

A CONTINENT OF PEACE?

ADDRESSING RISING TENSIONS AND INSECURITY IN EUROPE

This paper identifies some of the factors underlining rising tensions and insecurity within Europe and the challenges they pose to the resilience of citizens and communities. It also asks whether Europe should adopt a peacebuilding approach – usually reserved for non-European, fragile states – to manage these increasing tensions and the threat of violent conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Europe is not usually the first region that comes to mind when we think of conflict and peacebuilding. Nonetheless, a pattern of strained social relations is emerging in a variety of European Union (EU) member states, including economic challenges as a result of the global crisis. This is increasing the incidence of divisive narratives, with protests and unrest breaking out in places as diverse as the UK and Greece.¹ Moreover, migration into and across Europe is generating an increasingly diverse population that are attempting to find common ground, but also widespread disengagement from traditional mainstream political processes. Do these trends warrant consideration? And is it necessary to turn our attention to conflict *within* Europe, looking at the growing levels of inequality, the increase in divisive narratives and the crisis of faith in institutions? These interconnected issues point to complex forms of social disaffection and marginalisation that are increasing tensions, undermining security, threatening the resilience of communities and placing

the contract between citizens and their states under stress.

GROWING INEQUALITIES

Since the global financial crisis began in 2008, the dominant ideology for many governments has been to minimise the role of the state in order to reduce debt burdens and balance the books. The cutting of welfare support, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has contributed to a widening gap between the rich and the poor,² which is now “significantly more unequal than it was before”.³ Low-income earners have witnessed a further reduction in their incomes and the drop in income for the bottom 10% of the working population has been twice as large as the drop in income for the top 10%.⁴

In many places the gap left by the removal of state support has been filled by charities and religious institutions, which have stepped in to meet the most urgent needs of the vulnerable. While this has provided much-needed relief, it carries the risk of fundamentally altering state–citizen relationships and

duties, with the state withdrawing from its role within the social contract to help maintain a minimum standard of living and opportunity for all its citizens, and citizens taking on this burden through taxation. At the same time, it creates a trap that continually pulls people just above the breadline without addressing the underlying drivers and consequences of poverty.

For countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain, the safety net of the family traditionally provides support during crises rather than the state. However, this is also coming under increasing strain when multiple family members are unemployed or underemployed, stretching the resources of families to breaking point. In many places, people turn to informal grey economies to survive, gaining respite but none of the security, stability or confidence obtained from engaging in the mainstream market.

In countries where family support networks are weaker and where neither state nor voluntary sector support is able to respond to the social, financial and psychological needs arising from crises, alternative

- 1 For example, see the following: ‘England riots’, *BBC News*, 29 October 2012. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-14452097>; and ‘Unrest in Greece: Protesters take to the streets over new austerity measures’, *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2012. Available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/greek-workers-stage-24-hour-strike-over-cutbacks/2012/02/07/gIQA9FrUwQ_gallery.html
- 2 ‘Rich-poor divide accelerating, says OECD’, *BBC News*, 15 May 2013. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-22545210>
- 3 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014). ‘OECD income distribution database: Gini, poverty, income, methods and concepts’. Paris. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm>
- 4 OECD (2014). *Rising inequality: Youth and poor fall further behind*. Income Inequality Update. Paris. p.2. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2014-Income-Inequality-Update.pdf>



Labour protesters in Marseille, France, 2010. Courtesy of marcovdz, Creative Commons

In the UK, 500,000 people are now reliant on food aid as a result of rising unemployment, increasing levels of underemployment and falling incomes, coupled with the rising cost of living.

In France, 75% of those receiving food aid say they need food aid so they can pay their rent.

Source: N. Cooper and S. Dumbleton (May 2013). *Walking the breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st century Britain*. Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam; and International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2013). *Think differently: Humanitarian impacts of the economic crisis in Europe*. Geneva: IFRC.

structures can become more attractive in providing a sense of belonging, identity and opportunity. This has had a detrimental impact on community safety in countries such as Greece, where the breakdown of traditional support networks has arguably resulted in increased support for far-right agendas.

