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Making sense of Europe's cohesion challenge

The EU Cohesion Monitor and the path of the EU28
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Cohesion as a connective fabric of a political system is fundamental for the system and those who live in it. In the case of European integration the question of what it is that holds us together, that makes us as European citizens willing to cooperate has been present throughout its history. The project chaired by Joseph Jannig within the ECFR framework takes us closer to the answer to this question.

I would like to begin by saying that the major problem of the EU today is lack of political cohesion. It is particularly relevant in the context of emerging political will to run the Union in the years to come through largely inter governmental approach. If, unfortunately, this will be the case, political cohesion will be the necessary precondition .

The report presented by Joseph copes with both the state of cohesion and its dynamics as well as with the forces behind the cohesion. My intention is to comment rather on the cohesion forces and European cohesion capital than on the facts related to the level of cohesion. Trends at work behind the cohesion seem to me fundamental for the future of European integration.

In the report it is proposed to look at ties between states or economies on the one hand and between individuals on the other. Ties between member states or national economies allow to better exploit the integration potential (trade, single market) and build global role of EU. Ties between individuals, contribute to solidarity, trust, cultural capital. For long term cohesion they are crucial. Governments come and go. There is a lot of evidence in Europe that there is no continuity with regard to national positions on many issues. That is why cohesion of individuals matters.

I would like to comment on six issues.

1) Throughout the project, cohesion is seen as a good change. This stands in a sharp contrast with existing cases in the Union where policies leading to dividing people are labeled "good change". They do not lead to cohesion. If cohesion is seen as a process of forming a united whole, unity, interrelatedness, togetherness, it is actually what European integration is about.

The report mentions three dimensions of European Cohesion: interdependence – interaction – identity. I find this categorization very useful for understanding forces which are behind the evolution of European cohesion.

Interdependencies develop over time largely through policies with less involvement of politics but they are contribute to enhancing political dimension of European construction.

Interdependencies are achieved by the way integration proceeds, through single market building, through various convergence related policies, one rule fits all approach, etc.

Interaction is in principle shaped by politics, by the way decisions are made, by the legal system and economic interests. The level and intensity of interaction vary strongly.

Identity is the most fragile element of cohesion.

Identity is often influenced by nation state mentality and populism. It can reduce the strength of potential democratic legitimacy for European action. Perception of democracy as a national level phenomenon is not conducive to European identity. Problems with European identity lead to weakened legitimacy and making Europe a working democracy.

2) Cohesion in Europe does not function in an axiological vacuum. It has a common foundation - commonly shared values, among them democracy, human rights, rule of law. This has been a very important force behind the cohesion

Are these values unconditionally respected today? Definitely not. The great ideals that gave birth to the European integration have lost their appeal.

The avalanche of crises reduced the strength of trust, confidence, solidarity. In general it weakened substantially what I would call European integration capital.

Shattered, battered values, shaky European capital of values make the foundation for cohesion less and less powerful.

3) What influences the forces at work behind cohesion is also the way we read the current situation from the point of view of legitimacy for European action. Do the crises provide justification for moving backward to a Europe of largely independent nation states united merely by not so common single market or rather justify a move toward more Europe in areas where European solutions are the only good way. In short, do we get from the crisis situation legitimacy to work towards European solutions or the opposite.

4) Role of vision in shaping European integration is worth mentioning as well in this context. Cohesion has been also shaped by the dilemma: vision based

or step by step, gradual approach to European integration. Does Europe need vision, road maps and strategies ?

Finalité politique was rejected as the integration drive. Step by step, often called a pragmatic approach has never been really conducive to cohesion. A lot of unfinished businesses were the result of it because political will tended to expire too early. Many European integration related changes were half measures. Stretching the Treaties went often too far. Without a clear vision it is hardly possible to get people on board, to harness their enthusiasm. In particular in times of high uncertainty people would like to know where we take them. Uncertainty pushes them towards populists. Without a vision it is, in my view, more difficult today to build sustainable cohesion forces.

5) Differentiated integration which is a fact of life can work against cohesion. If we take the most visible differentiated integration stemming from the fact that nine member states do not share common currency with the other nineteen, we can see that euro area members do much more together than the rest. They have Banking Union, supervision, resolution , stability fund, will have EDIS, fiscal capacity. And this higher speed of integration will continue. Additionally, Brexit will shift political centre of the Union even more strongly towards the euro area.

It will be up to the Commission to ensure cohesion between EMU and the rest, to protect non-euro states against any discrimination, but also to protect single market cohesion. But there is also a risk that cohesion might suffer.

6) To conclude let me go to what I said at the beginning about the importance of the lack of political cohesion. It is particularly important in the time when there seems to be growing appetite for intergovernmental approach to integration. How can a soft method of coordination shape Europe if political unity does not exist?

It is worth looking more carefully into what I would call political cohesion. Here we are clearly not very successful. There are many examples of a total failure of soft method of coordination. In reality, we see inefficiency of soft method of coordination in crisis management.

Also, what undermines the political cohesion is the nation state mentality which is back in Europe with all its consequences.

We see far too many cases of national leadership failure when it comes to capacity to think and act in a pro European way, to respecting European commitments and implementing European policies. New style of running politics, where facts do not matter and false promises lead to successful elections in the long run will definitely work against cohesion.

Contradicting trends are visibly at work behind the European cohesion.

Interdependence and interaction will grow. But constraints to cohesion can also grow, in particular due to identity related barriers and anti European

political rhetoric . Lack of political cohesion can block interdependency related changes. The tension between growing interdependencies and lack of political cohesion will require adjustment on the side of political integration. Inequalities within countries will continue to work against solidarity at European level. Brexit related labor market issues are an example here. Political populism will play its role.