



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 11, 2020

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

In search of lost social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract. Strengthening social cohesion draws not merely on social and economic rights but it is connected to all prerogatives relevant for enlarging the choices of individuals to live meaningful and decent life. Author's attempt in this article is to analyse some of the substantial elements for social cohesion in general and furthermore in Bosnia and Herzegovina's context tackling some of the reasons of insubstantial social cohesion. The key challenge concerning the subject is how to translate the concept into a practice that can effectively support necessarily development changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina for well-being of all citizens in this specific society.

Keywords. Bosnia and Herzegovina, development, social exclusion, social cohesion, trust, well-being

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterised today with significantly low level of trust in social institutions such are judiciaries, health institutions, legal, educational and political institutions. It is also characterised by strengthening of numerous types of populist strivings and ideologies. Furthermore, we can observe increase acceptance towards various opportunistic behaviours where frequently used informal instruments become only mechanisms for solving numerous problems that are tackling citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

These are some most intense social phenomena and processes which can be linked to the creation or degradation of social cohesion in this very specific country and complex society such is Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this regard, there is an important question: what hinders social cohesion and enables the start of immanently necessary reforms towards solving crucial problems such are economic underdevelopment, unemployment, slowness of life standard's growth at entire territory of the country, various forms of social exclusion, stagnate poverty in certain social layers, corruption, nepotism, clientelism particularly in political context, various indoctrinations in education, inadequate cultural policies, etc. On the other side, which social processes decrease these tendencies, what kind of processes can inaugurate social cohesion of this society?

Importance of social nettings that are essential for social institutions and trust that ease their functioning were researched mostly *via* concept of social capital. But, recently, serious sociological researches are turning back to the concept of solidarity and dialogue as relevant factors towards more stable and inclusive society. This shift of paradigm was induced by

diverse consequences of globalization processes, primarily by increase of migrations and intensification of inequality in all spheres of society.

Many analyses in social sciences direct us towards a need of deeper and far more serious social phenomena, which require reconsideration and redefinition of basic human and social concepts of social cohesion. As one of the definition examples, the Council of Europe identifies social cohesion as “the capacity of a society to ensure the welfare of all its members, minimizing disparities and avoiding polarization.

A cohesive society is a mutually supportive community of free individuals pursuing these common goals by democratic means”¹. This term of social cohesion concerns and fosters following aspects: reciprocate loyalty and solidarity, strength of social nettings and common values, sense of belonging, trust among individuals within community and reduction of inequity and social exclusion. In such perspective, this concept has as a matter of fact a positive connotation, but social cohesion remains redefined and sometimes equalized with homogenization and assimilation. Discourses on diversities and unities become increasingly nationalistic and radical that can be viewed in miscellaneous populist approaches. On the other side, sociological researches are directed towards questions about influences of diversities on participation in social life, and what kind of effect on social solidarity and social cohesion has a social capital. Social capital is closely linked with already familiar concept of ‘citizen’s merits’. These citizen’s merits are the most effective when represented as the portion of shared social relations. But, as Putnam stated, society enhanced by many worth but isolated individuals is not necessary a society with social capital and developed social cohesion (Putnam, 2008:21). Consequently, in case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, social cohesion remains a wider concept influenced by numerous politics that encourage or discourage social inclusion, social mobility and social capital in general.

Lack of social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily driven by a complex grid of institutional barriers for certain individuals and social groups with a lack of prospect to overcome these barriers. It is about condition whereby certain individuals or groups are being driven to the edge of society, prevented from living a decent life and fully participating in society due to their ethnicity and religion, age or gender differences, financial short-comings, disability, sexual orientation, lack of formal employment and opportunities. These factors not only distance many from social, health and other services but weaken social and community networks, deteriorating the sense of trust and belonging to the society. Where there is a lack of trust – social inclusion is weaker, there are more divisions, instabilities and conflicts that are influencing development and needed transformation in the whole country.

What is Social Cohesion and Why is it Important?

This chapter perceives the meaning of social cohesion and the suite of factors that influence strengthening social cohesion wide-ranging. The further significant attempt would be the application of these ideas to today’s Bosnia and Herzegovina and miscellaneous obstacles tackling its social cohesion.

