

**Social Capital across Europe -
Findings, Trends and Methodological
Shortcomings of Cross-National Surveys**

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Beim Präsidenten

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Abstract

Two sets of issues are elaborated and reflected on. The first one concerns the distribution of stocks of social capital across European (EU) nations. Using the conventional proxies like trust and associational involvement on the basis of data of cross-national surveys (EVS/WVS and ESS) the main tentative trends and patterns are outlined. The second issue refers to the quality of data. Are the findings and indicators reliable and credible? Are the EVS and other available European surveys a methodologically correct and sufficient source of empirical evidence?

Concerning the first issue, it is possible to speak of four groups with regard to the distribution of social capital at the European level. In contrast to authors who argue that there are no large differences in mean scores across the national patterns, this analysis arrives at more differentiated conclusions. Between the first and fourth group a very clear borderline can be drawn while differences between the second and third groups are not so pronounced. In the context of the thematising and critical reflection of the validity and comparability of the empirical evidence some errors and inconsistencies were found. It seems that they appeared partly due to the inappropriate technical design of cross-national surveys and also because of the semantic-cultural as well as institutional factors which have not been paid much attention, partly in the stage of preparing and conducting the survey as well as in the phase of interpreting and generalizing of the data.

* * *

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Introduction

It is interesting to note that, despite an abundance of empirical research, there are still no systematic overviews providing reliable insights into cross-time and cross-nation differences and similarities regarding the distribution of social capital within Europe or the European Union. A number of partial studies exist yet the question is not truly answered by them. The initial aim of this contribution is to provide a more comprehensive approach to explaining trends and the state of social capital while keeping in mind that only preliminary findings are given and these need to be subsequently completed through a correction process once new data and insights are available. However, it turns out that this aim cannot be satisfied without a methodological reconsideration of the quality and credibility of data that could provide a basis for drawing conclusions about the growth or decline of social capital in European societies.

Social capital research remains in its initial phases. When looking for appropriate conceptualisation and measurement solutions we still find ourselves in the 'pilot' phase.¹ However, it may be argued that some well-elaborated approaches promising the successful continuation of research efforts do exist, while some others have proven to be less productive. There is a wide range of conceptual problems that mainly derive from the statement that social capital is a genotype phenomenon which comprises a series of contextually conditioned phenotypical applications (Adam/Rončević, 2003). As a consequence, there are several conceptual misunderstandings and oversimplified operational definitions.² Four main fields of application connecting older theoretical approaches with the still fluid and ongoing social capital discussion can be distinguished. The first – on which our approach is based – connects macro-level research into civil society and civic participation with social capital indicators like associational involvement and trust. The second proceeds from the notion of human capital and regards social capital as an additional resource which enables the circulation and sharing of knowledge and information (one branch of this mainly micro- or mezzo-oriented field evolved in a macro-level field focused on developmental/non-economic factors). The third field is in fact the implantation of social capital at the informal and micro-level into network analysis, while the fourth joins collective action theory with social capital as a solution to the so-called free-rider problem.

Our point of departure is van Deth's analysis of methodological pitfalls which states that conceptual heterogeneity is much less reflected in operational and empirical realms than expected.³ The measurement is characterised by several orthodoxies that mainly relate

¹ Recently, one author wrote that social capital's conception and measurement may currently be at the same early stage that human capital theory was thirty years ago (Grootaert/Bastelaer, 2002: 341). From this assessment, we exclude approaches based on empirically more developed network analysis and block modelling (Lin, 2002; Savage et al., 2004).

² One author is very critical. He states: 'Empirical social capital literature seems to be particularly plagued by vague definition of concept, poorly measured data, absence of appropriate exchangeability conditions, and lack of information necessary to make identification claims plausible' (Durlauf, 2002: 474).

³ He points out the following 'pitfalls': the use of proxies from existing data sets due to the unavailability of specific data, using perceptions instead of observations, using aggregate measures deriving from the individual level for investigating collective phenomena, using inverse measures as proxies (the rate of criminality as an indicator of the absence of social capital), using identical indicators in different settings and using single indicators instead of composite measures (Van Deth, 2003).

to the dominant position of the survey method and use indicators that measure the stock of social capital only on the basis of respondents' statements and attitudes. While we agree with this observation, our critical assessment is more concrete since it is based on an evaluation of three cross-national comparative surveys, namely the World Values Survey (WVS), the European Values Survey (EVS) and the European Social Survey (ESS). Like Van Deth, we also stress the need for triangulation. Yet, by doing this, we do not merely address the additional use of other methods of data collection like experiments or secondary statistical data analyses but believe a combination of different datasets deriving from cross-national surveys should also be included. When conducting a complex analysis we cannot use and rely on just one set of data, for example, only the data from the WVS (see Norris, 2002) or EVS (see Arts et al., 2003). Instead, a broader context of empirical evidence should be taken into account. More complex research designs should also include a combination of 'deductive' (outsiders') data acquired by the abovementioned cross-national research and 'inductive' (insiders') national and regional case studies.

Based on the existing findings and debates, two circumstances that demonstrate the state of art in the field of social capital research can be underlined. First, the level of reflection and critical assessment of the main theoretical and methodological dilemmas has increased (see Stolle and Hooghe, 2005; Morales, 2002; van Deth, 2003; Schuler/Baron and Field, 2000). This is true of the general level of analysis, however, it does not have a direct impact on the empirical level or problems with operationalisation and measurements.

Second, at the data analysis level the development of increasingly sophisticated statistical multivariate techniques can be observed along with attempts to formalise a theoretical proposition in the form of mathematical models (especially where economists are involved). Yet these exact ('hard') procedures cannot resolve the question of the quality of the input data (data gathered by survey questionnaires). To put it differently, statistics is only a useful tool that by itself does not ensure the quality of input data and consequently high levels of coherent analysis and interpretation. The problem lies in the very old fashioned empiricist 'habitus' of (still) many social scientists who consider each set of quantifiable data as being taken for granted and ready for further statistical operations (see Cicourel, 1964).

Proceeding from these preliminary observations and insights, three sets of questions will be elaborated and reflected on:

- 1) How are stocks of social capital distributed across European (EU) nations? Using the conventional proxies like trust and associational involvement on the basis of data of cross-national surveys (EVS/WVS and ESS) we will try to show the main tentative trends and patterns.
- 2) What is the quality of such data? Are the findings and indicators reliable and credible? How do we explain inconsistencies and even contradictory findings when comparing similar or even the same wording of a question? Is the EVS a methodologically problematic source of data?

