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The hidden side of Social Europe: Revealing welfare Euroscepticism through focus group discussions

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Abstract

While the public opinion literature on Social Europe is growing, so far, it relies on quantitative survey evidence that hides some of the arguments and motivations lying behind the standardized results. This article reveals through qualitative research that 'welfare Euroscepticism' (i.e., opposition towards Social Europe) needs more attention in the literature and explains why. Specifically, this article uses qualitative focus group discussions on Social Europe collected in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain (134 participants in total). The participants filled out a quantitative survey before the discussions started and these survey results are in line with the usual public opinion literature on Social Europe, that is, relatively supportive of the social dimension of the EU. However, multi-faceted welfare Eurosceptic attitudes appeared throughout the discussion. While participants may support the general idea of a Social Europe, they are highly critical about how it actually works in practice. The analysis reveals that the public is sceptic towards both harmonizing social policies on the EU level and redistributive social policy instruments on the EU level. Three overarching and partly overlapping rationales appear to drive welfare Euroscepticism: (1) economic self-interest, (2) cultural ideology and (3) the democratic deficit. The results

emphasize the public preferences for more conditional redistributive policies and the need to make Social Europe more visible to the public.

KEYWORDS
European Union, focus groups, public opinion, social Europe, social policies, welfare Euroscepticism

1 | INTRODUCTION

As a response to increasing inequality, demographic change, Euroscepticism and crises, the European Union (EU) has expanded its social dimension over the past decades, also referred to as 'Social Europe' (Ferrera et al., 2023; Leibfried & Pierson, 1992). The European Commission's response to the COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly strong social policy dimension, for example, by creating financial social policy instruments to redistribute budget, such as SURE in 2020 (i.e., Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency). Over the past years, the EU also adopted a range of guiding Directives to harmonize social rights across the EU, such as the Minimum Wage Directive in 2022. However, the progress of Social Europe policies is often stalled by imbalances between the economic, social and cultural dimensions of the European integration process (De la Porte & Natali, 2018; Graziano & Hartlapp, 2019; Scharpf, 2002). As a result, these policies mostly have a soft law character, and the EU is being criticized for not delivering what it promises on social rights (Falkner, 2019; Jordan et al., 2021). Hence, it is still uncertain whether the EU will go beyond the conventional call for a social dimension and will serve as a genuine 'holding environment' for national welfare states (Hemerijck, 2019) or even become a 'European Social Union' (Vandenbroucke, 2013).

In line with this special issue, this article explores particularly the obstacles to the future of Social Europe since these have not been sufficiently theorized and empirically analysed in the literature yet. Building on Eick and Leruth (2024) this article examines 'welfare Euroscepticism', here defined as *the opposition to welfare policies at the European Union level, in terms of harmonizing social policies on the EU level and redistributive financial instruments on the EU level*. Welfare Euroscepticism can affect already established social measures or common policy objectives established by European institutions, or oppose ideas or proposals that are put on the table, especially since Social Europe is still evolving and defining itself. The particular challenge for Social Europe is that it raises not only concerns over national sovereignty among (radical) right parties but also over the EU's neoliberal agenda for (radical) left parties (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). And as Vesan and Corti (2019) show, parties across the political spectrum (and in a range of member states) have already pronounced opposition to the social dimension of the EU, at least to some degree. Ultimately, welfare Euroscepticism could further advance a multi-tier Europe in which EU citizens are no longer being treated equally (see literature on differentiation, e.g., Leruth et al., 2019).

This article will examine welfare Euroscepticism among the public in different EU member states. This is because complex, multi-dimensional cleavage patterns have emerged in the public when it comes to Social Europe. Economic self-interest and cultural ideology patterns differ when it comes to deepening European integration versus expanding generous welfare states. For example, the opposition towards Social Europe is particularly found in countries that are net contributors to the EU budget as well as the traditional EU supporters and higher socioeconomic status groups (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Eick, 2024). This makes support for Social Europe dependent on a wide range of issues and could lead to serious challenges in democratic representation in the EU. Generally, public support for Social Europe can be an important step for legitimizing further integration and progressive change at the EU level (Gerhards et al., 2016).

