."

In the case of education, responses from focus group participants appeared generally more optimistic and enthusiastic about the EU playing a greater role in this area, in particular when it comes to issues such as promoting cross-border mobility and the recognition of educational credentials. See, for instance, this quote from Maria from Spain: "In the education system, I believe that it would not be difficult to unify criteria at the European Union level, to unify education criteria from the beginning, from *kindergarten*, like the one the Germans have, which is wonderful. Here we have a lot to learn and a lot to advance." On a similar note, Mirko from Germany stated: "There's no question about education. Certain things can be stringently specified, or at least certain things can be made more binding than minimum wages or labor policy. I think it's rather easier there."

Quite a few participants were aware of the EU's existing policies in the education area, in particular the Erasmus program, and were therefore also more positive about the EU's role in this domain: "As far as education is concerned, this is actually already happening, yes, there is Erasmus, there are research projects under way, yes, and there are diploma supplements, so it seems to me that to some extent we have a common education policy" (Izabela from Poland). In a similar vein, Heinrich (Germany) stated: "I also participated in Erasmus and for me [the example you gave us] is actually like a new Bologna reform. So we already have [a situation where] the degrees count the same and where there are similar standards. That is how we advance the research and the science even further, something the youth can take with them into the future."

In spite of these generally positive assessments, there were also some critical voices, such as the one by Katrin from Germany: "I think education policy is a difficult topic. Maybe it also has something to do with Germany. That it's a matter for the states [*Bundesländer*] anyway, and the states insist on their own characteristics and their own school systems. And the attempts to Europeanize that, and what that always means is that you have to agree on some common denominator, I think that will be very difficult, because the education systems are also very, very different. So I don't see the EU in the steering role." Potentially, Germany is a special case among the four countries in our study because of its decentralized and federal education system, but the local and regional level is also influential in the governance of education in other countries. Hence, the comment by Katrin hints at the fact that different aspects of education policy (i.e. those that are related to cross-border mobility) are easier to transfer to the EU level than those that refer to the governance of education at the local level.

Furthermore, regarding unemployment policy, we found generally more skepticism regarding the role of the EU in this policy domain. As Maja from

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Poland says: "I don't see precisely the areas that are supposed to be somehow firmly regulated by the European Union's policy on […] fighting unemployment. Indeed, I would say more that here we should go in the direction of aid, or […] providing work, or even commissioning projects in markets where there is high unemployment […]." Or, as bluntly put by Daniel from Germany: "I honestly don't know exactly how that is going to work." And again, even if it is possible to agree on joint standards, participants are doubtful about the implementation of these standards in different country contexts. Mateusz from Poland, for instance, says: "[Having a joint EU policy on unemployment] is a difficult question, because if we establish standards that would make unemployment benefits comparable in different countries, it is a big challenge to implement these standards and, as I understand it, also in terms of amounts, because the differences in income are very large."

Interestingly, one participant explicitly noted the difference between passive and active labor market policy and argued that the EU's role should be stronger in the case of the latter: "[Unemployment] benefits are not only financial payments, but also offers for professional qualification and integration into the labor market. In this respect, I am absolutely in favor of harmonizing standards across Europe, so to speak, also in the context of retraining and so on. There are many reasons why people can no longer practice a profession or no longer want to practice a profession, because they may have decided at 17 or 18 to do a job that they realize at 32 is not for them. And to bring in flexibility and also changes in the labor market, which will be passed on, the standards are still very different, as far as I know" (Walter from Germany).

Finally, focus group participants also offered their views on the long-term prospects of Social Europe and the European Union as a whole. In this case, opinions differed strongly between optimists and pessimists. To some extent, for both groups, the futures of Social Europe and the European Union are intertwined. As aptly put by Mariana from Germany: "If you create added value for the people again, especially in terms of rights, basic rights or minimum income, education policy, unemployment policy, then there could be a change in people's minds, a change that they say, hey, the EU is important and we have to protect and preserve it." From this perspective, the expansion and further development of the social dimension of the EU is crucial for its long-term survival in terms of political legitimacy. In a similar tone, Irene from Spain appealed to the sense of the European community: "We have come out of the pandemic together, and we are fighting the war together. So, I think this is the European message; maybe this is the way forward with regard to rights, social rights, and labor rights as well, and also the way forward regarding the rights of the poor."