- 3) How can the research design be improved in the sense of greater methodological reflexivity and a triangulation strategy? How do we interpret the findings and statistical calculations based on the doubtful validity and reliability of the input data?

1. The cross-time and cross-nation distribution of social capital: some tentative trends and patterns

Although a number of cross-national researches allowing a comparative analysis of the state of social capital have been conducted in the last five years, a more holistic answer to the questions of whether social capital is growing or shrinking or, in which particular components can we see progress or a decline, still has to be answered.⁴ One attempt in this direction is an analysis which studies the index of social capital in 47 countries, albeit it is based on old data from the WVS (data from 1995) and only includes some European countries (Norris, 2002). The comprehensive study of generalised trust and its predictors on the world scale has been undertaken on the basis of WVS data from 1990-1996 (Delhey/Newton, 2005). A much stronger focus on European countries is seen in an anthology written on the basis of the EVS 1999/2000, but even here only social capital in Western European countries was studied (Arts, Hagenaar, Halman, 2003, eds).⁵ The same holds for a study focusing on factors that determine social capital in member states of the EU-15 on the basis of a European Community Household Panel conducted in 1999 (Christoforou, 2005).

Very few empirical studies encompass both Western European and Eastern European countries. To the best of our knowledge there are three such studies. One was based on the Eurobarometer surveys (1998-2002) (Fidrmuc and Gerxhani, 2005), while the second one took the European Values Survey from 1999/2000 as its basis and uses the so-called fuzzy-set method in its analysis of the data and indicators (Adam, et al., 2005). The third is also based on the same data set but only takes into account membership and active participation in voluntary associations (Bratkowski and Jasinska-Kania, 2004). However, only a few cross-time studies at the European level have so far been conducted (Oorschot and Arts, 2005 on the basis of EVS data with only ten Western

⁴ In a recent article, the authors (Stolle/Hooghe, 2005: 157) speak of the lack of long-term empirical sources at the European level as a reason for the absence of the systematic monitoring of social capital dynamics. But in reality the data from the EVS have been available since 2001 (see Halman, 2001), while ESS data from 2002 are also available at least since 2004. Besides these sources, other sources could be utilised like Eurobarometer, New Democracy Barometer, partly the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and Political Culture in East-Central Europe. However, it is true that besides the WVS and EVS no other (complete) time-series data are available or they are not appropriate for making generalisations.

⁵ One contribution stresses (by referring to Western European countries as an example) the generational aspect. The authors state: 'In reply to Putnam, we may conclude that young generations outside of US, are not less but more involved in participatory life compared to older generations, more instead of less inclined to trust other people, and even more not less politically involved, mostly regardless their levels of involvement in civil society' (Dekker/Ester/Vinken, 2003: 245). Some other authors point out that in a few EU countries the younger generations are less involved in associations (Halpern, 2005).

European countries plus the USA and Canada, and Morales, 2004 on the basis of the EVS and the ESS).

It is also worth mentioning here publications based on national case studies. The first regards social capital in individual Western European countries (van Deth et al., 1999), the second one deals with five Western European countries (Sweden, Spain, France, Germany and Great Britain) as well as Japan, Australia and Canada (Putnam, ed. 2002). There are also some investigations dedicated to Eastern Europe (Badescu/ Uslaner, eds, 2003; Mihaylova, 2004; Haerpfer et al., 2005).

In order to study the state of social capital in Europe and its trends, we need to focus on data that allow us to conduct cross-nation as well as longitudinal (over time) comparisons. By doing so, we can gain some insights into distinctions and similarities among countries or groups of countries while, on the other side, it will allow us to make conclusions about the trends and time fluctuations. To establish the stock of social capital we will use standard indicators of generalised trust (Table 1), membership (Table 2) and the activity or amount of unpaid work in voluntary associations (Table 3). We should stress that this is a very approximate way – including where an entirely correct measurement procedure is involved – of investigating the (potential) stock of social capital.

Generalised trust

Although the interpersonal trust – trust in generalised other – is seen as one of the main components of social capital is difficult to agree with the thesis that this component is the best (single) indicator of social capital (notably: Uslaner, 2000; Newton, 2005, Halpern, 2005). While these authors overestimate the significance of trust – and especially its operationalisation and measurement – as being the best predictor of social capital, some others do not include it at all in their analyses (Bratkovski and Jasinska-Kania, 2004). This means that every investigation of social capital should include trust, however to measure it only by using trust is not theoretically justified. The underlying assumption is that generalised, diffused interpersonal trust indicates the readiness of an actor to enter into communication and co-operation with unknown people (strangers). However, serious limitations in the form of either a situational or semantic and cultural (particularist) conditioned understanding of the wording of the question or statement ('most people can be trusted') should not be overlooked.

Table 1: Generalised trust – WVS 1981, 1990 and EVS 1999

% of respondents agreeing that most people can be trusted

	WVS 1981	WVS 1990	EVS 1999***
Austria	N/A	31.8	33.9
Belarus	N/A	25.5	41.9
Belgium	29.2	33.5	30.7
Bulgaria	N/A	30.4	26.9
Croatia	N/A	25.1**	18.4
Czech Republic	N/A	27.4	23.9
Denmark	52.7	57.7	66.5
Estonia	N/A	27.6	22.8
Finland	57.2	62.7	58.0
France	24.8	22.8	22.2
Germany	32.3*	32.9	34.7
Great Britain	43.1	43.7	29.7
Greece	N/A	N/A	23.7
Hungary	33.6	24.6	21.8
Iceland	39.8	43.6	41.1
Ireland	41.1	47.4	35.8
Italy	26.8	35.3	32.6
Latvia	N/A	19.1	17.1
Lithuania	N/A	30.8	24.9
Netherlands	44.8	53.5	59.8
Norway	60.9	65.1	65.3**
Poland	N/A	31.8	18.9
Portugal	N/A	21.7	10.0
Romania	N/A	16.1	10.1
Russia	N/A	37.5	23.7
Slovakia	N/A	22.0	15.7
Slovenia	N/A	17.4	21.7
Spain	35.1	34.2	36.2
Sweden	56.7	66.1	66.3
Switzerland	N/A	42.6	37.0**
Turkey	N/A	10.0	15.7
Ukraine	N/A	31.0**	27.2

Both the WVS and the EVS have the same question on generalised trust: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ (1 – Most people can be trusted, 2 – Can’t be too careful)

*data only available for West Germany

**data available for 1995 – WVS

***data pertaining to EVS 1999 are weighted

N/A – data not available

Source: World Values Survey: wave 1981, wave 1990; wave 1995, European Values Survey: wave 1999