The literature on public opinion towards Social Europe is relatively new and relies so far on quantitative survey evidence. Overall, a wide range of studies examine 'support for' Social Europe and usually conclude that the support is relatively strong (see, e.g., Gerhards et al., 2016; Kuhn et al., 2020). However, this article argues that there is also a significant public opposition to Social Europe that is still undertheorized and underinvestigated (see also Eick & Leruth, 2024). Furthermore, the quantitative surveys on Social Europe come with crucial limitations. For example, evidence shows that across all member states only 8% of the population know what the European Pillar of Social Rights is, even though it is the main roadmap for Social Europe (Eick, Burgoon, et al., 2023). So, survey respondents might not (fully) understand the rather abstract survey questions and might express general welfare preferences or even confirming opinions (i.e., the so-called desirability bias). Therefore, this article argues that qualitative public opinion research is needed to probe deeper what the public criticizes about European social integration. The research questions for this article are:

RQ1. Do welfare Eurosceptic attitudes emerge in national focus group discussions on the future of Social Europe?

RQ2. Do participants differentiate welfare Euroscepticism across harmonization and redistribution?

RQ3. What types of rationales are employed in justifying welfare Euroscepticism?

To answer these questions, the article uses focus group discussions (134 participants in total) about the future of Social Europe. These were collected in 2022 as part of the EU Horizon 2020 project 'The future of European social citizenship' (EUSOCIALCIT) in four EU member states: Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain. The results demonstrate that the current survey research on Social Europe alone is not suited to fully uncover public welfare Euroscepticism and that qualitative public opinion research on the matter is needed. This is because pre-discussion survey results are in line with the usual public opinion literature on Social Europe, that is, relatively supportive of the social dimension of the EU. However, even though the discussion moderators did not specifically ask about any kind of welfare Euroscepticism, it was present throughout the discussions. More specifically, while participants may support the general idea of a Social Europe, they are highly sceptical about how it actually works in practice.

2 | WHY THE PUBLIC OPINION LITERATURE ON SOCIAL EUROPE NEEDS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Traditionally, social policymaking has been in the hands of national governments, and thus, the bulk of research on research on welfare state attitudes and preferences refers to the national level too (see, e.g., Kumlin et al., 2021; Svallfors, 2012 for reviews). The body of scholarship that is particularly devoted to the study of public opinion on social policy-making on the EU level has slowly begun to grow over the past decades when the EU started to expand its social dimension. So far the studies in this field depend on quantitative survey evidence, including Eurobarometer, European Social Survey or smaller-scale survey experiments (see, e.g., Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Burgoon, 2009; Gerhards et al., 2016; Kuhn et al., 2020; Mau, 2005).

An important first finding in the existing survey literature is that overall, support for Social Europe appears to be relatively strong. For example, Gerhards et al. (2016) find high levels of support for a different range of EU-level social policies. Other studies find that one-third of the public in EU member states are in favour of introducing a potential EU-wide minimum income scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Roosma & Van Oorschot, 2021). Kuhn et al. (2020) find that there is strong support for a potential EU-level unemployment scheme, although the support depends also on how such a scheme would be designed.

Second, studies have also found that the levels of support vary on the individual level. On the one hand, there is evidence that left-wing and post-materialist values, in combination with a strong European identity, are related to support for Social Europe (Gerhards et al., 2016). This pattern is in line with the transnational cleavages between opponents and supporters of European integration (Hooge & Marks, 2018). On the other hand, 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 (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Eick, 2024). This is because such a policy aligns with the self-interest of lower socioeconomic status groups.

Third, studies have also found that the levels of support vary on the contextual level. Importantly, a range of studies demonstrate that individuals are more supportive of EU-level social policy if their respective national-level social policy is (perceived to be) less generous (see, e.g., Beaudonnet, 2013; Burgoon, 2009; Mau, 2005; Roosma & Van Oorschot, 2021). Other studies also show that the economic context as the level of domestic corruption also matters (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; Beaudonnet, 2013). Furthermore, Eick (2024) shows that the contextual level also shapes socioeconomic cleavages, at least in the case of an EU-wide minimum income scheme. In particular, the cleavages between higher and lower socioeconomic status groups decrease in countries with more welfare solidarity (higher social expenditure and more generous social rights for migrants).

Finally, another important finding of the field is that the public opinion towards Social Europe is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional (Baute et al., 2018; Eick, Burgoon, et al., 2023), which is also in line with welfare attitudes more generally (Roosma et al., 2013). This means that support for Social Europe is not only about preferences for EU versus national social policies but also about whether there should be a (larger or more institutionalized) Social Europe or not, which policy areas should be prioritized, who should be included and under which circumstances. Studies on trans-national and inter-personal solidarity also show, for example, that support is higher across certain policy areas and in times of crisis (Ferrera & Pellegata, 2018; Heermann et al., 2022).