Starting point here would be that outlines of social cohesion rooted in primary relationships among people have been replaced by a slow universalization of citizens’ rights. Max Weber claimed that the concept of citizens’ rights started to develop in the small cities in the Middle Ages period, where people depended on each other for their needs, securities, spaces and

¹ The Council of Europe’s Strategy for Social Cohesion by Gabriella BATTAINI-DRAGONI, Director General and Stefano DOMINIONI, Administrator Directorate General of Social Cohesion. Strasbourg, 2003 Conference on Social Cohesion Faculty of Social Sciences, the University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Council of Social Service the University of Hong Kong, 28-29 November 2003, p6

services (Weber, 1968). He supposed these settings as the cause of occasions that fostered development of citizenship and citizens' rights such are: strong demand by residents for equal treatment under the law, connected with comparably strong confrontation to aristocratic privilege, institutionalization of the concept regarding public good (Weber, 1968:32). This represents a conception that the well-being of every human being is linked with well-being of others, and the initiation of cooperation regarding conflict resolution creating basis for the establishment of institutions that will tackle specific issues, generating social dynamics for the universalization of citizens' rights.

Furthermore, Gustave Le Bon in his famous book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* had researched social cohesion embarking theory of mass behaviour. He portrayed common characteristics and mental patterns of the crowd, the crowd's emotions and ethics, its behaviour patterns, opinions and beliefs of crowds and the means used by leaders to persuade. His work even today can be actualized and contextualized in Bosnia and Herzegovina's continuum particularly taking into the consideration various populist tendencies that are gathering various collectivism and social groups. Furthermore, according to Berkman and Kawachi (Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S., Brazier, 2019), Durkheim explains social cohesion as a characteristic of society that shows the interdependence in between individuals of that society, and coins to social cohesion (1) the absence of latent social conflict (any conflict based on for e.g. wealth, ethnicity, race, and gender) and (2) the presence of strong social bonds (e.g. civic society, responsive democracy, and impartial law enforcement). Among many sociology theorists that are mentioned in the significant article *Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it*, Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier give out McDougall and Lewin's definitions of group cohesion as the intrinsic collective mentality with levels of reciprocity and a common way of feeling and thinking. Also to this, Lewin defines a group as a dynamic whole with its own size, organization, and intimacy and argues that individual behaviour is a product of both the person and the social environment, relating therefore agency of the individual to what the surrounding social context affords him/her (Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S., Brazier, 2019).

Later on, definitions of social cohesion accentuate that concept of social cohesion occurred in Europe as a way of unifying a number of different areas of policy concern in the European Union. According to Manca A.R. (2014), social cohesion refers to the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society. It identifies two main dimensions: the sense of belonging of a community and the relationships among members within the community itself. It stems from a democratic effort to establish social balance, economic dynamism, and national identity, with the goals of founding a system of equity, sustaining the impulses of uncontrolled economic growth, and avoiding social fractures. Furthermore, social cohesion is a social process which aims to consolidate plurality of citizenship by reducing inequality and socioeconomic disparities and fractures in the society. It reflects people's needs for both personal development and a sense of belonging and links together individual freedom and social justice, economic efficiency and the fair sharing of resources, and pluralism and common rules for resolving all conflicts (ibid).

The key factor for fruitful functioning of cohesive societies is high level of trust. Strong institutions are today precondition for development of social cohesion, and they should ensure for citizens to be involved in social processes, to conduct and implement social agreements and regulations and to create a framework for economic progress, and sense of wellbeing and fairness in the society. According to Šunderić (2015), in the book *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama claims that development of society depends on several factors: sense of citizens for belonging to that society, successful functioning of institutions, social activity and alliance of citizens. In order for democracy to function, Fukuyama stress out that

citizens should develop their irrational pride in their own institutions, and likewise they should develop what Tocqueville named as “an art for association”, which rests on the sense of cohesion with community (ibid). In this context, social cohesion is an idea of society development based on principles of freedom, equality and solidarity. This could refer to different ideological and historical experiences and allow different societies to adopt these common principles to their specific needs and to develop their own model of progress. In other words, social cohesion appears as likely concept of modern societies’ sustainable development². Robert D. Putnam in his famous book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, accentuates John Stewart Mill’s thoughts on participating democracy’s influence on character (Putnam, 2008) linking this concept with social cohesion today. According to Mill, without participation in public life, citizen never thinks about collective interest, there is no a goal to achieve together with others but only acting as a rival to them. On the other side, engaged citizen has no personal interest, he/she belongs to public life and community aiming at general well-being (Putnam, 2008:442). When people associate in any types of groups, their separate and individual voices are strengthening and multiply. Except that associations nurture democratic habits, they also serve for serious discerning about vital social issues. It is all about the revival of the “deliberate democracy” concept (Putnam, 2008:445). Because politics without social cohesion are alienated politics.