In these cross-time findings we cannot find a unilinear trend. Comparing the periods between 1981 and 1990, the growth of generalised trust in the majority of countries can be seen; in some cases, the growth is low or stable whereas in others it is a little more pronounced (the Netherlands or Sweden). Besides France where we encounter a slight fall, it is solely in Hungary – the only country from the communist bloc included in the first wave of the WVS – that a considerable decline of trust is to be observed. What is intriguing here is the fact this country had relatively high levels of social trust under the communist regime whereas the beginning of the democratic transition saw a reduction of trust, with this negative trend continuing in 1999. Comparing the periods between 1990 and 1999/2000, we can see that the level of generalised trust was reduced in twenty countries, it grew in eight countries while others remained at nearly the same level. What is quite surprising is that the biggest growth in trust took place in Belarus, which is today still the only non-democratic country in this part of the world. In most European countries we find a clear decline in generalised trust. This is a dramatic turnaround. Looking only at the (old) EU-15 members, the picture is as follows: in six member states a fall in trust is registered, in five it increased and in two it is stable. Observing the EU-25 (we have 22 countries included), in 13 countries the trend is negative and only in six is it positive.

Regarding the situation in the new (post-socialist) members of the EU (since 2004), all have a negative trend except Slovenia (which made an improvement but from quite a low starting position in 1990). All of them have a score under 26% and can be placed in the category of low-trust societies (see Delhey and Newton, 2005). In the category of highly trusting societies four (Scandinavian plus the Netherlands) countries can be found, six are medium-trust and the rest (all new members plus Portugal and Greece) are in the lower trust category.

Membership and participation in voluntary associations

The other indicator of social capital is passive and active membership (participation) in voluntary organisations theoretically elaborated especially in the work of Putnam (but not in Coleman's and Bourdieu's approach or within network analysis). According to the so-called Tocquevillean-Putnamian model, the density of 'horizontal networks of citizen engagement' and vibrant associational life are the core factor of understanding the dynamics and accumulation of social capital. Associational participation is seen as a school of democracy, as an opportunity to learn co-operative behaviour. The strength of voluntary associations – forming an intermediary sphere – is also understood as an indicator of developed civil society and as a sign of self-organising capacity of a given community or society.

Table 2: Membership in voluntary organisations – WVS 1981, 1990, EVS 1999

Index (all memberships per respondent), in brackets percentage of members in least one organisation

Index membership in voluntary organisations: **WVS 1981** uses the following question on membership in a voluntary organisation: ‘Which, if any, do you belong to?’ The types of organisations mentioned were the following: 1. Charities concerned with the welfare of people; 2. Churches or religious organisations; 3. Education or arts groups; 4. Trade unions; 5. Political parties or groups; 6. Organisations concerned with human rights at home or abroad; 7. Conservation, environmentalist or animal welfare groups; 8. Youth work (e.g. scouts, guides, youth clubs etc.); 9. Consumer groups; 10. Professional associations.

WVS 1990 uses the following question: ‘Please look carefully at the following list of voluntary organisations and activities and say, which, if any, do you belong to?’ In comparison to WVS 1981 the list of organisations was expanded, while one item (consumer groups) was omitted: 1. Social welfare services for elderly, handicapped or deprived people; 2. Religious or church organisations; 3. Education, arts, music or cultural activities; 4. Trade unions; 5. Political parties or groups; 6. Local community action on issues like poverty, housing, racial equality; 7. Third world development or human rights; 8. Conservation, the environment, ecology; 9. Professional association; 10. Youth work (e.g. scouts, guides, youth clubs etc.); 11. Sports or recreation; 12. Women's groups; 13. Peace movement; 14. Animal rights; 15. Voluntary organisations concerned with health; and 16. Other groups.

EVS 1999 uses the same question as WVS 1990; items 8 and 14 were merged into ‘Conservation, environment, animal rights groups’; ‘Trade unions’ was changed into ‘Labour unions’.

* data available for West Germany

** data available for WVS 1995 – this survey uses a different question wording: ‘Now I am going to read off a list of voluntary organizations; for each one, could you tell me whether you are an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organization?’ the question is followed by the list: 1. Church or religious organization; 2. Sport or recreation organization; 3. Art, music or educational organization; 4. Labour union; 5. Political party; 6. Environmental organization; 7. Professional association; 8. Charitable organization; 9. Any other voluntary organization. In the index above only ‘inactive’ memberships are taken into account.

N/A – data not available

Source: World Values Survey: wave 1981, wave 1990; European Values Survey: wave 1999

¹ The data for Finland from the first wave should be regarded with reservation (Morales, 2004). We even recently received (July 2006) from the person responsible for the EVS data at Tilburg University an explanation that Finnish file is no longer available i.e. that it is excluded from the WVS 1981 data set due to »severe problems with socio-demographic variables«.

The problem is that such errors have been reoccurring, for instance in ESS 2002 when two countries (Switzerland and Czech Republic) were also excluded from the data file because »their items on associational involvement were incorrectly formulated in these countries' questionnaires and their data are not comparable to the rest« (Morales, 2004: 10).

	WVS 1981	WVS 1990	EVS 1999
Austria	N/A	1.1 (53)	1.5 (67)
Belarus	N/A	0.6 (47)**	0.5 (46)
Belgium	0.6 (41)	1.4 (57)	1.6 (65)
Britain	0.9 (52)	1.1 (52)	0.6 (34)
Bulgaria	N/A	0.7 (41)	0.4 (23)
Croatia	N/A	1.1 (67)**	0.7 (43)
Czech	N/A	1.1 (62)	1.0 (60)
Denmark	1.0 (64)	1.8 (81)	1.9 (84)
Estonia	N/A	1.2 (73)	0.5 (34)
Finland ¹	N/A	1.8 (77)	1.9 (80)
France	0.4 (27)	0.7 (38)	0.6 (39)
Germany	0.7 (48)*	1.5 (74)	0.7 (47)
Greece	N/A	N/A	1.3 (56)
Hungary	N/A	0.7 (50)	0.5 (31)
Iceland	1.6 (82)	2.4 (90)	2.7 (93)
Ireland	0.8 (52)	1.0 (49)	1.2 (57)
Italy	0.4 (24)	0.6 (34)	0.8 (42)
Latvia	N/A	1.2 (68)	0.4 (31)
Lithuania	N/A	0.9 (60)	0.3 (19)
Netherlands	1.2 (61)	2.7 (84)	3.1 (92)
Norway	1.1 (63)	2.0 (81)	1.5 (74)**
Poland	N/A	0.6 (41)	0.4 (25)
Portugal	N/A	0.6 (33)	0.4 (28)
Romania	N/A	0.4 (30)	0.3 (21)
Russia	N/A	1.0 (71)	0.4 (31)
Slovakia	N/A	1.0 (56)	1.1 (65)
Slovenia	N/A	0.6 (39)	1.0 (52)
Spain	0.5 (31)	0.4 (23)	0.5 (29)
Sweden	1.1 (67)	2.1 (85)	3.2 (96)
Turkey	N/A	0.2 (18)**	0.1 (8)
Ukraine	N/A	0.5 (41)**	0.5 (34)

Analysing the period between 1981 and 1990 we get a similar picture as in the case of generalised trust, namely an increase of membership in most countries. The period between 1990 and 1999 (with more countries included) shows a different picture, in 14 countries the trend is negative, in eleven it is positive and in five it is unchanged. If we only take the EU-15, we can see a decline in membership in only three cases (the extreme fall in membership in Britain and Germany is a surprise). In the EU-25 we again have mixed evidence, in 13 cases there is an increase or stability and in eight cases a decrease.