Overall, the findings highlight that attitudes towards Social Europe should be studied as a distinct concept and that the dynamics of public opinion on Social Europe are more complex compared to attitudes towards national welfare states. This article argues that the current survey-based research is still not showing all of the complexity and that qualitative public opinion research is needed to deepen our understanding. The survey research deals with two main limitations concerning theory and empirics that this article aims to address through using qualitative public opinion research.

First, it can be argued there is a lack of proper theorization that takes into account how challenging the attitude patterns are for democratic representation in the EU, an issue that the EU specifically aims to address with its social dimension. Above, it was already mentioned that the member states and socioeconomic groups that support a general European integration are not the same as those that support European social integration. Apart from this dilemma the very basic interpretation of 'support' can also be questioned. In the representative European Social Survey, two-thirds of the public might be in favour of introducing a potential EU-wide minimum income scheme (Baute & Meuleman, 2020; Roosma & Van Oorschot, 2021), but this still means one-third of the population are against it, representing around 150 million individuals in the EU. In related fields, such as the literature on Eurosepticism, anti-immigrant attitudes or welfare chauvinism, such levels of opposition are investigated very critically, which means there is theoretical value in a more critical viewpoint on Social Europe too. These literatures have already demonstrated also that there are general patterns of opposition that could be related to welfare Euroscepticism (see, e.g., Eick, 2024) and these patterns will come up again during the analysis in this article.

Second, the surveys also come with a range of methodological issues. As mentioned in the introduction, respondents probably do not fully understand abstract concepts such as Social Europe and, if unsure, potentially express confirming opinions, that is, the so-called social desirability bias (see on knowledge about the EU also Clark, 2014). Of course, attitudes are not always rational and factually correct, but we can still assume that the support for Social Europe might be overestimated in quantitative surveys. Individuals may have vague and ill-defined attitudes on Social Europe more narrowly, but associated positive things with the policy goals included in the framing, meaning rather general welfare attitudes are being measured that are not particularly about the EU. For example, surveys such

as the Eurobarometer often ask for support for 'a more Social Europe' or 'the EU dealing with social security issues', but what it means is unclear and likely differs systematically for individuals with different characteristics. These interpretations are further complicated by the translations of these items across member states and all of this could result in considerable measurement error. Another methodological limitation is that most of the surveys do not directly force a decision between welfare on the EU or the national level or often do not include the national level as a baseline at all. This means that respondents might express general welfare preferences rather than attitudes that are specifically directed at the EU. A general observation about the often-used Eurobarometer data in this field is also that it is not a purely scientific project. The data is in the hands of the European Commission, which is a political actor in the matter (Höpner & Jurczyk, 2012). This is another reason for a more critical viewpoint on the particular question wordings used. The article argues that some of these issues can be addressed by the use of qualitative data.

3 | METHODOLOGY

One of the main contributions of this article is to complement quantitative survey data with qualitative data derived from focus group interviews. This section summarizes the method and process of data collection, a more detailed description can be found in Eick, Berriochoa, et al. (2023). To be clear, the focus group discussions do not aim to measure levels of public opinion or show representative results. The added value of the focus groups is to understand how individuals form their opinions to get a more nuanced and differentiated picture of public opinion (Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018). Focus groups can also have a deliberative element, meaning that their opinions are partly shaped during the discussion process (ibid.). This emphasizes again that there is not one true opinion that can be captured within an individual.

An important feature of the focus group design for this article is that the qualitative discussions can be compared to pre-discussion quantitative surveys on the same topics. This allows testing the robustness of the findings, in particular, because focus group discussions can mitigate the potential risk of 'non-attitudes', meaning that respondents might indicate preference without having knowledge or a particular opinion on the topic (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012).

In comparison to other qualitative interview methods, focus group discussions are particularly useful for teasing out cross-cultural differences, insights into rhetorical and argumentative processes, and contemporary discourse (Myers, 1998). Although the focus groups for this article were held in a national frame, everyone spoke in the official language of the respective country and most of the moderators can be identified as citizens of the respective country too. This national setup has certainly an impact on the results, in comparison to discussions on the European level (see, e.g., Leruth, 2023). The fact that focus-group participants are confronted face-to-face with the moderators and other participants might also further exacerbate social desirability, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The focus groups for this article were collected as part of the EU Horizon project 'The future of European social citizenship' (EUSOCIALCIT), in the capitals of four European countries in April and May 2022: Germany (Berlin), the Netherlands (Amsterdam), Poland (Warsaw), and Spain (Madrid). The country choice is useful for getting a broader picture as the sample covers EU member states that have (1) different relationships and histories with the EU, (2) different levels of prosperity and (3) different welfare regimes contexts (De Vries, 2018; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Due to project-related constraints, no Northern member state could be included in the sample. Still, this way the article includes a rather conservative sample, with two of the six founding member states (Germany and the Netherlands) and two net beneficiaries of the EU (social) budget (Poland and Spain). These countries can be expected to be more supportive of Social Europe while Northern member states are known to be rather sceptic towards Social Europe (see, e.g., Burgoon, 2009). The fact that the discussions were held in capitals is also relevant, as individuals in capitals (vs. rural areas) are often more supportive of the EU (Schoene, 2019). This adds another conservative element to this analysis.

