Bertelsmann Stiftung (Hrsg.)

Der Kitt der Gesellschaft

Perspektiven auf den sozialen Zusammenhalt in Deutschland

Abstract

What holds society together

Social cohesion generally becomes a matter of public debate only when it appears to be failing or absent. In this sense, it is a hot-button issue raised most often in times of perceived crises. The commonly identified challenges to stable social cohesion include the erosion of traditional values, unbridled individualism, growing social inequality and increasing cultural, religious and ethnic diversity. These "threats" are often accompanied by a vague sense that things are headed in the wrong direction as an increasingly powerful centrifugal force appears to be pulling the fabric of society apart.

Given the palpable changes experienced in Western society, it comes as no surprise that increasingly more people believe modernization is undermining our sense of belonging, solidarity and civic engagement. Many therefore express a longing for times past in which communities seemed more humane, stable, kind or morally robust.

At the same time, the challenges facing society today, such as the recent arrival of more than one million refugees in Germany, has elicited conflicting responses. One response is marked by a hostile resistance to incoming refugees that views this development as the beginning of the "end of the Western world." This response has culminated in refugee housing being set on fire and helped the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party secure seats in several German state parliaments. At the other end of the pole, however, massive numbers of volunteers have mobilized with support

for the refugees, vividly demonstrating modern Germany's deep sense of solidarity and cultural openness. These two very different responses powerfully reflect the caesura between social milieus in Germany that have long been overlooked by its consensus-oriented society (cf. Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016). To date, the debate over how to respond to the refugee inflow remains heated. The growing number of terrorist attacks in Europe have clearly widened this gap, as those advocating cultural diversity and a humane refugee policy have been put increasingly on the defensive.

What is social cohesion?

Though declarations of a crisis of social cohesion are widespread, there is no clear definition of the concept. In criticizing this situation, Canadian sociologist Paul Bernard (1999) attributes the success of the "quasi-concept" of social cohesion to its hybrid nature. On the one hand, the construct draws upon evidence-based data on society that lend the concept an "aura of legitimacy" while, on the other hand, the concept remains vague enough to find broad usage in public debate. It is indeed tempting to combine all conceivable positive attributes of a society under the rubric of "social cohesion." But in order to effectively target social cohesion in policymaking, we must work with a clearly defined concept. Social cohesion can be measured only when it is differentiated from phenomena such as inequality, poverty or life satisfaction – each of which, however, are factors that can influence social cohesion.

Several policymaking experts and professionals have attempted to define social cohesion and the factors ensuring its existence. The diversity of definitions illustrates the broad spectrum of issues that can be addressed by the concept. Indeed, the German government already named in 2002 social cohesion a pillar of its "Strategy for Sustainable Development," thereby making it a key policy objective. Identifying public spirit, solidarity and civil courage as the binding elements of this cohesion, the government emphasizes their importance in fos-

tering a "culture of mutual recognition" (ibid.: 43). Furthermore, society as a whole is called upon to create social cohesion – in other words, the state as well as manufacturers, trade and industry unions, churches, associations and civil society must participate in this process (ibid.: 130). The four policy action areas here are: employment, the reconciliation of work and family pressures, ensuring equality and the integration of foreigners.

Eleven years later, the 2013 coalition agreement struck by the CDU, CSU and SPD featured a "Social Cohesion" chapter that is also the largest chapter in the agreement (German Federal Government 2013: 62–74). The chapter addresses a variety of issues, including the family, sexuality, aging, other-abled people, civic engagement and voluntary services, housing, religion, cultural diversity and integration, and immigration and minorities. Within each of these areas, policymakers were to make decisions that would ensure social cohesion. Most recently, in the first half of 2016, the government passed a public investment package designed to promote social cohesion in German municipalities and communities (BMUB 2016). Article 3 of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) also emphasizes social cohesion, stating "It [the European Union] shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion, and solidarity among Member States." (EU 2009). Finally, the Council of Europe also published a "New Strategy for Social Cohesion" (2010), which calls for a strengthening of society's capacity to ensure the well-being and welfare of all its members.

Cohesion as a policy objective

In a series of publications addressing questions of social interaction, the Bertelsmann Stiftung began focusing on the issue of social cohesion by the end of the 1990s. In addition to smaller-in-scope publications (Weidenfeld and Rumberg 1994; Berger and Luckmann 1995; Dettling 1995), two important anthologies stand out here. *The Limits of Social Cohesion*, edited by Peter L. Berger, appeared in 1999 as a report to the Club of Rome. This was followed in 2002 by *Democracies in*

Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society, which featured Robert D. Putnam as editor and examined the evolution of social capital in Australia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Spain, Sweden and the United States.

In his introduction to *The Limits of Social Cohesion* (1999: xv–xix), Volker Then posed a question that remains as relevant as ever: How can we manage the inevitability of conflicts in a context of rapidly changing societies, growing pluralism and eroding shared value systems? He explicitly rejects the idea that a past homogeneity of values, if restored, could resolve this problem. Instead, he argues, we must craft an arrangement in which diversity is accepted and cohesion generated.

This tension between homogeneity and conformity on the one hand and heterogeneity and individualism on the other continues to have a considerable impact on our social reality. Neither of these two extremes will, in the future, ensure cohesion. What are, however, the shared values we need in order to create a societal unit that does not undermine diversity?

For centuries, religion has been regarded as an integrative institution that serves as the key source of societal values. Consequently, at the start of the 21st century, the Bertelsmann Stiftung began exploring the role of religion in social interaction. The first edition of the Religion Monitor, a quantitative survey of religious beliefs and religiosity in 21 countries, was published in 2008 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2008). Since the Religion Monitor's second edition in 2012, social cohesion has been explicitly addressed in the survey. The extent to which religion or religiosity functions to either unite or divide people in society was explored in 13 countries (i.e., Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Israel, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2013a). The findings were ambivalent. On the one hand, with the exception of Turkey, alarmingly high levels of negative attitudes were expressed in the surveyed countries toward Islam, which was viewed as a threat and incompatible with Western values.