Yet the differences are huge between, for instance, Sweden and Lithuania or Portugal. On the other hand, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Slovakia and (especially) Greece have relatively very high scores despite their quite low levels of generalised trust.

Active membership in voluntary associations is especially important for learning skills and attitudes of self-organisation and mutual co-operation. On the structural (societal) level its role in generating social capital in the form of trust, solidarity and participation seems quite obvious, although contradictory empirical evidence has also been presented so far, especially regarding the relationship between (active) membership and trust as well as regarding the impact of associational engagement on political participation (for more information on different findings, see Halpern, 2005: 189-194; Delhey/Newton, 2005: 313-314). On the other hand, it is quite clear that not all associations are equally important and that diverse and multiple active membership is probably more important for the creation of higher levels of social capital (Morales, 2002; Morales, 2004; Halpern, 2005). Most cross-national analyses are still far away from such a selective and sophisticated approach and use very rough indications for detecting the role of associational participation in the creation and diffusion of social capital.⁶

Based on conventional and available measures of the active involvement we get the following picture:

⁶ There are attempts at a detailed analysis. Some authors use the distinction between Putnam (including more socially-oriented and public good producing associations) and the Olson group (including associations representing special interests), see Fidrmuc and Gerxhani, 2006 and Welzel, Inglehart, Deutsch, 2006 or between mailing list and face-to face associations (Dekker and van Broek, 2005).

Regarding the measure of associational involvement most analyses use the proportion of respondents who are members or doing unpaid work in a least one organisations from the list. A few investigations take as a starting point the sum of members in each organisation, though this procedure is quite unusual and incomparable with others (Raisén et al., 2001, Haerpfer et al., 2005). In this article we use the measure which includes not only the respondents reporting themselves as being a member or active in at least one organisation but also those who have multiple memberships or multiple activities.

Table 3: Unpaid work in voluntary organisations – WVS 1981, 1990 and EVS 1999

Index (all unpaid work per respondent), in brackets the percentage of members doing unpaid work for at least one organisation

	WVS 1981	WVS1990	EVS 1999
Austria	N/A	0.4 (26)	0.5 (30)
Belarus	N/A	0.1 (9)**	0.3 (19)
Belgium	0.3 (21)	0.6 (28)	0.7 (35)
Britain (Great)	0.3 (19)	0.4 (22)	0.8 (42)
Bulgaria	N/A	0.4 (20)	0.3 (19)
Croatia	N/A	0.6 (41)**	0.4 (24)
Czech	N/A	0.4 (29)	0.5 (33)
Denmark	0.2 (18)	0.4 (26)	0.6 (37)
Estonia	N/A	0.5 (34)	0.3 (18)
Finland	N/A	0.9 (45)	0.6 (38)
France	0.2 (15)	0.5 (23)	0.4 (27)
Germany	0.3 (21)*	0.5 (34)	0.2 (19)
Greece	N/A	N/A	1.0 (40)
Hungary	N/A	0.2 (16)	0.3 (15)
Iceland	0.7 (28)	0.6 (36)	0.5 (33)
Ireland	0.3 (22)	0.5 (27)	0.6 (33)
Italy	0.2 (17)	0.4 (24)	0.5 (26)
Latvia	N/A	0.7 (36)	0.3 (22)
Lithuania	N/A	0.5 (30)	0.2 (16)
Netherlands	0.3 (24)	0.7 (36)	0.9 (49)
Norway	0.4 (24)	0.6 (37)	1.0 (58)**
Poland	N/A	0.4 (28)	0.2 (14)
Portugal	N/A	0.3 (18)	0.2 (16)
Romania	N/A	0.3 (25)	0.2 (16)
Russia	N/A	0.3 (23)	0.1 (8)
Slovakia	N/A	0.4 (27)	0.8 (51)
Slovenia	N/A	0.3 (15)	0.5 (29)
Spain	0.4 (23)	0.2 (12)	0.2 (16)
Sweden	0.3 (26)	0.7 (39)	1.1 (56)
Turkey	N/A	0.3 (18)**	0.1 (6)
Ukraine	N/A	0.1 (9)**	0.1 (13)

Index unpaid voluntary work in organisations: WVS 1981 used the following question: ‘And do you currently do any unpaid work for any of them?’ WVS 1990 and EVS 1999 used the wording: ‘Please look carefully at the following list of voluntary organisations and activities and say, which, if any, are you currently doing unpaid work for?’ For list of organizations see comment under Table 2.

*data available for West Germany

**data available for WVS 1995 – see comment under Table 2. In the index above only ‘active’ memberships are taken into account.

N/A – data not available

Source: World Values Survey: wave 1981, wave 1990; European Values Survey: wave 1999

Even in this – in the framework of the Putnam-Tocqueville model – the most relevant and useful indicator of social capital we can see a rise throughout the 1981 to 1990 period while in the period between 1999 and 1999 the situation is more ambivalent. Taking the whole sample into account, in 19 countries we can observe an increase or stability in active membership and in 11 a decrease. In the EU-15 a decrease is registered in only three cases and in the enlarged EU in seven cases. It can be concluded that the prevailing trend is, on average, quite positive. The greatest surprise is Greece

where its active membership figure is well above the average of EU countries since only Sweden shows higher scores in this regard. Slovakia's very high position is also difficult to explain (considering its low trust level, this is also true of Greece).