In each country, 4–6 focus groups with 6–10 participants each were conducted (134 participants in total). Researchers at the University of Konstanz (UKON), the University of Amsterdam (UVA), the Warsaw School of

Economics (SGH) and the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (UC3M) were 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. Different focus groups varied systematically according to their socioeconomic composition. According to how focus groups are usually structured, the aim was to create relatively homogenous groups but also some mixed groups were included for comparison. The groups were organized according to age (older vs. younger), educational background (higher vs. lower educated), and family status (individuals with family care responsibilities). At this point, it should be emphasized that there might be an element of self-selection when it comes to the sample. The results from the survey show, for example, that voters of more left-wing, pro-EU parties are overly represented among the participants. However, for the purpose of this analysis, this should not be a concern, as it emphasizes the conservative setup of this analysis once more. Appendix S1 provides more details on the groups and their composition. Each participant received a small financial compensation for the participation. Focus group discussions were recorded on video and audio, transcribed in the respective national language and translated into English.

The focus groups were led by a main and a co-moderator and started with a quantitative survey, followed by the discussion, with a previously developed semi-structured interview guide (see Appendices S2 and S3). Standardizing the interview guide ensured that all participants received the same prompts and questions. The included topics covered three overarching aspects related to the future of European social citizenship: income inequality, national versus EU social policy, and access to social rights. None of the questions aimed to cover opposition towards Social Europe, which is why it was again even more telling that the discussion evolved so much around it. Importantly, the discussions started with a first primer about income inequality and what the EU should do about it. The participants were later primed with the following statement: 'We will now move on to the next topic, which surrounds inequality in the EU. The EU consists of 27 member states with very different social rights...'. This framing was also included in the name of the project that participants signed up for. Hence, the primers were not exactly neutral and might have led to social desirability bias in terms of expressing support for Social Europe.

For this article, the transcribed and translated data was coded according to different patterns of welfare Euroscepticism. Individual participants are pseudonymized and anonymized, meaning participants receive a unique identification that allows them to match quotes from the focus groups with responses from the survey. To facilitate the readability of the results section, participants were assigned made-up names, and some of the quotes were slightly edited without misrepresenting the meaning.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Survey results

Figure 1, with an item from the pre-discussion survey, reveals that the majority of participants of the focus groups in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain indicated that harmonizing social rights across the EU was their preference. The extent to which they agree varies significantly across countries: The participants in Spain (100%) are followed by Germany (87%), the Netherlands (64%) and Poland (59%). In spite of this variance, the overall levels of support for some version of equal social policies at the EU level are in line with the survey research on the field. Of course, this is a very general question, but other questions in the pre-discussion survey showed similar results.

4.2 | Focus group results

While the focus group discussions used for this article sometimes mention support for a more Social Europe (see Eick, Berriochoa, et al., 2023 for a more comprehensive overview of the discussions), scepticism is also present. The
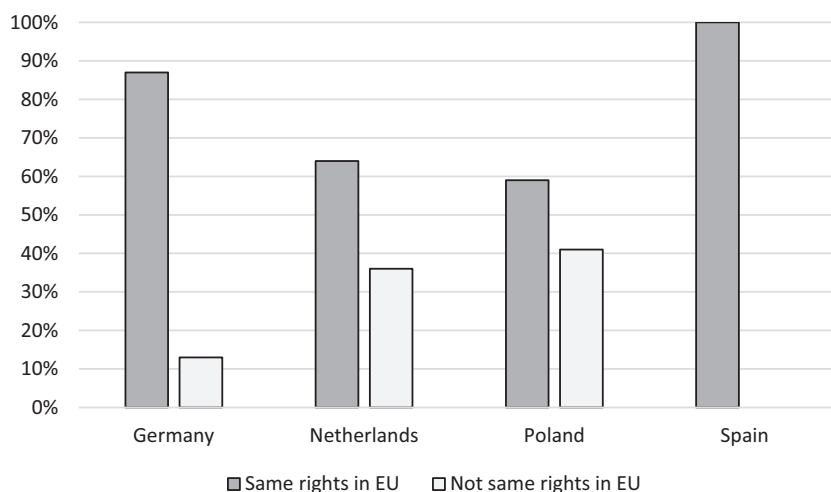
FIGURE 1 Survey results on question 1 = It would be good to give all EU citizens the same social rights, so that it does not matter in which EU country they live, 2 = It is better to maintain the differences between national welfare states, even if this means that some EU citizens have fewer social rights than others, total *N* = 125.

