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IS IT FAIR? HOW SOCIAL COHESION IN EUROPE CAN BE STRENGTHENED

EVENT REPORT | JULY 2019
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The prosperity gap in Europe is widening. Despite the general upswing since the economic crisis in 2008, an increasing number of European citizens are at risk of poverty. At the same time, globalisation and digitisation are changing almost every aspect of our lives.

Although research shows that social cohesion in the EU is relatively stable – particularly in economically prosperous countries – a greater number of people feel left behind and concerned about their place in society, with more people turning towards populism, nationalism and anti-immigrant movements.

At the Young Europeans' Forum 2019, organised by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Aladin Project in cooperation with UNESCO, young people from all over Europe discussed how we can shape a peaceful, open and supportive life in diversity.

Participants discussed the following: What holds a diverse society together? How can we use immigration and the increasing diversification of our cultures to strengthen social cohesion? What are our common values? And what is the role of citizens who are socially involved?



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To promote social cohesion, conflicts need to be part of the debate

By Florence Schulz | EURACTIV.de / Translated by Daniel Eck



From 25 to 27 June, around one hundred young Europeans who are socially engaged back home debated at the Young Europeans Forum in Berlin.

Community and belonging – what do these terms mean in an increasingly diverse and identity-focused world? At the Young Europeans’ Forum 2019 that took place in Berlin in June, young people discussed what makes a good society and how social cohesion can be promoted at an individual level.

In November 2018, almost 300,000 people took to the French streets and protests lasted months. The ‘yellow vest’ movement, which was at times brutal, was the expression of a deep social dissatisfaction that shook France and raised questions about the country’s social cohesion.

However, in other European countries, the successes of right-wing parties and a debate that has become increasingly aggressive raised the question of whether social cohesion was crumbling.

What is it that holds society together in times like these?

From 25 to 27 June, around one hundred young Europeans debated at the Young Europeans Forum in Berlin, organised by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in cooperation with the Aladin project and UNESCO.

These young Europeans shared their experiences on social engagement, discussed the challenges and opportunities of cultural diversity

and proposed ways to make progress towards the necessary societal change.

CONFLICTS NEED TO BE PART OF THE DEBATE

“Above all, social cohesion means trust, a sense of belonging, but also cultural diversity,” Hanno Burmester, founder of the consultancy firm Unlearn and policy fellow at “Das Progressive Zentrum”, told participants.

At first glance, social cohesion in Germany does not seem too bad. On a 0-100 scale, the social cohesion average for Germany lies at 61, according to a

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study conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung in 2017.

Yet, this does not appear to be the case everywhere, particularly in the Mediterranean region, where the economic crisis left deep social cracks. In that region, social cohesion levels are far lower. Volunteering is also rarer than in the more prosperous north.

According to a study by the EU agency Eurofound, which assists in developing better social, employment and work-related policies, the disruptive factor to social cohesion that is most felt among European citizens, is the tension between ethnic and religious groups.

In this study, four out of ten Europeans surveyed stated that they perceived such tensions in their social environment. This applied the most to Belgium, France, Ireland, Austria, Germany and Italy.

Even in Scandinavia, however, which continues to stand out for its low rates of social exclusion, the integration debate has been raising questions on social cohesion.

"Many Muslims in Sweden are insecure and do not know where they belong. There are still strong identity problems," said Tuba, one of the participants of the Young European Forum. In Sweden, this young Muslim woman activist is part of the Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice organisation.

"When it comes to us Swedes, it is often said that we prefer to avoid conflicts. Yet, if we do not talk about the problems related to integration, we are damaging the quality of the public debate. Conflicts need to be discussed," she added.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY CREATES SPACE FOR DEBATE

The issue of migration is a recurring one in discussions on social cohesion. For instance, can migration harm

cohesion and does diversity also have its limits?

All agree that it is not the case when migration proceeds in an orderly, integrative and fair manner.

Integration studies demonstrate that cultural diversity does not harm society's cohesion at all. According to the study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, 58% of Germans even believe that Germany will become a better place if it accepts migrants.

Between 60-70% of citizens who've had a personal encounter with refugees rated their experience as positive. Nevertheless, a non-negligible proportion of the population continued to be critical of cultural diversity.

Hanno Burmester believes that in order to not leave anyone behind, interpersonal relations cannot be overlooked.

"The only things that strengthen social cohesion are honest encounters and good human relations," he said.

AN UNBALANCED ECONOMIC SYSTEM

However, this is not enough for society to function peacefully.

"The issue of social cohesion is essentially about whether we trust our democratic institutions," the director of the Bertelsmann Foundation, Stephan Vopel, said in his speech.

Author and activist Lorenzo Masili agreed that many institutions have failed, especially when it comes to integration policy, and have therefore given space to right-wing populists.