Although the interpretation might not be unanimous, it can be asserted that social capital according to the WVS/EVS data in Europe is generally not eroding. There are signs of decline as well as improvement. While the reduction of generalised trust is quite visible – though not in all countries – the associational involvement shows a more complex but on average positive trend. However, the dynamics and fluctuations of our three main indicators are not in accordance with the theoretical expectations. For instance, the decrease in trust does not result in a reduction of (active) membership and vice versa as projected by Putnam's theory. There are some cases (mainly Nordic countries) which are consistent with this theory, but many cases show an 'erratic' movement. The scores for some countries are difficult to explain (and understand). In some cases, the question remains open of whether the findings reflect a real increase (or decrease) or whether this can be attributed to methodological artefacts, statistical errors or problems relating to cultural-semantic issues arising in the processes of preparing the questionnaire and data collection. Some findings and atypical oscillations are hard to explain. Yet even bigger problems emerge if one conducts a synchronic comparison of the results from two different surveys or datasets, namely the EVS and the ESS.

2. The quality and credibility of the indicators and data – a comparison of the EVS and ESS findings

By comparing the findings from two different datasets we can establish some kind of logical control. Let us now see what is the result of comparing the data from the EVS and ESS surveys. The latter was conducted three, in some cases two years, after the first one. As far as the measurement instruments are concerned, changes were made to the wording concerning generalised trust. Instead of the dichotomous item, a methodologically more correct eleven-scale ladder was used. However, the problem is that the ESS includes much fewer countries than the EVS/WVS so that we are unable to explain some 'mysterious' cases (like Slovakia or Belarus).

Table 4: Comparison Generalised Trust EVS 1999 and ESS 2002
 Generalised trust, in brackets the ranking of countries

	EVS 1999 (%)	ESS 2002 % (mean score on a scale from 6-10)	ESS 2002 (mean score on a scale from 0-10)
Denmark	66.5 (1)	74.7 (1)	5.1 (7)
Sweden	66.3 (2)	61.1 (3)	6.2 (2)
Netherlands	60.0 (3)	58.4 (4)	5.7 (4)
Finland	57.4 (4)	70.9 (2)	6.3 (1)
Spain	38.6 (5)	40.9 (8)	4.8 (10)
Ireland	36.0 (6)	50.8 (5)	5.8 (3)
Austria	33.4 (7)	41.9 (7)	5.2 (6)
Italy	32.6 (8)	33.7 (10)	4.4 (12)
Belgium	29.2 (9)	40.2 (9)	5.0 (8)
Britain (Great)	28.8 (10)	43.1 (6)	5.3 (5)
Czech	24.5 (11)	27.6 (12)	4.5 (11)
Greece	23.7 (12)	21.3 (16)	3.4 (17)
Hungary	22.3 (13)	23.3 (14)	4.3 (15)
Slovenia	21.7 (14)	24.2 (13)	4.3 (14)
France	21.3 (15)	28.1 (11)	4.8 (9)
Poland	18.4 (16)	18.9 (17)	3.9 (16)
Portugal	12.3 (17)	22.9 (15)	4.3 (13)

This table shows that in most cases the values in the ESS (the second column) are higher than the values in the EVS, but these differences can be ascribed to some extent to the fact that the former data set has more differentiated scaling and the calculation is different. If the ranking of an individual country is taken into account, the congruency between both data sets in the majority of countries is quite visible. Put differently, the differences regarding generalised trust between the EVS and ESS data sets are relatively small considering the rank order of countries. However, there are four exceptions whose ranking changed substantially, namely Spain, Greece, France and the Britain. While the first two are better placed in the EVS data set, the other two have a higher position in the ESS. Many more deviations or incongruences are found between the EVS and ESS third column (average value on a scale from 0-10). From a theoretical point of view, it is interesting to note that Finland is better placed in the ESS regarding trust but its position regarding active associational involvement in the same survey is much lower than in the EVS.

Let us now see the results of a comparison of both data sets regarding the patterns of passive and active associational involvement.

Table 5: Comparison of the European Social Survey (ESS) and the EVS

Index - memberships and unpaid (voluntary) work per respondent; in brackets the percentage of respondents who are members or doing unpaid work for at least one organisation

	Membership		Unpaid work res. voluntary work	
	EVS 1999	ESS 2002	EVS 1999	ESS 2002
Austria	1.5 (67)	2.0 (74)	0.5 (30)	0.2 (13)
Belgium	1.6 (65)	1.6 (71)	0.7 (35)	0.4 (23)
Britain (Great)	0.6 (34)	1.6 (69)	0.8 (42)	0.4 (23)
Denmark	1.9 (84)	2.5 (92)	0.6 (37)	0.4 (28)
Finland	1.9 (80)	1.6 (76)	0.6 (38)	0.2 (12)
France	0.6 (39)	0.9 (48)	0.4 (27)	0.3 (19)
Germany	0.7 (47)	1.5 (70)	0.2 (19)	0.4 (24)
Greece	1.3 (56)	0.4 (25)	1.0 (40)	0.1 (6)
Hungary	0.5 (31)	0.4 (27)	0.3 (15)	0.1 (9)
Ireland	1.2 (57)	1.6 (68)	0.6 (33)	0.3 (16)
Italy	0.8 (42)	0.6 (34)	0.5 (26)	0.1 (5)
Netherlands	3.1 (92)	2.2 (83)	0.9 (49)	0.4 (29)
Norway	1.5 (74)**	2.4 (84)	1.0 (58)**	0.6 (37)
Poland	0.4 (25)	0.3 (21)	0.2 (14)	0.1 (6)
Portugal	0.4 (28)	0.5 (28)	0.2 (16)	0.1 (5)
Slovenia	1.0 (52)	0.9 (52)	0.5 (29)	0.3 (19)
Spain	0.5 (29)	0.7 (35)	0.2 (16)	0.1 (6)
Sweden	3.2 (96)	2.5 (90)	1.2 (56)	0.6 (35)

Source: European Values Survey 1999; European Social Survey 2002

** data from WVS 1995

Comparing the data referring to membership and unpaid work in voluntary organisations it seems that we have considerable inconsistencies between both data sets. Concerning membership on the basis of the first measure (all memberships per respondents meaning that some respondents are members in more than one organisation) in nine cases higher values of the ESS data can be observed, while in eight it is the opposite. Regarding unpaid work res. voluntary work, lower scores in all countries except Germany are noticeable. In some countries like Austria, we find with the ESS a higher level of membership but a lower level of active involvement in the form of unpaid work. Regarding the scores for unpaid (voluntary) work the cross-national differences are smaller than what appeared to be in the EVS. What are reasons for these divergent findings? Is it appropriate at all to directly compare the findings from these two data sets?