Income inequality is not the only factor challenging stability; unequal opportunity is also an issue. Mapping carried out by the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) across 22 countries in Europe has pointed to an increase in the 'social distance' required to climb out of poverty and join the mainstream.⁵ This presents a fairly bleak picture of the potential for a long-lasting schism between the wealthy and the poor, reducing opportunities

for social mobility for current and subsequent generations.

Young people have been hit the hardest by these challenges: unemployment is highest among the younger generation, while social reforms have eroded access and opportunities for young people first. Young people in today's Europe are facing the stark reality of a mismatch between their aspirations and the opportunities afforded to them based on the economic and social position they occupy. This could have a detrimental impact on longer-term life opportunities, "scarring" any future

wage-earning potential and carrying "an increased likelihood of periods of unemployment later in life".⁶

Economic opportunity, social mobility and aspiration are key components of a stable society. Inclusion and integration are gained through contributing to society⁷ and social status is partially constructed through employment and a person's pay level. When opportunities to participate in this way are thwarted and/or devalued by stagnating or falling wages, this has a serious impact on people's standard of living, wellbeing and self-esteem. It can result in a greater marginalisation of sections of society, in turn placing an increased strain on the relationship between different communities and between citizens and the state. Understanding the wider social impact of growing inequalities and finding ways to mitigate this risk are critical for building a more secure future across society.

In 2013, unemployment among people aged under 25 rose to 23.5% in the EU. Greece had the highest rate (62.5% in February 2013), followed by Spain (56.4%), Portugal (42.5%) and Italy (40.5%).

Source: 'Youth unemployment at record levels across Europe', *Channel 4 News*, 31 May 2013. Available at <http://www.channel4.com/news/youth-unemployment-spikes-across-europe>

⁵ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2013). Op. cit. p.2.

⁶ C. Biggins (2012). *A demanding job: Finding employment for Britain's youth*. London: Centre Forum. p.7.

⁷ L. Enria (2012). *Conflict analysis* (internal report). London: International Alert.

DIVISIVE NARRATIVES

Rising economic inequality and reduced opportunity have had knock-on effects on cultural inequality, leading to the growing prominence of narratives that scapegoat sections of society along simplified lines of cultural difference. Blame for exclusion and lack of opportunity are externalised and reframed as a threat to national culture and way of life. This is particularly evident in the targeting of immigrants, Muslims and welfare recipients, each of which has been grouped by the media, politics and policy along simplified and often derogatory lines that serve to apportion them blame for any social problems.

Immigration is now on a par with the economy as the top issue of concern for the British public, with 52% of respondents saying it is the main issue facing the UK today.

Source: 'Economy no longer the (only) number one issue', *YouGov*, 14 May 2014. Available at <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/05/14/economy-no-longer-number-one-issue/>

Such agendas were on the rise before the economic crisis. However, the austerity agenda has provided greater legitimacy for divisive narratives to become a more prominent feature of Europe's social and political landscape – including anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and anti-Roma sentiments. These dynamics were clearly visible in this year's European elections, with growing support emerging for parties with far-right and radical anti-immigration platforms, in turn shifting the rhetoric of mainstream parties to the right for fear of losing their traditional supporters. Immigration dominated mainstream political headlines and campaigns, giving further credence to divisive narratives. This led to a swing in favour of right-wing parties in some member states, such as France and Hungary.⁸

In Italy, this debate became particularly heated in relation to the number of people arriving through the island of Lampedusa, between Sicily and north Africa. Such reports were often described in sensationalist

terms by mainstream media as an 'invasion' or 'biblical exodus', igniting fears of Italy being 'overrun' by immigrants. In Greece, this fear turned violent, with the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party members being linked to violent attacks on migrants and left-wing activists, including the murder of rapper Pavlos Fyssas.⁹

Support for anti-immigration/immigrant agendas deepened as a result of the economic insecurities arising from the crisis and the responses to the crisis.¹⁰ This support increased further with the growing political dissatisfaction, the lack of voice within mainstream democratic channels and the absence of counter-

narratives. Compelling narratives that promised belonging, identity and security formed around traditional notions of community life in turn shifted the focus of mainstream politics towards an increasingly anti-immigration/immigrant agenda, characterised by growing public scrutiny of minority groups.