respondents often use words like 'utopian', 'wishful thinking', 'impossible', 'pessimistic' or 'disentchanted' to describe Social Europe. In the following, the article elaborates on specific scepticism that was expressed towards harmonizing social policies and redistributive instruments. Both were undermined by three partly overlapping rationales for welfare Euroscepticism that dominated the discussions: (1) economic self-interest, (2) cultural ideology and (3) democratic deficit.

4.2.1 | Scepticism towards harmonizing social policies

First of all, for the social-policy harmonization on the EU level Directives are a common device. They are legislative acts that set out goals for member states to achieve, but they leave it up to individual member states to implement their own laws in order to reach those goals. The participants do not seem to be aware of such devices and use more general terms, like 'standards', 'guidelines' or 'minimum conditions', indicating preferences for a more soft law character of Social Europe.

A more principal scepticism towards harmonizing social policies across the EU is based on participants perceiving the cultures of different EU member states as incompatible with common welfare policies. Mark (Netherlands) says: 'For example, in mental health care, you have different types of services. A client of ours, who is from Poland, has a very different view on mental health care. I think that it is really very individually determined per country and that it is then very difficult to draw a European line for it. That is because other cultures look at it very differently and give a completely different kind of treatment than in the Netherlands. So you can't possibly get that right'. Zuzanna (Poland) has similar concerns: '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 I think each country should work social policies out for itself'. Martijn (Netherlands) summarizes his preference in the following way: 'We first have to start at home'.

These cultural incompabilities are also perceived in regard to the inclusion of migrants, particularly refugees. Iga (Poland) describes: 'Assimilation is difficult. Now it seems to me that our Polish perspective is that Muslims integrate poorly with us and that Ukrainians can integrate with us more. That's why we gladly welcome them, and we gladly

help them. More then, I don't know, the Syrians who tried to sneak into our country somewhere across the Belarusian border'. So if equal rights would be the norm, then equal rights for whom?

More practical scepticism is related to the perception that the EU failed as a manager of social crises and will continue to fail in the future. When the participants think about social crises, they refer to various aspects of recent crises, including the financial crisis, refugee crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine or the climate crisis. One reason is the perceived lack of a unified approach. Perez (Spain) mentions: 'In crises times [national governments] say, I've got my own thing sorted out, and that's it. [The EU] sets the rules, but then they don't make sure that member states don't break them.' And Tanja (Germany) says: 'I couldn't see that the EU had a unified strategy [during the recent crises]. The refugee distribution was a disaster. Corona, everyone has somehow tried to do it on their own. And [related to the climate crisis] we're all somehow saving plastic bags here, and everyone else is throwing them into the environment'. Other participants refer to issues around the multi-level governance nature of Social Europe. Clara (Germany) says: 'With the Corona crisis, you can see that every country had different regulations, and somehow you didn't even know if it was ok to cross the border. Or even now. When do I wear a mask, and when do I not wear one? I feel like I no longer know in another federal state. So not only at the EU level it is so totally inconsistent, and that actually speaks against the involvement of the EU'.

Related to these issues, participants feel that the national governments are left alone by the EU in times of social crisis, like Silvio (Spain): 'In previous crises, they should have intervened within the government's internal power, but they didn't care. The problem was that they didn't do anything.' The EU is also not seen more positively in the most recent crisis, the war in Ukraine. Junis (Germany) describes: 'I think now, during the Ukraine crisis or war, the EU has completely melted down'. Many participants think a fully-fledged Social Europe is not possible at all, and there is not much hope either. Ali (Germany) explains: 'I don't think it's going to change. We saw that with the refugee policy, then again with the Corona crisis. Okay, the EU says these are the measures, but the nations then decide for themselves if they act on them'.