It has to be stressed that question wording differs in some aspects. First of all, in the ESS the respondents are asked not only to report membership and unpaid res. voluntary work in voluntary organisations (like in the EVS-WVS) but also to distinguish between: 1) membership (belonging); 2) participation in these organisations; 3) doing voluntary work; and 4) donating money. We compared unpaid work and voluntary work, but what about the category of participation?⁷ The other difference between the EVS and ESS instruments might be the limitation in the sense of timing, namely the respondents only had to report their involvement within the last twelve months while in the EVS the respondents are required to report if they are ‘currently’ members or doing unpaid work. In the ESS the time limitation appears more strict at least in a psychological sense. Also concerning the list of organisations there some differences, in the EVS on the list there are 14 organisations (plus ‘other’), while in the ESS there are 23 organisations (plus ‘other’).

These differences in the wording of the question mean that a direct comparison between both data sets is hard to justify. To some extent passive membership is an exception. Despite some differences concerning the list of organisations (which is in the case of the ESS more diversified) one might expect similar or convergent findings. What we can reveal is that only in five countries do such convergent results appear whereas in some of them, especially in Germany, Britain, Greece and Sweden we instead observe very divergent scores. If we calculate the ranking, the picture is in two respects similar to that emanating from the EVS. On the top are again the Nordic countries (minus Finland) plus the Netherlands, on the bottom are Poland, Portugal, Hungary and Greece. Unlike the EVS, the position of Greece is completely different (now at the bottom). The scores for countries in-between the top and bottom are in many cases substantially different (Germany, Britain). Put differently, comparing the rank positions in both data sets we encounter some convergent (especially on the top and bottom) and some very divergent findings. Taking into account the other measure – the percentage of respondents being members of at least one organisation – it turns out that that differences between EVS and ESS regarding membership are much smaller (with exception of Great Britain, Germany and Greece).

One possibility to undertake some kind of comparison regarding active membership would be to bring together the scores for participation and voluntary work in the ESS and compare that with unpaid work in the EVS. When doing this, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands appear on the top. There is again some similarity with the EVS although Finland is missing here (only in eleventh place). The composition of the bottom is also as expected with the exception of Greece. The position of Belgium and especially Germany and partly also France is far better in the ESS than in the EVS while Finland and Italy are placed worse.

⁷ Actually it is difficult to imagine what is meant by participation and how respondents understood the difference between these two categories. If we namely count as participation such short-time activities like attending meetings or answering (e-)mail, exchanging information then the question arises of what is meant by membership or belonging to an association. If somebody is a member only formally (cheque-book or mailing list membership) and has nothing to do with the situation in their association, then it is difficult to speak about the generation of social capital or the strength of civil society. However, it is true that in some periods people are more active or more passive.

3. How to explain the divergent findings and generalisations

Our presentation and treatment of social capital indicators like trust and participation in associations on the basis of the EVS and ESS data show that we are dealing with certain findings and oscillations that are difficult to explain. Cross-national researches seem to have serious problems with the provision of credible data (see Jowel, 1998). This in turn raises doubts about the generalisation of findings and theoretical conclusions. These aspects have not been discussed much so far; the prevailing stand is to treat the empirical data as taken-for-granted.

From this point of view it is very interesting to read the volume, edited and (partly) written by the authors who were directly engaged in organising and conducting the EVS project. While carrying out various multivariate analyses, especially those involving the cluster approach, they found ‘strange’ patterns or blocks of supposedly similar countries. They were surprised with what these statistical operations can bring about, complaining that ‘no sensible interpretation of these findings comes to mind’ or, in another place, ‘this is again a cluster whose connection is unclear’ (Arts and Halman, 2004: 42-43).

In their eyes it is not the quality (or poverty) of the input data that is responsible for this cognitive confusion, but the grand theories they used as an interpretive framework of reference. They argue: ‘*Such patterns are hard to understand and interpret and it seems as if these patterns are not really as strongly related to economic development as Ronald Inglehart, among others, would like us to believe. The only cluster of countries which seem to make sense is the group of Nordic countries*’ (ibid, 51).⁸ The authors of the quote do not depart from the point that there is something wrong with the data but see the problem in an inappropriate theoretic paradigm functioning as Procrustes' bed. What is frustrating is the very fact that, in this sense, they do not offer any alternative, nor a middle-range theory. However, it is totally impossible that the conceptual confusion they themselves describe would only result from a deficient or inappropriate theory of modernisation or post-materialism. This finding has been confirmed by a growing number of authors (also mentioned below). In fact, theory also plays an important role but in a different context – in the sense of a theoretically well-considered research design. Haller (2002) believes that one of the main weaknesses of cross-national projects (like the WVS/EVS) is that the questionnaires are produced without a design and are not based on (preliminary) theoretical grounds. In this sense, he speaks of inductive post hoc generalisation appearing in the stage of interpreting the data.

The quote mentions Inglehart as a theoretician but not as the author of many studies based on the WVS data. In fact, this author is a true authority in the field of studying changes in values – among which he includes trust and social capital – in the context of global structural and economic processes (Inglehart, 1997; Welzel, Inglehart, Deutsch, 2006). Lately, he has been reproached for interpreting the data from cross-national

⁸ In contrast to this, two other authors in the same book dealing with the same data set (but using different exogenous variables – like the Human Development Index as an indicator of modernisation – and applying regression analysis instead of cluster analysis) arrive at the opposite conclusion, namely that just this (modernisation) theory matters, meaning there is a close connection between socio-economic development and social capital indicators (Bratkovski and Jasinska-Kania, 2004: 124, 134-35).

researches incorrectly and ad hoc and for using inadequate statistical procedures and for confusing the levels of (aggregate) analysis (Seligson, 2002; Haller, 2002).⁹

There is a similar story about Putnam who is considered to be the founder of empirical research into social capital, although mostly he himself does not use the WVS/EVS data. He has also become the target of serious criticism. What is surprising is that he is not reproached partially or for individual weaknesses, but many oppose the essence of his statement about the decrease in social capital in the USA, some even arising from the same databases (e.g. Paxton, 1999). Inglehart's problem is that in his studies on values he almost exclusively draws on the WVS data, i.e. on a certain 'deductive', outsider database while, on the other hand, Putnam is almost exclusively focused on American data from different sources and operates as an insider (national case study) researcher in this sense (Putnam, 2000). At least two researchers who used the WVS data, one from second wave and the other from the fourth wave, showed that these data do not indicate a decrease in social capital in the USA. Further, especially recent data point to an improvement of the situation as far as participation in associations is concerned (Baer, Curtis and Grabb, 2001, Dekker and van den Broek, 2005).