Yet the correlation between economic insecurity and anti-immigration narratives is not always straightforward. Spain, for instance, despite being one of the hardest-hit countries, has not experienced a significant rise in racism. Conversely, Scandinavia with its relative economic security has been vulnerable to rising

nationalist and anti-immigration/immigrant agendas. Understanding the dynamics that play into these different scenarios – what creates the space for divisive agendas and why this space sometimes isn't exploited – is key to addressing the inherent challenges.

Immigration and Islam in the EU¹¹ have been increasingly portrayed as a threat to national cultures and national security within Europe. Consequently, tensions within Europe are framed as part of wider global conflict dynamics. Conflicts no longer just take place 'over there' but are connected to, influenced by and influence dynamics within Europe itself. Financial flows, political influence, the social and emotional ties of people within Europe to non-European countries, development and knowledge links, and the rapid flow of information all highlight the blurring of borders in a modern globalised society that connects countries from the north to the south. Such complexity can generate a desire for increased simplicity, which translates into a simplified view of different faith and cultural practices. This is combined with a lack of empathy for different experiences and a lack of openness to perspectives that differ from the dominant narrative, with different faith and cultural practices being perceived as a risk to a country's stability. Such risks are conflated into dangers, increasing the sense of insecurity even further.

Such divisive narratives are not only limited to immigrant populations, but also target sections of the wider population. One trend of the austerity agenda across parts of Europe has

In the Netherlands, anti-immigration discourse is closely associated with an anti-Islam sentiment. In one of his speeches, Geert Wilders, leader of the far-right Freedom Party (PVV), asked his supporters whether they wanted "more or fewer Moroccans in the country". This prompted the Dutch Moroccan Alliance (SNM) to file a complaint of discrimination against the politician.

Source: 'Dutch politician Geert Wilders takes aim at Moroccans and sparks outrage', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2014. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/20/dutch-politician-geert-wilders-moroccans-outrage-pvv-party-anti-islam>; and 'Dutch politician Wilders accused of discrimination', *BBC News*, 20 March 2014. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26667788>

8 Analysis of the European elections 2014 is available at <http://www.paneuropeannetworks.com/government/analysis-elections-2014/>

9 B. Navarro (May 2014). 'EU election results: A symptom of a less peaceful Europe?'. London: International Alert. Available at <http://www.international-alert.org/blog/eu-election-results-symptom-less-peaceful-europe>

10 M. Goodwin (2011). *Right response: Understanding and countering populist extremism in Europe*. London: Chatham House.

11 'Populism poses a real threat to the mainstream', *Demos*. Available at <http://www.demos.co.uk/projects/thefarrightineurope>

Mainstream anti-social television genres that focus on poor families with behavioural or social problems are aired in a number of countries. They serve to generate powerful stereotypes of the poor as being responsible for their own poverty. This practice is evident in, for example, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK.

Source: 'Understanding Europe's white working class communities', *Open Society Foundations*, 16 June 2014. Available at <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/understanding-europes-white-working-class-communities>

been to shift responsibility and blame for the crisis from the state to the individual. Off-setting the costs of the crisis has been borne by the individual through stagnating and declining wages. This has been coupled with rhetoric that shifts responsibility and blame from the state to the individual in terms of 'demonising' those who rely on the state for survival to find alternative mechanisms to state support. Welfare recipients, for example, have been portrayed as anti-social and a 'drain' on society by both political and media rhetoric. Responsibility for poverty and for finding ways to escape poverty is individualised,

isolating and excluding the poorer parts of the population.

If left unchecked, divisive narratives can contribute to community tensions and reduce community resilience and social bonds, with groups becoming increasingly marginalised and their presence, cultural practices and beliefs scrutinised by the public and policy gaze. There is a need to develop a wider understanding of the impact of divisive narratives and the environment that enables them to become dominant. Spaces for narratives that offer alternative perspectives need to be created, bringing people and groups together

through dialogue that promotes understanding, empathy and alternative solutions. These spaces need to enable work with institutions that will encourage peaceful and productive ways of tackling these challenges, so that the fabric that binds societies can be protected and repaired.