However, there were also some decidedly pessimistic voices. Katrin from Germany, for instance, was mindful of the tensions between the EU and the

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national levels of social policy-making when she stated: "I doubt that governments will let social [policy] competences leave their hands. And at the end of the day, it's also just what wins elections. And that's just such a national issue that I doubt that they're going to let the scepter be taken out of their hands." Emma from Spain was more pessimistic: "I am becoming more and more disenchanted every day. I find it very difficult to think about the future of social rights in the European Union. It always seems, for some reason, that things don't move forward, so thinking 30 years down the line is difficult."

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Before moving on to the conclusions, we would like to briefly summarize the main four takeaways from the focus group interviews in light of the above-mentioned theoretical expectations in the form of four theses.

First, the results from our focus group interviews seem to confirm that there is widespread support for the idea of Social Europe on an abstract level. There are very few who doubt the validity of this project in principle. However, the focus groups reveal additional and crucial layers of complexity: Opinions differ, for instance, with regard to whether Social Europe should be primarily about harmonizing standards or about promoting cross-border mobility. Many participants also expressed doubts about the feasibility of implementing joint social policies – even though desirable – given the large differences between countries. At the same time, quite a few participants referred to the possibility of defining joint standards and rights at the EU level and adjusting the implementation to national contexts (which is in fact more or less the way EU directives work).

Second, there appear more notable differences with regard to the definition of boundaries of citizenship. The fully fledged "universalists" support granting social rights on the basis of human (basic) needs and do not differentiate between different types of citizenship. However, the conditional view received overall more support, which ties the granting of social rights to particular conditions. Legal citizenship does play a certain role in this regard, but it seems that the dominating conditioning factor is whether people have worked and contributed to society or not. In any case, there is relatively widespread support for universal social citizenship rights regarding basic needs, both within and beyond the European Union, but support becomes more conditional in the case of social benefits and transfers.

Third, differentiating between policy areas, the focus group data seem to confirm that citizens tend to be more in favor of the EU playing a larger role with regard to social investment policies compared with more traditional compensatory policies, which is largely in line with the previous quantitative evidence summarized above. Participants were much more in favor (and regarded

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this also as more realistic) of the EU taking on responsibility in the case of education compared with minimum income and unemployment policies. Regarding minimum income, there appears to be slightly more support for an EU-wide approach, whereas critical views appear to dominate in the realm of unemployment policy. This might be because the notion of minimum income comes closer to the idea of basic needs, for which most participants regard the EU as being responsible, and minimum income levels can be adjusted quite easily to national economic contexts. In the case of unemployment policy, it is not just a matter of recalculating the benefit level; instead, welfare states also differ with regard to the overall generosity of benefits, which may be the explanation for why participants see even less leeway for a joint social policy approach here.

Finally, regarding the long-term vision for Social Europe, the responses from the focus groups suggest that in many ways, Europe stands at a crossroads (again). On the one hand, there are optimists who believe in a further strengthening of the European Union as well as its social dimension. On the other hand, the pessimists doubt the ability of the EU to successfully deal with the multiple challenges it faces. Interestingly, for both the optimists and the pessimists, the future of Social Europe seems to be deeply intertwined with the future of the EU as a whole, which confirms the crucial role of social policy in legitimizing political orders.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This chapter has shown the usefulness of complementing quantitative survey data with qualitative data from interviews or – in this case – focus groups. Even though focus group data may not be as precise in measuring attitudes as quantitative data, they add color and nuance to findings based on quantitative research. For example, the focus groups showed that the relatively high support for Social Europe expressed in quantitative survey data needs to be contrasted with an equally high degree of skepticism regarding the feasibility of strengthening the social dimension of the EU. A second example is that focus group participants quite clearly distinguish between basic social needs (and associated rights), for which there is considerable support for a universal provision, and social benefits which are more tied to reciprocity concerns. This distinction tends to get lost in quantitative survey data on Social Europe, which at best distinguish between different policy areas only.