Let us highlight that information which will be surprising to many. It is believed that membership in traditional organisations like church organisations, parties and trade unions is decreasing. However, the results of the EVS/WVS show the opposite trend, with membership and activity increasing (in the 1981-2001 period) and, what is unusual – primarily in the US. In this country, even the number of those belonging to trade unions and political organisations grew and is higher than in most European (EU) countries. Elsewhere in Europe, growth was also registered and a fall was only recorded exceptionally. Certainly, this is in striking contradiction with the information indicating a fall in interest in trade unions and parties, or speaking of extensive secularisation. Some researchers believe that the thesis about declining social capital and civic participation is wrong as it overemphasises the old forms of sociability which are indeed on the decrease, as shown by Inglehart, and pays insufficient attention to new, less formalised forms (Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). However, the figures discredit such opinions and Putnam. Of course, it is possible that the EVS/WVS results paint an inadequate picture. Here, another question is raised, that of why is there such a discrepancy between the American and the WVS data, and which should we trust. Certainly, as far as the American data are concerned other interpretations are possible. One of the most convincing says that the character of voluntary associations itself is changing, that they are organised according to the principles of lobbying, 'advocacy groups', with a professional leadership and increasingly passive members (Skockpol, 2003).

The situation in Europe is also facing many conflicting, controversial findings and interpretations based on supposedly exact statistical calculations. This is especially characteristic of the studying of connections between different variables or indicators of social capital, for instance between generalised trust and membership in associations, or between different components of social capital and exogenous variables (level of

⁹ Haller even says this: 'Since Inglehart had changed neither his approach nor his method, and since his work – despite its evident weaknesses – continues to be quoted around the world, I think it is imperative to review it critically again and again' (Haller, 2002: 154).

economic development, level of democratisation or political culture etc.). We seem to be dealing with an immeasurable mass of conflicting analyses and conclusions, some proving the connections while others are denying the same connections.¹⁰ The spirit of empiricism is identifiable, there is in many cases a distinct absence of any wider contextual and qualitative reflection.

4. The cultural and institutional context of cross-national findings

When speaking of methodological deficiencies, one should distinguish between two levels. The first concerns weaknesses arising from comparative, cross-national research. The second level is directly connected with the issues of the conceptualisation, operationalisation and measurement of social capital. These two levels overlap in many ways; we will only highlight some characteristic aspects.

We have mentioned the quality (or, in other words, validity and reliability) of input data several times. In this regard, we distinguish between three aspects. The first concerns the question whether the data from cross-national studies reflects the situation and trends in individual countries included in comparative research. This aspect could be called *correspondence*. It is possible to check this by comparing the data from several international researches or – which is more appropriate – by comparing cross-national findings with the findings of national case studies. If there are no major deviations, we can speak of satisfactory correspondence. We have already mentioned the disparity between the American data (or the interpretation by Putnam), indicating a decrease in membership and activities in voluntary organisations, and the WVS data showing that civic participation is growing in the US, even to a greater extent than in Europe (Dekker and van den Broek, 2005). The central question should be why such divergent findings appear. However, it seems that at the moment nobody can answer this question systematically since it seems that many researchers are not used to working with controversial and contradictory findings or various data sources. This gives a bad name to the ability of sociological analysis – and especially the part researching the dynamics and trends in the accumulation and distribution of social capital – to also address tougher methodological challenges and dilemmas.

¹⁰ For instance, Delhey and Newton (2005) found out (on the broader WVS sampling) that voluntary organisations may not be particularly important for the generation of trust, and a similar opinion is expressed by Uslaner (2000). On the other side, some authors (working with a somewhat different selection of countries) argued differently: ‘Belonging to voluntary associations was positively related to social trust in 10 of 12 countries, to political involvement in 11 countries....No single negative effect was found’ (Dekker and van den Broek, 2005: 53-55). Van Deth and other co-authors (Gabriel et al., 2002: 171) argue that political involvement has very little to do with social capital: ‘...ist in keinem einzigen Land ein starkes Zusammenhang zwischen Sozialkapital und politischem Engagement empirisch zu beobachten’, also see van Deth (2000). Of course, this is in contradiction with the above quotation. Sometimes these contradictory findings and calculations are the consequence of a different selection of countries and levels of (statistical) analysis (individual level vs. aggregate or national levels).

The second aspect of data quality is *mutual comparability*; the question is whether the results obtained in one country are comparable (equivalent) to the results obtained in other countries. For instance, did the Swedish respondents in the EVS 1999/2000 understand the question about membership in religious or church organisations (question 5B) in the same way as German or Czech or other respondents. It has already been mentioned that was not the case, with the Swedish respondents probably understanding this question in a considerably different way than the others. What were the reasons for that? In the opinion of two Dutch sociologists, the problem is that Swedish citizens are ‘automatically administered as members of the Lutheran Church’ (Oorschot and Arts, 2005: 11) and understand this question as confessional adherence and not as membership in quasi-church voluntary organisations (which is the intention of the question). However, this explanation neglects the fact that the EVS questionnaire also contains a special question: ‘Do you belong to a religious denomination?’ (question 22). Seventy-six percent of Swedish respondents answered this question affirmatively, and only slightly fewer (71%) said they were members of religious or church organisations (of whom 23% declared themselves active members or members doing unpaid work). It is possible that they confused the two questions or understood them in the same way, but in 1990 they gave a completely different answer to the same question. In that year, just 11% said they were members of religious or church organisations. What happened in 1999 to make them answer differently? If we take the data from the ESS 2002 we again see the ‘normal’ picture, namely it appears that only 15% of Swedish respondents report their membership in this type of voluntary organisation.¹¹

Some authors claim that people in Great Britain erroneously or inadequately answered the question about adherence to organisations in the area of sports and recreation (or that this question was not asked correctly) (Dekker and van den Broek, 2005: 56, footnote 5). But these are more ‘exotic’ details, what our analysis comparing the EVS and ESS data revealed is much more critical, namely systematic measurement errors in the case of associational involvement in Greece.¹² The reason for that is supposed to be relatively banal, either errors in translation, biased sampling or errors in data processing (and probably not the failure to deal with country-specific arrangements or semantic-cultural problems). Regarding comparability, there are therefore many unresolved problems in the EVS like an ‘implausible low level of volunteering in Germany’ (Dekker et al., 2003: 223), a disproportion between membership and unpaid work in the British case (which only appears in the EVS and not in the ESS). What is especially critical is that findings which are difficult to explain or are contradictory do not only appear in post-communist Eastern Europe (like the high trust levels in Belarus) but mainly in Western Europe where both cross-national researches and public opinion surveys have a tradition of many years.