"Italy has failed in terms of migration management. The state is not even able to accommodate migrants who have the right to stay there. As a consequence, many sleep on the street and this creates a sense of crisis, of invasion," Masili said.

Nevertheless, existing institutions remain the only effective way to strengthen society.

"They are the only alternative to the right-wing populist strongman. Because the likes of Orban, Salvini, Kaczynski

and Farage only make the problems, to which they owe their success, worse."

Yet, migration is not the real reason for the growing political divide in Europe, according to both Masili and Burmester.

"One cannot talk of social cohesion without talking about economic injustice," Masili said.

Recent OECD figures make it clear that such economic injustice does exist and that it has the potential of being politically explosive. According to these figures, close to half the Germans are worried about poverty in old age.

Since the 1990s, the proportion of people at risk of poverty in Germany has risen, currently affecting 16% of the population. At the same time, the incomes of the top 10% increased by 35% compared to the 1990s, according to the German Institute for Economic Research. Economic growth is therefore no longer a guarantee of social security, and the income gap is widening.

The European Commission's efforts to counter this trend and create a political framework for socially fair living conditions at EU level can only help to a limited extent.

Since the European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed in November 2017, several initiatives have been launched to strengthen social systems and occupational health and safety in the European Union.

Ultimately, however, labour and social policy remain the responsibility of the individual member states.

According to Masili, labour market reforms alone are not enough.

"Our democracy needs to overcome its dependence on an economic system that is highly unfair. We need to break down the structures in which power is held by the very few just because they have capital. In that sense, informal lobby networks have more political power than the common citizen. We need to regain people's trust in these democratic structures," Masili said.

INTERVIEW

Inequalities of chances, income and capital are destroying society, says German expert

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By Florence Schulz | EURACTIV.de / Translated by Daniel Eck



"The peoples' parties do not simply fall apart because nobody likes them. They disintegrate because they are currently incapable of making good proposals for possible futures. Both the Greens and the AfD do this and that is why the public debate is grouped around these two sides," said Hanno Burmester, founder of Unlearn. [Thomas Kunsch, Berlin]

In an interview with EURACTIV Germany, Hanno Burmester, founder of the consultancy firm Unlearn, spoke about the widening gap between rich and poor in Europe, the rise of nationalism and whether social cohesion is crumbling.

of Unlearn and is also a policy fellow at "Das Progressive Zentrum", where he conducts research on the future of democracy. Burmester is also an affiliate scholar at the Potsdam Institute for Transformative Sustainability Research.

Europe in crisis?

Yes and no. There are currently many factors that fragment our society and worsen social cohesion. At the same time, we are seeing the emergence of a counter-movement

Hanno Burmester is the founder

Mr Burmester, is social cohesion in

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that is creating new and greater cohesion.

The fragmentation we see is driven by social media and the polarising logics of algorithms. And, of course, by the inequality of opportunities, wealth and income. It destroys society.

Our society is becoming increasingly diverse. Can democracy reflect this or must we adapt our political model to the times?

Democracy is designed for diversity and complexity. One of its core characteristics is that the population can react to change in a self-organised way. However, the current polarisation of the public debate shows that we are leaving such a potential untapped. The various worldviews stand against each other instead of us being able to bring them into a productive social dialogue

The migration debate reminds us that diversity is not an end in itself. Diversity can be seen as an opportunity when it is consciously designed and made fruitful for everyone.

This also means that democratic societies repeatedly negotiate the values that characterise them. What do these values mean at the everyday level, for those that have been there for a long time, as well as for the newly arrived?

There is still room for improvement.

On what could we agree on together? To a large extent, values depend greatly on culture.

Yes, they do. This starts at an individual level – how one understands and experiences a value are often two very different things. Societies are still able to negotiate values and their meaning.

For Western societies, issues such as freedom, human dignity and freedom of expression are important and there is a common foundation that can work

across Europe. The crucial question is: how do we get these values interpreted in a contemporary way and put them into practice?

Concretely, this can mean: What does freedom of expression in the digital age look like? To whom does human dignity apply – only to us, or also to refugees stranded on Europe's borders? And what are the limits of individual freedom in times of a climate catastrophe?

Speaking of Europe, in most EU member states we are seeing a sharp drop in votes for the traditional peoples' parties. At the same time, right-wing populist groups and the Greens are getting stronger. Does this signal a division of society or a revival of a different democracy?

It is not a question of either or – it is division and revival at the same time.

What we are currently experiencing are symptoms of a deeper crisis. We are increasingly understanding the limits of our basic ways of life and societal order.

The peoples' parties do not simply fall apart because nobody likes them. They disintegrate because they are currently incapable of making good proposals for possible futures. Both the Greens and the AfD do this and that is why the public debate is grouped around these two sides.