Furthermore, a significant limitation of quantitative surveys on Social Europe is that they entail the risk of measuring non-attitudes as citizens might not fully comprehend abstract concepts such as social citizenship rights. The added value of the focus group approach is to somewhat mitigate this risk by allowing researchers to go more in depth in the discussion and to be available

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to answer questions of understanding. In providing context and explanations, the focus group approach in turn runs the risk of potentially biasing and priming respondents, which is less of a concern in quantitative studies. Hence, it is exactly the combination of these two different methodological approaches in a mixed-methods research design that promises to yield the best results.

Still, in conclusion, it is important to note some general limitations of our approach. A first limitation is that in spite of the large number of focus group participants across the four countries and the significant efforts undertaken in getting a balanced representation of different social groups, it is still clear that biases do exist. For instance, those with higher educational degrees are heavily overrepresented – to some extent in the groups themselves, but also in the response patterns, as the highly educated are typically better at voicing their opinions. The bias is less pronounced in the case of age and gender. Still, the bias toward the higher educated who typically also hold more pro-European views might lead us to overestimate the support for Social Europe to some extent. Furthermore, participants may still not fully comprehend the notion of Social Europe in its entirety; the risk of measuring non-attitudes is mitigated in focus group settings, but not eliminated. We paid particular attention to including the views of individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds in this analysis, but overall, the focus group is not sufficiently fine-grained and precise in order to derive robust and generalizable statements about the impact of individual-level factors on views and attitudes as precisely as quantitative research is able to do. A second limitation is that there is limited variation in views across countries – which is again due to the overall limited number of cases. There are, however, some tendencies with participants in Poland being, for instance, more skeptical regarding the potential of Social Europe compared with those in southern Europe, who are more optimistic.

From a more methodological point of view, our findings also raise serious doubts regarding the validity of some quantitative measurements of attitudes toward Social Europe, in particular regarding those questions and items that assume a certain degree of knowledge about the state of affairs regarding European social citizenship rights. Hence, looking forward, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research perspectives continues to be important in order to gain a deeper understanding of the state and future of EU social citizenship. Having said that, a further refinement of existing quantitative measures and the collection of time-series data are also of top priority for the field.

Regarding policy implications, our focus groups have revealed (or have confirmed, depending on personal priors regarding this issue) the limited knowledge of European citizens about the European integration process and about the state of Social Europe in particular. Even though many are strongly supportive of Social Europe, they remain generally doubtful of the feasibility of integration measures, even though at least some of these measures are already

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in place (e.g. regulations regarding the transferability of social security claims or the equalizing of working conditions for men and women). It is, therefore, crucial to mitigate existing information deficits in order to tap into the latent support for a stronger Social Europe, which – as the focus groups also show – is critical in maintaining the cohesion and long-term sustainability of the EU as a whole (see also Eick et al., 2023b). The elections to the European Parliament in 2024 are a concrete recent example of the challenges ahead. Even though social policy issues were a salient topic in this election, other topics, such as security policy and migration, were at least equally salient.[1] Furthermore, national policy discourses often dominate EU-level discourses, even in European elections.

A second important policy implication of our findings is that the current focus on social investment policies rather than compensatory policies at the EU level is broadly in line with citizens' views and preferences. The EU's role in promoting education, active labor market policies, and similar social investment policies related to labor market mobility is widely perceived and supported. In contrast, when it comes to more traditional social transfers and benefits, citizens would rather see national welfare states in charge (and would like to keep it this way). Thus, even though the experience of the recent European elections is somewhat ambivalent in this regard, policy-makers at both the national and EU levels are well-advised to take social policy matters seriously.

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