The Utilisations and Reasons of Insubstantial Social Cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina

During the past twenty five years since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended, this country is still faced with a constant increase in the number of people that are socially excluded due to various reasons. The common characteristics of social exclusion are invisibility, poverty, stigmatization and cumulatively less favourable positions in society (Sen, 2000). The contemporary situation jeopardies undermining the already fragile social cohesion within Bosnia and Herzegovina’s society.

The phenomena of insubstantial social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be viewed through social exclusion both as subjective or objective exclusion, and perceived from at least two standpoints. Social exclusion appears as a serious consequence of a lack of health and social care, unemployment, poverty and/or intended marginalization, stigmatization and segregation of individuals or social groups within a society. It is perceptible as a specific form of social stratification within a society where individuals or particular social groups of the deprived, unemployed, illiterate, physically and mentally challenged, or groups and individuals belonging to an ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, gender, sexual orientation groups are undervalued, disadvantaged of their rights, stigmatized and segregated. Unfortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina’s political elite seems to be, unlike in many other countries, unconcerned about constant increase of unemployed, poverty, miscellaneous marginalization of citizens and fail to act or to address their positions and problems. Nevertheless, some individuals and social groups can be stated to have been deliberately marginalized and segregated. These include Roma people in particular, members of another religion and ethnicity group. It is implemented through stigmatization, trying to show, *via* numerous pressures, that the members of minority population are undesirable or less worthy members of society. The same refers to the specific social groups,

² It assumes a constant process of community development based on common values, mutual challenges and equal opportunities grounded on the feelings of trust, hope and reciprocities among all citizens. It is about a characteristic of society that connects all members through actions of specific attitudes, behaviours, rules and institutions, resulted as the product of consent but not pure constrain. Cohesion creates community that is able to secure wellbeing to all its members, mitigate inequalities and avoid marginalization of individuals or social groups. Cohesive societies are characterized by strong social connections and recognizable focus on common good (Šunderić, 2015).

such as those who are HIV positive, raped women, street children, LGBTQI persons, drug and alcohol addicts and many others. This reflects on non-acceptance of the 'Other and Different Ones' and the expression of closed society, which negatively influence social cohesion utterly. This results in shutting out the above mentioned individuals or entire social groups within small communities completing the malicious circle of social exclusion and marginalization. The lack of engagement by governments, media and society in the social inclusion of these individuals and groups is very noticeable. Yet some 'isolated' examples have shown that this kind of engagement is possible.

Insubstantial social cohesion is also a consequence of personal abstinence from potential social participation or engagement in the local or wider community. At that level mentioning, it occurs in the form of dispute caused by broken social links between an individual and society. Insubstantial social cohesion as a result of increased social exclusion on the one hand, and personal abstinence and apathy regarding citizens' participation in social processes on the other, can be mixed to different degrees of intensity and heighten each other. For instance, young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina may decide to withdraw from any decision making process about themselves after having experienced various situations where their voice was not heard or not taken into consideration at all. The voice of the workers is often ignored as well, which is obvious from the incessant, often justified requests by workers, or even strikes to which insignificant attention is paid.

High percentage of unemployment in Bosnia and Herzegovina points out that this can be a crucial factor for the lack of social cohesion. According to Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina in their Release from July 2020, published the number of registered unemployed persons. In May 2020 the number of registered unemployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina amounted to 421.474. If we take 2018 as a base year (2018 = 100) and compare May 2020 with the same month of 2019, we will notice that the number of unemployed decreased by 3,3 index points, or in absolute terms the number of people registered as unemployed decreased by 14.789 (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2020)³. One of the causes for such a decrease is a crisis produced by Covid-19 pandemic, but what is important to underline is that before this specific occurrence, unemployment was increasing as well combined with young people leaving the country. Prominent economy theorist as Barr claims that unemployment has devastating effects on society influencing negatively on the level and form of democracy within society. State should strive towards full employment that is a "key component of wellbeing" (Barr, 2012:7). That is why the responsibility of institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to incite economic development and create a system that will ensure the labour costs-effectiveness and entrepreneurship. Increase of employment would certainly strengthen social cohesion and prevent social divisions that are already existing. On a contrary, the only aim within society becomes and remains meeting only individual needs and struggle for personal security and benefit. Instead of common goal and progress, reinforcement in these type of societies such is Bosnia and Herzegovina's is reinforcement only for survival instead mutual support and enhancement.