I am firmly convinced that the established popular parties to the right and left of the centre have very good chances of survival. That is if they make good, clear and distinguishable proposals for new, sustainable social designs.

The result would be a clear and controversial debate. Nothing revives a democracy any more.

Can a peoples' party which strives to represent as broad a section of the population as possible represent an increasingly heterogeneous society?

This is, of course, a challenge. However, even the society of the 1950s and 60s was not totally homogeneous. Back then, there were different ways of life and different values. One can provide a diverse society with a common approach but this requires a shared vision of the future and shared fundamental values.

How can people who feel detached from politics and elect populist parties like the AfD, be involved in such a process? How can they be committed to social cohesion that benefits everyone?

I do not think that AfD voters are uninterested in any form of social cohesion. Of course, there is a large part of the electorate that is simply racist and rejects some parts of society.

Despite this, I believe that the majority of AfD voters have a longing for increased social cohesion. They vote for right-wing populists in protest because they feel forgotten.

In Germany, especially in rural areas, many suffer from the fact that public transport is being dismantled, that there are no good life prospects and that the state has been withdrawing its funding for years, wherever possible.

I do not want to outright suggest that these people would never ascribe to fundamental democratic values.

With regards to integration, which is currently being stemmed, many people fear for their national identity. Is this something you can understand?

Identity debates usually substitute real ones.

Our core problem is our lifestyle, which is based on cost externalisation. Our problem is an economic system that promotes blatant inequality of perspective and wealth.

These should be the topics of discussion – whoever conducts

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debates on identity is distracting people from these real issues.

Do you really think that we would be debating the meaning of being German or European if everyone in Germany believed they could lead their lives in dignity, respect and security?

Does that mean you do not agree with the many people who are concerned about their national identity?

I reiterate that this is not a core issue.

These are often said to be the concerns of the 'little man' but I refuse to believe these people are obsessed with fears of the Syrian fugitive next door.

They are concerned about the level of their pensions, the quality of schools, day-care centres, and about their stagnating wages. These are the issues that should politicians should be dealing with, instead of chasing after these populist themes.

The EU has a powerful instrument to promote social cohesion: With its €324 billion Structural Funds, it currently supports infrastructural projects, as well as socio-economic development programmes, particularly in structurally weak regions. Is this the way to go?

Citizens can see that since their country joined the EU, their roads and electricity are improving.

However, the question remains: What is the trade-off?

Countries like Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, etc. have been downright colonised by German and French companies since they joined the EU. In those countries, it was close to impossible for entrepreneurship beyond small and medium-sized enterprises to grow.

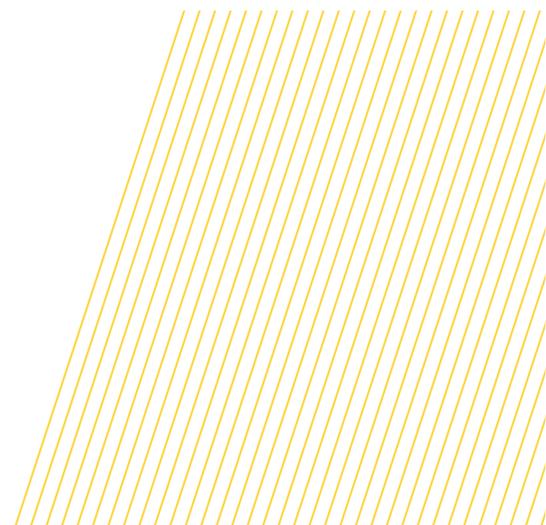
From my point of view, these EU

funds are poor compensation for what is being structurally withdrawn in the long term. Unfortunately, the economic benefits of European integration are concentrated in a handful of countries. In view of this balance, the European Structural Funds have a credibility problem.

As long as there is no progress regarding the political and social unification, the economic union will deepen the current inequality between poor and rich countries. In my view, EU member states need to talk about how genuine harmonisation and fair burden-sharing can be achieved in this case.

What is that supposed to look like?

I believe that the EU needs to have direct revenue from tax resources at its disposal. It also needs a financial equalisation of the nations at a far greater level than is currently the case.



PROMOTED CONTENT / OPINION

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Time to oppose centrifugal forces that affect European societies

By *Andreas Grau and Julia Tegeler* | Bertelsmann Stiftung / Translated by *Daniel Eck*



The world is currently experiencing rapid technological, economic, political and social change. The consequences of these developments are also being felt in Germany and Europe, write Andreas Grau and Julia Tegeler.

Andreas Grau and Julia Tegeler are project managers at the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Megatrends such as globalisation, digitalisation and demographic change

are accelerating the centrifugal forces that threaten to drive society apart.

The rift across society is only getting wider. Such a trend calls for joint efforts to ensure that our society can continue existing and still be cohesive.