Some participants even perceive that social crises might lead to the end of the EU. Like Martyna (Poland): 'In 30 years, the climate crisis and the climate refugees will completely tear down [the EU]'. Christoph (Germany) has similar concerns: 'I have always seen the EU with a weeping and a laughing eye. I'm just talking about the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, the Corona crisis. It felt like Europe was often on the verge of breaking up completely as a result of these crises'. In general, both younger and older generations in the focus groups seem pessimistic about the future of the EU. There are even participants who think the EU won't exist anymore in 30 years. Felix (Germany) explains this: 'I also think that [the EU] will no longer exist because there are so many things that the EU already does, and people don't know them. And if people don't understand where the added value is, then that's what they vote for at the ballot box.'

Other practical concerns related to harmonization deal with cultural concerns. Natalia (Poland) explains: 'This is also a danger in the sense if […] we will continue to see an EU policy of trying to impose some norms and hard regulation, including cultural and social issues, which will at the same time led to even greater radicalization at the local level. In this regard, I am indeed afraid of a situation in which, due to such a natural reaction of people, a rebellion starts. Simply because of the fact that you want to impose on us independent states, some European norms that are foreign to us. Because for some they will be too left-wing, for others they will be too right-wing'. More generally, participants seem concerned that welfare chauvinist and anti-migrant logics increase with more generous welfare policies. Nuria (Spain) mentions the issue across member states: 'The countries with better social systems, such as the Nordic ones, are especially racist, and it is especially difficult to integrate into that society'.

Yet another dominant rationale for welfare Euroscepticism in the focus group discussions is the perceived EU's information deficit and democratic deficit surrounding social rights, particularly by lower educated groups. The higher-educated participants are generally more aware of the social policies available to them and, if necessary, also know where and to whom they can turn in case of uncertainties and questions. Christoph (Germany) says: 'I'm going to say I feel informed or I think I know what my rights are in the social sphere. And even if I miss out on certain things, so to speak, I know where I can get the relevant information.' Nikola (Poland) has a similar attitude: 'The

information is there, but you have to look for it.' On the contrary, lower-educated participants have less knowledge about the social policies available to them and also do not feel well informed by the authorities. Antje (Germany) explains: 'Active support from the government to enforce one's rights is rare. You almost have to go to a lawyer in the meantime. You have to go twice for every case. That's why I don't see myself supported by the government.' Karina (Germany) explains: 'The job centre has so many employees who say: No, you're not allowed to do that, where I really have to pick out the paragraph myself and say: But according to this and that, I'm allowed to do that, and you're paying me for this additional certificate or something else.'

Speaking about EU-level social rights, there is low to no knowledge among the focus group participants. Holger (Germany) says: 'It's a jungle of authorities that we can't see through. And we don't learn that at school. Where do you go when you have a problem? Where can I get advice when I have a problem?' Participants feel discouraged about getting support from the EU because of this perceived information deficit. Lorenzo (Spain) describes: 'The reality is that we have different levels of culture, different levels of education, and different levels of problems; I mean, let's say in a case of a family or a person who has so many economic issues or problems of lack of work, salary, whatever. They don't go online and say, let's see what rights the EU gives me.'

Participants know even less about what social policies they are eligible for when the discussions move to travelling or moving to other member states. Juana (Spain) explains this issue from the view of a traveller: 'I believe that there are 1000 things that we do not know about and that we never know exist because it is very difficult to announce everything. I do believe that there are many options, especially aid for studies and also in health. For example, I did not know that the European health card existed in the EU, which covers you in all countries; I thought I had to take out insurance every time I went on a trip'. Other participants explain this issue from the view of EU migrants. Here, it becomes apparent that few participants have experience with EU policies. Only some higher educated participants already had experiences with EU programmes, for example, through Erasmus or comparable EU education programmes, like the Da Vinci programme. However, other existing EU social programmes, such as SOLVIT, are non-existent for all the participants.

4.2.2 | Scepticism towards redistributive social policy instruments

When it comes to redistributive social policy instruments on the EU level, the participants also do not seem to know any particular ones. The participants instead express such instruments in terms of 'paying money to [country or region]' or 'money flows to [country or region]'. These expressions already hint at some perceived inequality in terms of contributions to Social Europe.

A particular principle concern is related to the feasibility. In particular, participants in Germany and the Netherlands are concerned about the financing of cross-border social transfers, like unemployment benefits. Doreen (Germany) says: 'I always think about the fact that Germany is one of the richest EU countries and would then always have to give something to others when there is talk of poorer countries receiving help. Where should the money come from then?' Franziska (Germany) mentions the example of Greece, 'which was on the verge of national bankruptcy. There, too, money flowed in again'. Participants in Poland and Spain seem more concerned about being able to reach new EU social policy targets, like Bartlomiej (Poland): 'However, all EU countries are at quite different stages of development. It is difficult for a country that joined the EU relatively recently to meet all the criteria that should actually be present in every EU country because it takes money. Not every country can afford [more generous social policies] right away'.