The notion of ethnic divisions and its connection to insubstantial social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been a serious issue for a longer period. The illogicality in this context exists in between the inner structure of its society and the overall goal of transition. This paradox directly relates to whether Bosnia and Herzegovina's society is represented by a collective in general or rather its ethnic collective grouping (i.e. its three constituent people) around which most of social relations are shaped and formulated (Mujkić, 2007). In other words we live, work

³See more at: http://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Saopštenja/2020/LAB_03_2020_05_0_BS.pdf

and create all our values not as Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens, but as Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats or so called 'Others'. Yet the universal aim of transition and globalization processes is to develop a model of free market economy with a basis of which is the citizen as individual. It is an inevitable fact that the current structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina and this overall aim are incompatible. Both rationally and politically there is an absurdity basis, upon which the content and forms of social relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina are built influencing insubstantiality of social cohesion. This kind of condition substantially determines the overall social reality within the country and the process for social cohesion. The basis of change should be that of considering the citizen as an individual rather than belonging to any particular group (Mujkić, 2007).

Conclusion remarks

Bosnia and Herzegovina is able to become more cohesive society although according to many presented indicators it has a low level of social cohesion. The most important decision on this 'social cohesion' road is on when and how to start the process of deep social transformation. Process of EU integrations is one element of this road. It is in the political context perhaps one of the most realistic processes that will lead this country in recovering pursuit for social cohesion. EU integration process is directed towards many issues that are related to better functioning of the state, especially regarding some parts of the country that should become part of wider community.

One of the most required long-term changes that will improve social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina are indicated towards institutions at the local level. Trust among citizens is not an independent aspect, it is the result of institutions' actions. Consequently, as the result of low level of trust in the society, we got a so called "social trap" i.e. situation in which individuals, social groups or organizations are not able to cooperate unless they are sure or believe that almost everyone will cooperate, due to what "non-cooperation becomes rational respond of an individual" (Rothstein, 2005:12 in Šunderić, 2015). Therefore, one of the key roles of various institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina to incite cooperation among members of society and thereby create sense of trust, mutual understanding and belonging to the society. It is significant to underline that cooperation will provide results only if various functions and mutual independence of social actors are preserved in order for different voices and interests to be articulated.

In order to create cohesive society in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is additionally needed for adopted legal regulations to be implemented. At this moment the level of implemented legal regulations, court decisions, even European ones⁴, are at the unsatisfactory level, what equally contributes to the sense of social mistrust and insecurity. Directions for Bosnia and Herzegovina to improve already existing legal frames is in achieving new social agreement, increasing transparency within institutions and their performances and development of control mechanisms that will ensure implementation of legal regulations.

This indicates that social cohesion in Bosnia and Herzegovina is hindered by various types of social exclusion, the constitution⁵, the resulting ethnic divide and a lack of trust in institutions.

⁴ European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling in the Sejdić and Finci case: The failure to resolve discriminatory practices does not affect only Roma and Jews, or only minorities. This discrimination affects *all* ethnic groups. Serbs living in the Federation, Bosniaks and Croats living in Republika Srpska (RS), residents of Brčko District who wish to vote in the Federation or RS, anyone who does not want to declare membership in any one ethnic group, and all minorities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina are barred from fully participating in elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

⁵ The Dayton Peace Agreement focused on achieving peace, rather than on creating a coherent and stable state structure.

Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are presently poorly driven and encouraged and very much exhausted to deal with social cohesion 'on their own'. But it is more than detectible that adequate resolving all above mentioned burdens will still require time and enlightened alterations in social dynamics in general. Institutional and legal changes can play a significant part, yet the reconciliation processes and the fostering of new belonging based upon respect and understanding of differences lies at the basic of securing necessary changes for better forthcoming and for all citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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