But Religion Monitor findings also point to several bridges that have been built between the world's major religions. We can in no way

speak of a religious divide across these societies. Drawing on Religion Monitor data, Richard Traunmüller shows in his examination of how religions in society affect each other that fears of increasing religious diversity having a negative impact on social cohesion are unfounded. (Traunmüller 2014: 86). Nonetheless, divisions between religious communities and their members can precipitate conflicts that weigh upon social cohesion, as the Muhammad cartoon crises of 2005 and 2006 vividly demonstrated. Ongoing fears of Islamist terrorism fueling widespread suspicions of Muslims more broadly continue today to have a negative effect on social cohesion.

The Social Cohesion Radar

The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Social Cohesion Radar is an empirical tool for use in examining how members of a community live and work together. The term "Radar" is purposefully used here to expand the scope of analysis beyond the role of religion in examining societal change and relationships. Though not a silver bullet, the Social Cohesion Radar can help us more quickly identify the challenges ahead. We find it important to treat social cohesion not as a vague objective but, rather, as a measurable concept subject to evidence-based monitoring.

The Social Cohesion Radar defines social cohesion as a descriptive attribute of a collective that expresses the quality of social cooperation. This quality is expressed in three domains:

– in robust social relations, that is, in the horizontal relations between individual members and groups within a society;

– in the positive emotional connectedness of people and institutions within a society;

– in a focus on the common good by individuals whose actions and attitudes demonstrate a responsibility for others and the community.

Together with a research team from the Jacobs University in Bremen, we have used the Radar to take a close look at social cohesion in several different studies published since 2012 (Bertelsmann Stiftung

2012, 2013b, 2014; Bertelsmann Stiftung and Eurofound 2014). Two of the participating experts, Jolanda van der Noll and Daniel Schiefer, provide in an article published in the academic journal Social Indicators Research, an exhaustive discussion of the Radar's theoretical context (Schiefer and van der Noll 2016). The Radar is also presented in the recently published *Social Cohesion in the Western World* (Dragolov et al. 2016). In addition, the Social Cohesion Radar is currently being tested in non-Western contexts such as Kyrgyzstan (Larsen and Boehnke 2016) and in societies in South-, Southeast- and East Asia (Bertelsmann Stiftung forthcoming).

In our studies, we've taken a closer look at the period from 1989 to 2012 in the German Bundesländer (federal states) and in cross-national comparison. Our findings show no signs of serious threats being posed to social cohesion in Germany through the year 2012. In international comparison, Germany ranks comfortably in the middle of the 34 surveyed EU and OECD states. Compared to other heavily populated European states such as France, Great Britain or Spain, Germany actually received higher values for social cohesion (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2013b).

However, the studies also show a clear and widening gap between the country's East and West in the level of social cohesion. For the period of analysis, the five eastern states featured a lower level of social cohesion than their western counterparts. Nonetheless, at the same time, Germany overall has registered a stable-to-upward trend since reunification and shown no signs of eroding social cohesion (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2014).

The findings of our research thus far suggest that efforts in the surveyed countries to promote social progress by targeting well-being in a knowledge-based society have a positive impact on cohesion. Modernization per se does not undermine social cohesion. Our findings also show, however, that considerable disparities within society go hand-in-hand with weaker levels of social cohesion. Concerns that growing gaps between the rich and poor can pose a threat to social cohesion are therefore not without cause. Yet as the Radar findings demonstrate, the number of foreigners residing in a country have no

measurable effect on social cohesion. Rather than targeting a return to a supposedly more stable cultural homogeneity of the past, an effective strategy for social cohesion involves ensuring well-being and battling poverty.

Indeed, the findings suggest that sinking levels or the absence of an acceptance of diversity represent a considerable barrier to social cohesion in *de facto* heterogeneous societies such as Germany. The fact that 61 percent of Germany's non-Muslim population believe that Islam is not compatible with German society (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2015: 8) has an effect on this group's relationship with the near four million Muslims living in the country. Efforts among actors in civil society and the public sector to embed diversity within definitions of national identity can therefore help foster cohesion more broadly (see Kösemen 2016; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016; Foroutan 2015).

The rationale for this book

The Social Cohesion Radar provides exhaustive data on cohesion over a period of nearly 25 years, from 1989 through 2012. Another round of data collection is planned for the end of 2016. Yet both German society and Europe have changed in the four years since 2012. The influx of migrant and refugee flows, growing right-wing populist movements and a major loss of public trust in government and the media mark the most obvious changes. The obvious question, then, is how strong is the "glue" holding society together? Answering this question is the key rationale for this publication.

A second reason is found in its analytic approach. The Social Cohesion Radar represents a clear, effective and logically consistent means of communicating a highly complex phenomenon. Three domains of social cohesion are considered, each of which are comprised of three dimensions. It should be noted that each of the nine dimensions are themselves multifaceted and feature issues that have been the subject of numerous datasets and studies. As a composite model featuring overlapping domains of social cohesion that permit clarity in commu-

nicating and accessing the subject, the Social Cohesion Radar necessarily eclipses the manifold aspects of its individual parts. Whether drilling down through the individual dimensions to discrete data points or working with the clarity of composite profiles – both approaches make sense, but are difficult to achieve at the same time. In addition to updating data and research findings on social cohesion, this publication aims to provide readers accessible oversight with regard to the saturated state of material on each of the nine dimensions. In so doing, this publication is a supplement to the composite index provided by the Radar.