Social cohesion is crucial in ensuring society is worth living in and fit for the future. In societies with strong cohesion, people have stable, trusting and diverse social relationships, as well as strong and positive emotional ties with the community. In other words, people feel that they belong and are

part of a larger whole.

Moreover, they strongly support the common good because people are more willing to take responsibility for the community and to care for the weak and needy.

In our experience, three areas can be identified by which social cohesion can be measured:

1. Social Relations
2. Solidarity
3. Orientation towards the common good

Based on this 3-part model, cohesion appears to be currently at risk of becoming fragile in some areas.

Firstly, this can be seen in the trust placed in democratic institutions. Although trust in Germany's Bundestag, its state parliaments, state governments and political parties have hardly changed in recent years, trust in the German government has suffered significantly.

There are also considerable regional differences in Germany, but also Europe.

Compared to its western counterpart, Eastern Germany is less in favour of democracy being the best model for government. Peoples' satisfaction with experiencing democracy also significantly differs between East and West.

Secondly, accepting diversity and

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how to deal with it is something that drives many European societies apart. Although diversity per se is not an obstacle to social cohesion, it still makes cohesion more demanding. Because, despite diversity enriching our lives and increasing opportunities, meeting people with different traditions, backgrounds and customs could potentially cause tensions and conflicts.

Living together in diversity requires communication and negotiations processes to support lived values and different ideas of living together. Therefore, it needs to be actively designed.

A successful approach to diversity means, at the very least, that conflicts should be resolved non-violently. Ideally, people with different cultural identities will feel equally part of society, have the same opportunities to prosper, have a political voice and develop appreciative social responsibilities, not only among themselves but also beyond their group.

This gives rise to the responsibility not merely to tolerate and passively endure diversity but to recognise it and actively shape and includes requiring the observance of collective social rules and values by all those living in that society, as well as the setting of examples themselves.

Therefore, it is vital to practice respectful and appreciative interaction with one another, to counter discrimination and to ensure participatory opportunities are increased. This is all provided for by Germany's Basic Law, which provides for a binding framework that supports coexistence in a diverse environment.

There is a need for structural measures, openness, tolerance and the positive recognition of diversity.

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's study "Social Cohesion in Germany 2017," about one in five

Germans consider diversity to be threatening and are ambivalent about it. It is all the more important for various actors, such as political parties, trade unions or employers' associations, to continuously communicate on the values and rules associated with coexistence.

Shaping values, which is key to developing democratic and human rights-related values in everyday life is, therefore, key to coexisting successfully in a diverse environment. Citizens here also have a duty to keep seeking exchanges and to engage in the necessary dialogues about values that are crucial for living together.

Of course, numerous civil society actors such as voluntary neighbourhood assistance centres and meeting centres, are already successfully shaping social cohesion. These activities need to be intensified and above all reach people who consider diversity to be a threat or are ambivalent towards it.

Thirdly, justice plays a central role when it comes to social cohesion. More specifically, it boils down to the subjective feeling of what members of society consider to be fair. If real inequalities are also perceived as unfair, there may be turmoils.

According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's study "Social Cohesion in Germany 2017," only 16% of Germans believe that the distribution of economic goods is fair. According to the study, this perceived injustice corresponds to empirical data that points to actual inequality and a lack of participatory opportunities.

There is less social cohesion in areas with very high unemployment rates and where people live in poverty or are just above the poverty line.

In particular, an active civil society contributes significantly to a new cohesive society in the 21st century: Our guiding principle should be a society in which every individual can feel a sense of belonging, regardless of origin, age, gender, religion or social

status.

Society needs civil society actors who are committed to peaceful coexistence characterised by equality, respect, tolerance and trust. These are essential components of our liberal democracy.

At the Young Europeans' Forum, which took place in Berlin from 25-27 June and was organised by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Aladin Project in cooperation with UNESCO, around 100 young people from Europe who are involved in improving social relations on a full-time or voluntary basis discussed challenges and solutions for strengthening social cohesion.

They exchanged experiences, ideas, good practices and discussed solutions and ideas, which will help them improve social cohesion back home.

Participants agreed that that social cohesion begins with the quality of human encounters. Strong social relationships and networks are an essential cornerstone for this. This Young Europeans' Forum and the ties that have been forged between these young actors are already a starting point to strengthening cohesion.

However, it also became clear that there is a need for structural promotion and support. Accordingly, we are eagerly awaiting activities from the Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, as one of the responsibilities of the 'Community' section is to strengthen social cohesion.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung stands for social cohesion that enables all people, regardless of their origin or religious and ideological orientation, to feel connected and included. It requires contacts, dialogue and exchange between people with different values, especially in towns and communities.

This is the only way to create trust and democratic coexistence. So let us oppose the centrifugal forces that affect European societies – Now!



For information on
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