
Executive Summary of the Monitoring Report prepared by the European Observatory on the Social Situation - Social Capital Network

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Executive Summary

Social capital has emerged as a key concept in the social sciences in general and public/social policy in particular over the last decades. This report aims to evaluate the level of social capital from a comparative, pan-European perspective and identify its relevance to and connection with patterns of social policy-making and/or welfare state regimes across Europe, East and West. The report is based on data from Special Eurobarometer 223 and the European Social Survey (ESS). The data undoubtedly covers a wide variety of variables, measures and proxies widely used in social capital research and therefore it can provide the background for carrying out social capital measurements from a comparative, pan-European perspective. Despite the lack of data for the measurement of some important variables/proxies, such as relevant communication variables (i.e. paper readership, television viewership etc.), trust in institutions and perceptions of corruption, the data on the available variables can be used for the measurement of the stock of social capital across the EU Member States.

We have adopted a two-stage approach to carry out this research task. The first stage focuses on capturing the structure-culture nexus and involves the creation of a social capital index. In the second stage the main goal is to identify the relationships between the social capital index scores and other –determinant, outcome- variables and to account for the variation in social capital endowments among EU countries. For, we carry out correlations and regressions between the social capital scores and the other variables, with emphasis on the variables/proxies related to access to and satisfaction from public services. In this way, we create the necessary research base for establishing the link and/or the line of reasoning between the existing variation in welfare state and/or social policy styles and social capital endowments among EU member states and thus testing fundamental hypotheses of the institutional theory of trust which stresses the role of formal state institutions and especially the welfare state as crucial determinants for the creation of generalized trust and the building of social capital.

The key findings of our investigation are the following:

- First, from a comparative pan-European perspective, there seem to be broadly four groups of EU countries, according to their level of social capital endowments and capacities for collective action. The first -very rich in social capital resources- consists of the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. The second group comprises countries of medium-to-high, albeit well below the Scandinavian paradigm, levels of social capital resources, that is the Anglo-Saxon (UK and Ireland) countries and key countries of continental Western Europe. The third group comprises the South and East European countries, while the candidate Balkan countries, namely Bulgaria and Romania, constitute the fourth group;

- Second, social capital is highly correlated with almost all the other relevant variables/proxies with the exception of social care for others. However, it is not statistically significantly correlated with social contacts with neighbours, while it is negatively, albeit significantly, correlated with social contacts with colleagues. Additionally, most of the other variables are rather negatively correlated with the social contacts with colleagues and neighbours variables, while social care for others, as it might have been expected, is only significantly correlated with social capital, social networks and life satisfaction. What the above analysis suggests is that social contacts and socializing at large might not be as important predictor/determinant of social capital as it was hypothesized in previous research;

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1 The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the European Commission.
• Third, access to and satisfaction from the quality of public services appears to be similarly highly and statistically significantly correlated with social capital. This is an important finding from a comparative public policy’s point of view, because it vindicates the link between public policy outcomes and social capital. Thus satisfaction from the quality of public services constitutes a very important proxy for identifying similarities and differences in social capital and capacity for collaborative collective action among EU countries;

• Fourth, in relation to the role of public institutions and welfare regimes at large, while the impartiality and fairness of political and social institutions in general and street-level bureaucracy in particular constitutes a prerequisite for the creation of generalized trust and the building of social capital, the universal welfare state seems to be a necessary condition for greater equality in its distribution. Thus, though both variables are crucial, the most important explanatory variable for the existing differences in social capital endowments and capacities for collaborative collective action between European countries may be institutions.