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Georgi Dragolov · Zsófia S. Ignácz
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Social Cohesion in the Western World

What Holds Societies Together: Insights from the Social Cohesion Radar

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Foreword

Measuring Common Ground: Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Cohesion Radar

What holds society together? What is the proverbial glue that transforms diversity into a coherent unit in the twenty-first century? This issue is being discussed almost all over the world, in one form or another. As a result, the concept of "social cohesion" has taken on an increasingly important role in recent years. Today it is a central political and social challenge—from the local to the national, and even the international level.

In 1977 Reinhard Mohn founded Bertelsmann Stiftung with the aim to encourage people to campaign for their causes and to promote a society that presents fair opportunities for all. It is therefore not surprising that social cohesion has been a major issue for Bertelsmann Stiftung for years.

In a series of publications addressing issues of social interaction, Bertelsmann Stiftung directed its focus at the end of the 1990s to the subject of cohesion. Besides various smaller publications (Weidenfeld & Rumberg 1994; Berger & Luckmann 1995; Dettling 1995), two collective volumes particularly stand out. *Limits of Social Cohesion*, edited by Peter L. Berger, was published in 1999/1998 as a report to the Club of Rome. Two years later it was followed by *Democracies in Flux*, edited by Robert D. Putnam. This volume examined changes in social capital in eight countries: Australia, Germany, France, Japan, Sweden, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The modern world is characterized by a growing sense of insecurity and unrest, wrote then-president of the Club of Rome, Ricardo Diez-Hochleitner (1999), in the preface to *Limits of Social Cohesion*. In the introduction to the same book, Volker Then posed a central question that is just as relevant today as it was then—namely, how to handle the conflicts that become more and more inevitable as a result of increasing pluralism and the erosion of common value systems in quickly changing societies. He explicitly rejected the notion that the solution might lie in the restoration of a past homogeneity of values. In heterogeneous societies, a normative consensus can be reached only at the cost of liberty. And yet, complete relativism

and laissez-faire policies are also unrealistic approaches. Instead, it is important to find an arrangement that accepts diversity and at the same time establishes cohesion (Then 1999).

The tension between homogeneity and conformity on the one hand, and heterogeneity and individuality on the other, is still a decisive factor in today's social reality. Neither extreme can ensure cohesion in the future. Social interaction will rather oscillate between these two poles. How much does a society need to have in common in order to exist as a social unit, without placing too many restrictions on diversity?

For a long time, religion was considered an integral institution and the ultimate source of a society's foundation of values. Consequently, at the start of the twenty-first century, Bertelsmann Stiftung first turned its focus toward the role of religion in social interaction. The first Religion Monitor, a quantitative survey on faith and religious beliefs in 21 countries, was published in 2008 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2008). Today, with its Social Cohesion Radar and Religion Monitor, Bertelsmann Stiftung is equipped with two empirical instruments for studying social interaction. Since the second wave of the Religion Monitor (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2013), the topic of social cohesion has been explicitly added to the report's agenda. It surveyed 13 countries (Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Israel, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and examined whether religion or religiosity constitutes more of a connecting or a separating element in societies (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2012). The results were mixed. On the one hand, the study pointed to a disconcertingly high level of negativity among the surveyed populations (with the exception of Turkey) toward Islam. Islam was viewed as threatening and not belonging to the West. On the other hand, the Religion Monitor showed that many virtual bridges exist between the various faiths, so it would be inaccurate to speak of a religious division in the societies. On the basis of data from the Religion Monitor, Richard Traunmüller (2015) examined the network of relationships between religions. He concluded that fears of a negative impact on social cohesion due to a growing religious diversity were ungrounded. And yet, the dividing lines between religions and their adherents can lead to conflicts that place an ongoing strain on social cohesion. The caricature controversy of 2005 and 2006 already brought this to the general public's attention. That is why the relationship between religions and other communities of shared values will remain a central issue for Bertelsmann Stiftung, which it will continue to track with the help of the Religion Monitor.

Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Cohesion Radar is a further tool for examining social transformation processes and their impact on the social fabric of societies. It expands the viewer's perspective beyond the role of religion, to the connections and developments affecting society as a whole. This book presents the concept behind the tool and the results of the initial studies. It is for good reason that this instrument is called Social Cohesion Radar. A radar allows us to see things that are invisible to the naked eye. The Social Cohesion Radar provides a view of the current state of social cohesion and shows how it is changing; ideally, offering thereby the possibility to identify threats to cohesion at an early stage.

In the context of public discourse, social cohesion would typically be only mentioned when actors complain of a lack of cohesion. In this sense, it is generally used to describe a crisis. There is additional concern that social cohesion will be negatively affected by major social challenges—be it demographic change, financial and economic crises, increasing migration, stronger international competition, greater mobility, or value change. A growing number of people believe that advanced modernization may contribute to the gradual loss of society's sense of solidarity, commitment, and interaction. That is why some wish for a return to the past, when social interaction was considered more personable, more stable, more sincere, or more moral.

There is no question that modern societies have, in fact, changed. However, it is generally uncertain whether increased immigration, changes in the workplace, individualized lifestyles, major social disparity, or other related changes have actually led to a weakening of social cohesion. And yet, various examples can be found for this line of argumentation.

When we began our initial preparations for Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Cohesion Radar in the summer of 2011, the United Kingdom was being shaken by violent unrest. A policeman had shot a 29-year-old black man in London's Tottenham district on August 4. In the following days, what began as peaceful demonstrations escalated into violent riots that expanded throughout London and then spread to other major cities. The situation did not settle until August 11. Five lives were lost. British Prime Minister David Cameron addressed the British people on August 15. In his speech, he diagnosed a widespread moral crisis in the society. He spoke of "moral decline" and "bad behavior" and called on the people to join in a process of healing (Cameron 2011). This diagnosis represents an attitude that is frequently encountered—one that takes a pessimistic view of modern society as such. A similar argument was used in 2005, when French suburbs were experiencing rioting. And the same explanation arose in connection with the outbreak of violence in the U.S. town of Ferguson in 2014. It is the perception that societies are split and that conflicts are drawing lines of division. Even U.S. President Obama, in reference to the Ferguson riots, spoke of wounds that needed to be healed (Obama 2014).

The year of 2011 also marked the start of the global Occupy movement in New York. Beginning in September of that year, participants gathered under the Occupy Wall Street banner to protest the uneven distribution of wealth and power. While the riots from London to Ferguson were attributed to racial animosity and a failure of immigrants to integrate, Occupy focused on the social division related to income and assets. The battle cry "We are the 99 %" echoed throughout many other countries. Publications such as *The Spirit Level* by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010), *Time for Outrage* by Stéphane Hessel (2010), and *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Piketty (2013) emerged as the bestsellers of recent years. While Wilkinson and Pickett show that equality leads to more life satisfaction, better health, and greater wealth, Piketty provides historical evidence for the undefined sense that societies are becoming increasingly unequal. Hessel, in turn, issues an angry appeal, calling for an urgent change to the present circumstances.

The report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, commonly referred to as the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission, also received considerable attention. In the report (Stiglitz et al. 2009), the commission recommends placing a stronger focus on aspects related to the distribution of goods in society (e.g., income, assets, and consumption) in the measurement of wealth. Additionally, the measurement should incorporate non-monetary factors related to quality of life (e.g., health, education, and political participation).

These examples are intended to show that the debate over what constitutes a good life and how interaction should be shaped in heterogeneous societies has really taken on new momentum in recent years. Perceived moral decay, increasing social inequality, and growing ethno-cultural diversity are generally seen as challenges to society's cohesion. With this comes an undefined sense that something in modern societies is fundamentally wrong, that the centrifugal forces are becoming too great, and that the cohesive framework is collapsing. A survey in eight European countries reveals a sense of disorientation among a majority of the population (Zick et al. 2011).