CRISIS OF FAITH IN INSTITUTIONS

Rising inequalities and increasingly divisive narratives are compounded by a crisis of faith in institutions and in those wielding power to be able to effect positive change and opportunities for the masses.

One reflection of this is the growing withdrawal from mainstream democratic politics. In a number of countries, citizens are expressing disillusionment and apathy towards power and governance structures, as illustrated by declining voter participation at EU and national levels.



Anti-government demonstration by Golden Dawn, Greece, 2014 © ZUMA Press Inc./Alamy

In 1979, voter turnout in the European elections was 61.99%. This fell to its lowest rate of 43% in 2009 and only increased by 0.9% in 2014.

Source: 'Results of the 2014 European elections' are available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>

This is particularly evident in certain parts of the population, where an erosion of trust and sense of distance from influence are apparent by age and income bracket. In the UK, for instance, only 44% of young people aged 18–24 vote compared with 76% of over 60-year-olds. Similarly, those in the upper income bracket are 43% more likely to vote than those in the lowest income bracket.¹²

Politicians inevitably focus on the types of people who vote when it comes to policy decisions. This can lead to underrepresentation of the needs of young people and those in lower income brackets, thereby increasing their alienation. It can also mean that the policy environment is shaped by the perceptions and prejudices of those supporters who are furthest from the groups that the policy targets.

The crisis of faith in institutions goes hand in hand with a loss of 'voice'. Cuts to public services and local and national civil society organisations have made it increasingly difficult for these services to give a voice to the marginalised. Opportunities for new forms of participation through movements such as 'Occupy' and 'Los Indignados', together, with the use of online platforms that can transcend regional boundaries and quickly mobilise people, offer exciting spaces for reshaping engagement. However, despite the traction gained through these alternative mechanisms, there is still considerable distance to travel between the perception of engagement and the ability to actually influence change. Crucially, such movements and networks have often failed to

engage the most marginalised within society, continuing to leave a gap in representation for the most vulnerable.

Stability and security at local and national levels require an inclusive political system that is legitimate in the eyes of its public – a public that believes in its ability to shape and influence how power is exercised and decisions are made, and that is able to engage in both endorsing and critiquing power structures. Once this starts to erode, a pattern of retraction from traditional forms of representation starts to emerge, leading to apathy or the seeking of new ideologies to mobilise around. This can open up opportunities for new positive spaces for civic mobilisation. However, there is also a risk that the frustrations of economic and social exclusion may manifest themselves through more extreme violent ideologies that offer an alternative sense of belonging, respect and support.

CONCLUSIONS

Growing inequalities, the mainstreaming of divisive narratives and an increasing sense of distance from and disillusionment with state institutions are dynamics that do not necessarily present a risk to stability as long as they can be absorbed, managed and responded to peacefully. However, it is the interaction between these three areas at a time of increased global vulnerability that is creating greater fragility across Europe, deepening divides and opening up spaces for violence and exclusion.

A peacebuilding approach would take a broad view of these challenges, situating them within wider global dynamics in order to better understand the context in which they play out. It would look at the social, cultural, political and economic factors underpinning present-day issues, highlighting the issues that are most likely to be corrosive to stability rather than those that simply affect the greatest number of people. It would open up the opportunity to learn from successful practices across and outside of Europe that have found ways to address difficult challenges peacefully.

Such an approach would help to bring fresh understanding of how and why trends evolve as they do. This would help to shape new questions, generate new thinking, connect and convene new groups of people and bring new perspectives to Europe. Of equal importance is maintaining the connections and understanding that have contributed to peace and stability across Europe over recent decades.

What this looks like in practice would grow from these discussions, analysis and engagement, with people at its centre. By working across communities, we can identify and shape ways that can generate hope and agency for positive action, empower civic engagement with decision-making bodies and build a more resilient and secure future for Europe.

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12 Institute for Public Policy Research (2013). 'Young voters should be required to vote first time round', 29 April 2013. London: IPPR. Available at <http://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/young-voters-should-be-required-to-vote-first-time-round>

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