Another principle concern seems to be the perceived universal nature of Social Europe. Participants expect newcomers to earn their access to social policies (particularly cash benefits, like unemployment benefits or social assistance) by working for a certain amount of time. Lennart (Germany) says: 'That's Germany, isn't it? So it's our country. And why should anyone now just come here to visit, have the same social rights as someone who has worked here their whole life?' Ben (Netherlands) explains a similar logic: 'You have to meet certain requirements, so if you work

6 months, then you can get a benefit here for 3 months. But if you have worked longer, 4 years or 5 years before or so, then you can get more'. In this part of the discussions, it is often highlighted that newcomers have to 'achieve' something before receiving benefits, and it is clear that participants prefer labour market activation policies over unemployment benefits for newcomers. A group that was refered to as newcomers more often than others in Germany, the Netherlands and Spain are Eastern European migrants (from inside the EU). However, participants sometimes said that conditionality should be applied regardless of the migration background.

In line with these arguments, support for Social Europe is even expressed by participants as a remedy to keep migrants away. The basic line of thinking (especially in Germany) is that if social policy standards were better in Eastern Europe, there would be fewer migrants from Eastern Europe. Here is one example from Ute (Germany): 'Same social policies for everyone. It's a beautiful vision [...] 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 more practical problem mentioned in relation to accessing financial social policy instruments is the sheer amount of information. Magdalena (Poland) explains: 'I wanted to focus here on the complexity of the law and the formalities that may be associated with it. This can scare many people too. When I applied for a student loan, which I think is such a form of social assistance if the government helps in this, I got a file, I think 100-120 pages, and to be honest, I gave up on it, because I also had a lot on my head. And so I just opted for other things instead.' Martyna (Poland) further elaborates on this issue: 'I mean, it's also impossible for us to be up to date with the changes in the law at the various times of the day and night that have been going on in Poland lately. So I think it's important that we know where to access this information'. Ultimately, such experiences make some participants feel left behind by national and EU governments, particularly lower socioeconomic status groups.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social policymaking has been evolving into a significant component of the EU. However, this article shows that there might be more scepticism to Social Europe than literature has previously assumed and that it is vital to examine public welfare Euroscepticism. This section starts with embedding the focus group results in the literature and finishes with some conclusions.

The first research question this article embarked on was *Do welfare Eurosceptic attitudes emerge in focus group discussions on the future of Social Europe?* The results from the focus group discussions in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain showed that this is indeed the case. And this even though the study had a rather conservative approach. For example, through a pre-discussion survey participants indicate to be highly supportive of harmonizing social rights across the EU (up to 100% in the case of Spain) and not directly asking about any form of welfare opposition or Euroscepticism. Still, welfare Eurosceptic attitudes were present throughout the discussions, also in Spain. The results demonstrate that welfare Eurosceptic attitudes are ambiguous and multidimensional and can be influenced by various factors, such as self-interest, ideology, identity, political trust, socioeconomic status and perceptions of national interests. Therefore, a more nuanced approach to studying EU attitudes is necessary.

To be clear, focus group participants do hint at desires for EU member states to grow further together in terms of social policy, especially in times of crisis. But at the same time, participants argue that member states are too different, that the EU is not capable of making this happen and that people do not benefit sufficiently from it. Individual differences stood out especially in terms of the perceived information deficit regarding social policy access because the lower-educated participants felt particularly left behind (see also Crombez, 2003). Country differences stood out especially in terms of net contributors (Germany/Netherlands) and net receivers (Spain/Poland) to the EU budget which were reflected in worries about too high spending versus not having enough capital for uplifting social policies across the EU (see also Burgoon, 2009). Hence, while participants may support the general idea of a Social Europe, they are highly critical about how it actually works in practice.

More generally, this article demonstrates the need for qualitative research in the public opinion literature on Social Europe. Because by deepening quantitative survey questions through focus group discussions the article was able to shine a light on a more nuanced and critical understanding of individuals about Social Europe. This does not mean one method is more useful than the other; the methods of empirical investigation can complement each other, depending on the research questions. This argument has already been made on attitudes towards income inequality (Goerres & Prinzen, 2012) and welfare deservingness (Laenen et al., 2019) too, and it demonstrates the need for more qualitative public opinion research in the welfare policy and EU policy fields overall.