Despite the frequent references to a crisis of cohesion and the prevailing sense of disorientation among large sections of the population, a clear definition of the concept of "cohesion" still seems to be missing. Canadian sociologist Paul Bernard (1999) criticized social cohesion as a quasi-concept whose success largely rests on the lack of a clear definition. Its sheer vagueness results in it being used in every imaginable context in the sphere of public discussion. Bernard is right to the extent that, if cohesion is going to be used as a political variable, it is essential that the concept be clearly defined. This is exactly the challenge the Social Cohesion Radar has accepted. It was crucial to avoid viewing cohesion as a fuzzy variable. Instead of falling for the temptation to combine all conceivable and desirable qualities of society under the label of cohesion, the Radar asserts that cohesion can be measured and understood only if it is isolated from other social phenomena such as inequality, poverty, or life satisfaction.

Another point of debate is whether a consensus of values in our increasingly diverse societies can be considered a crucial component of social cohesion. An aspect of even greater interest is determining how much consensus is conducive to cohesion—particularly with regard to shared values. This, too, can only be examined empirically if values and cohesion are not grouped into a single unit but rather viewed as separate phenomena in a cause and effect relationship.

In the Radar, social cohesion is defined as the quality of interaction among the members of a community. This quality is expressed in the following three core aspects:

- First, in resilient social relationships—that is, in the horizontal network spanning the individual members and groups in a society;
- Second, in the positive emotional ties between individuals and their community and its institutions;

- Third, in a focus on the common good—that is, the actions and attitudes of the members of society that demonstrate responsibility for others and for the community as a whole.

Besides defining the concept, the Radar employs real-life data in sophisticated statistical techniques to provide a multitude of reliable empirical evidence on the current level of social cohesion and its progression over time. Transferring the theoretical concept of cohesion into an empirically measurable phenomenon was the second important goal of the Social Cohesion Radar. Tracking social cohesion over time constitutes a significant advantage, since it enables us to verify whether an erosion of cohesion is in fact taking place—or has already taken place—as anticipated in public discussions. The three concerns described above—moral decay, increasing social inequality, and growing social diversity—are processes that each refer back to the past, when cohesion was perceived to be stronger. That is why these developments can be better assessed when viewed in connection with their overall trend. The empirical evidence offers in addition a comparison of different countries. Cohesion is difficult to determine in absolute values but can be analyzed in terms of contrasts between societies. This analysis makes it possible to learn from the experiences and approaches of different countries.

Last but not least, the Social Cohesion Radar successfully fulfilled its third goal to offer insights into the determinants and outcomes of cohesion. Advancements towards achieving a knowledge society and economic prosperity have a positive impact on cohesion in the examined countries. Thus, it cannot be concluded that cohesion is weakening as a result of modernization. It is evident, however, that greater inequality within a society goes hand-in-hand with weaker cohesion. Hence, the concern that greater disparities between society's poor and rich strata present a greater risk for cohesion is not completely unfounded. And yet, the number of foreign nationals living in a particular country does not have a notable influence on the cohesion in that country. So, securing wealth and fighting inequality appear to be the better strategy for ensuring cohesion, as opposed to returning to a traditional homogeneity that is perceived as more stable. In turn, strong cohesion translates into happiness for all.

We were able to secure an exceptional team of researchers to carry out the study; they not only handled the conceptual development of the project but also systematically implemented it. First and foremost, we wish to thank Klaus Boehnke and Jan Delhey, who supervised this study with great academic expertise and vision. We would also like to extend our gratitude to their team: First, to Jolanda van der Noll and David Schiefer, who laid out the theoretical foundations of the Social Cohesion Radar in an extensive preliminary study. And in particular, to Georgi Dragolov, Zsófia Ignácz, and Jan Lorenz, who conducted the empirical analyses and skillfully compiled their findings in this book.

To Bertelsmann Stiftung, the studies on social cohesion in 34 EU and OECD countries as well as in the 16 federal states of Germany represent a logical continuation of the publications and studies that began at the turn of the millennium

with our collaboration with Peter Berger and Robert Putnam. We will continue this work and turn our focus toward other regions of the world, taking a closer look at social conditions at the local, regional, and country levels.

Stephan Vopel
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