The second research question of this article was: *Do participants differentiate between harmonization and redistribution?* In short, yes they did in the analysed discussions. While the concerns regarding harmonization of social policies (usually Directives) seem a rather soft form of welfare Euroscepticism, in relation to the practical implementation, the concerns regarding redistribution (usually financial social policy instruments) appear as a harder form of welfare Euroscepticism in the form of a principal negation of sharing (even more) financial resources with other member states.

The article also looked for answers to welfare Eurosceptic attitudes with the third and last research question: *What types of rationales are employed in justifying welfare Euroscepticism?* One of the rationales for welfare Euroscepticism are *economic concerns*, which are often discussed in relation to the perceived EU's failure in social crises. There was the previously studied concern regarding some countries contributing more than others to Social Europe (see, e.g., Burgoon, 2009). Interestingly, scholarship on Euroscepticism has shown that previous crises, such as the financial crisis or the refugee crisis, have led to a decline in support for the EU among citizens, particularly in countries most affected by the crisis (Serricchio et al., 2013; Stockemer et al., 2020). Researchers have long suggested (1) a more coordinated response to crises at the EU level, (2) greater transparency and democratic accountability and (3) efforts to increase citizen participation in EU politics as a solution to mitigate Euroscepticism (Serricchio et al., 2013). Hence, Social Europe somewhat mirrors these established patterns.

Welfare chauvinist logics were also present. In particular, participants had the impression that migrants and refugees come to 'their' country to receive better social rights than in their home country. Therefore, working was seen by participants as a premise to join the (national) community (see also Eick & Larsen, 2022). In the welfare literature, the welfare-to-work or workfare policies research already shows similar patterns, where solidarity is based on the willingness to work (van Oorschot, 2006). These findings are also in line with the literature on welfare chauvinism, which hints at the desire for reciprocity (Eick & Larsen, 2022). Such findings pose a challenge to the universal nature of Social Europe, where at least all EU citizens would be granted the same welfare conditions. While the participants did not systematically discuss particular migrant or refugee groups, fear about migration from Eastern Europe was mentioned more often than others, which is in line with the survey literature (see, e.g., Hjorth, 2016).

Another rationale is related to *cultural concerns*. On the one side, participants were concerned that the welfare systems across different EU member states function too differently and that it would be impossible to harmonize them. Some participants also want to maintain these differences as part of 'their' national identity. On the other side, participants were also concerned that the imposition of norms could lead to radicalisation, particularly in member states that are already more sceptical towards the integration of migrants and refugees in their national welfare states. These findings also fit the welfare chauvinism literature mentioned above and also remind of the literature on concerns over national sovereignty among (radical) right parties (Halikiopoulou et al., 2012). And of course, radicalization concerns are also connected to democratic concerns.

Third and related to this, there are *democratic concerns*, which are related to the perceived and experienced democratic and information deficits that feed welfare Eurosceptic attitudes. Participants were particular concerned about the lack of access to social policies and the amount of information that has to be processed to get this access. Ferrera (2018) also criticizes the lack of visibility of the EU's social dimension and argues that the expansion of the EU's social dimension is harder to notice for some individuals than for others. For the success of Social Europe, it is vital that the public must feel that the EU represents collective interest, taking care of all groups of the population.

Generally, it is well known in the literature that individuals have limited access to accurate and relevant information about the EU, which contributes to a lack of political knowledge and engagement with EU-related issues (Clark, 2014; Brosius et al., 2019; Natili et al., 2023). The EU is also sometimes criticized for its democratic deficit, which can be seen as a result of the EU's complex decision-making processes and the fact that the EU's political institutions are not directly accountable to citizens. This deficit can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the EU's political institutions and decision-making processes, which are different from national ones (Crombez, 2003). Following the focus group discussions, these arguments could also be conveyed to the social dimension of the EU and need to be addressed. Hence, while Social Europe is supposed to increase trust in the EU, it may as well have the opposite effect if not executed in a way that satisfies the public. Another reason is that Matthew effects could be amplified for EU-level social rights, which the focus group discussions also hint at. This would be problematic for the aim of Social Europe to address inequality but also for the already more Eurosceptic part of the public, which is typically part of the lower socioeconomic status groups (De Vries, 2018).

Finally, this article does not come without its own limitations. Future research should continue to understand the causes and consequences of welfare Euroscepticism in the public and also other public actors, such as politicians, policy-makers or public administration. Importantly, as mentioned before, the focus group findings are not representative, and it would be valuable to understand if the same patterns occur in larger samples, too. Hence, it will be important to combine high-quality qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods designs that can capture the complex mechanisms surrounding this policy paradigm.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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