¹¹ A contradiction in EVS can also be established between the question about membership and that of how much time the respondents spend at church (question 6-C). Here, 70% of Swedish respondents – which is more than in many other countries – answered that they do not go to church at all. This also shows they do not have a specific connection – or that this connection is very symbolic and can be understood only in Swedish national - historical and institutional context – with the church and their organisations.

¹² Also other data sets like Eurobarometer (see Fidrmuc and Gerxhani, 2004) and the European Community Household Panel (Christoforou, 2005) confirm that associational involvement in Greece is very low.

The third aspect is the *theoretical relevance* of data. The question is whether these data form an appropriate basis for the creation of indicators and whether it is based on theoretical starting points (in our case the theory of social capital). There are also certain reservations here. Van Deth (2003) believes there should not be a situation where the data determine the interpretation or definition of social capital. Here, we can reiterate Haller's opinion that this is about post-hoc and ad-hoc generalisations, which means that the problem is in the improvisation involved in the production of a questionnaire or in the fact that the questionnaire is not based on theoretical considerations.

Errors in measurement and inconsistencies – influencing correspondence and comparability as well as theoretical relevance – largely depend on two factors. The first concerns the *technical design* of the research. This refers to the stages of compiling and translating the questionnaire (mostly from English to (other) national languages) – this aspect can only be technical but in certain situations is connected with semantic issues – the stage of sampling, and the control of fieldwork in individual countries included in the sample.¹³ Such deficiencies can be eliminated relatively easily if there is the will and agreement among the researchers co-ordinating the survey.

A greater problem involves errors in measurement concerning the comparability of results ascribed to *semantic (hermeneutic)* reasons (concerning the issues of understanding and interpreting the 'proper' meaning of a given question's wording in a survey by respondents) stemming from *idiosyncratic cultural* and/or *institutional contexts*.¹⁴ The former is especially connected with the question about generalised trust and the latter with questions asking about membership and activities in voluntary organisations, yet in many cases they are overlapping. There exist both individual and

¹³ In the last chapter of the EVS report (Halman, 2001; EVS Methodology, pp. 335-378) we find detailed information about the control procedure concerning the whole process of preparing and testing the questionnaire (the problem of translation), about compulsory, optional and country-specific questions. Also the issues of sampling, response rate and checking of reliability of data are addressed. The intention to make these aspects transparent must be welcomed. However, it can be discerned from this information that the researchers failed to take into account all relevant control measures in order to ensure reliable and valid findings. It seems that some national teams had too much freedom in deciding to conduct the control or not. For instance, the supervision of interviews was only carried out by half of the national teams, the data were not checked for logic and consistency in seven countries. It seems that national teams could use additional ('country-specific') questions and modalities. For example, we found out that the Slovenian team completed the question relating to membership in local-level organisations by adding (suggesting) the names of such organisations (for instance they added: Red Cross). It is possible that a similar finding could have emerged without such an intervention by the national team, but there are some doubts because we do not know if the other teams also made such local adaptations of the questionnaire. But it seems that this has been generally allowed. If this is associated with an insufficient control procedure, the results cannot be optimal. This also means that we **should be very careful in dealing with such adaptations, they are needed but should be made in a transparent way (each national team is supposed to report such adaptations and the related reasons)**. Even bigger questions and doubts arise regarding the WVS, where the control was much more difficult to carry out (also see Haller, 2002).

¹⁴ A very illustrative example of an idiosyncratic institutional context is the already mentioned Swedish 'church and religious organisations'. The same is true for membership in trade unions in the same country which is not entirely voluntary since it brings some very concrete (financial) benefits and this explains why in Sweden union membership is so high. A more detailed analysis of data concerning associational involvement in Belarus shows that a relatively high proportion of membership is actually focused on membership in unions (approximately 70% of all membership) and this is again not entirely voluntary membership. It is a consequence of the still existing communist tradition and social inertia which in some years (if the reforms take place) might completely disappear. For the creation of social capital such a constellation has little significance.

culturally-conditioned variations in the understanding and interpretation of the significance of interpersonal trust (most people can be trusted). What does ‘most people’ actually mean? For some, this question indeed indicates their trust in strangers while for others that is not the case, especially for those moving within narrow limits of their everyday world (Lebenswelt). We have already mentioned ‘Nordic exceptionalism’, which is also shown in a high level of trust. Certain authors have a great belief in the classic question about generalised trust and claim that it in fact measures the trust put in strangers (particularly Uslander, 2000). However, Delhey and Newton reached a different conclusion, although their analysis was based on Uslander’s thesis at the outset. When they made empirical analyses, they found that ‘...ethnic homogeneity is strongly associated with generalised trust...’ (Delhey and Newton, 2005: 324). This in fact conveys a doubt that this question does measure trust in strangers. As Scandinavian nations are among the most ethnically homogenous in Europe (in addition to the fact that these are small nations with relatively small social differences), it is logical to find that the trust of Nordic respondents concerns the segment of people who – in the sense of an ‘imagined community’ – are detected as similar, and not as strangers.¹⁵

The problems of understanding and interpretation also – as we have seen – appear in the questions about membership and activities in voluntary associations. One of the known researchers working with the EVS 1999 data even says the following: ‘...survey questions seem to be understood differently in different countries’ (Anheier et al., 2004: 98). One other author comparing the EVS and Eurobarometer (EB) data sets (as well as the EB cross-time data) states that even equivalent question wordings within the same survey repeated in certain sequences (like the EB) can be problematic since they provide quite different – sometimes also contradictory – findings. Proceeding from a very systematic (statistical) analysis, she comes to the conclusion that ‘...our measurement of associational involvement and membership is far from perfect, and scholars should be very cautious with making strong theoretical claims with weak data, especially when doing comparative analyses...however what we can do is to improve the items in the survey to be designed in the future’ (Morales, 2002: 516). Besides the problems with sampling she points out the neglect of cross-national variations in the structure of associational life, concerning the country-idiosyncratic institutional arrangements which consequently means that the question wording is not sufficiently specific for respondents who have problems in understanding or interpreting the proper meaning of the question (ibid, 2002: 515-516). Two other authors recently came to a similar conclusion stating (and hoping) that these unresolved semantic-cultural backgrounds of question wording and/or country-specific institutional context should not substantially change or reverse the validity claim of the main scores and ranking position (Dekker and van den Broek, 2005: 56).

With regard to all errors and deficiencies, one could say that taking into account the EVS/WVS data (or any other individual data set) as the only basis of empirical evidence in the analysis of social capital means exposing oneself to a serious risk of not achieving the cognitive goals set. On the other side, as far as future conduct is concerned, it is

¹⁵ The authors argue: ‘In other words, generalised trust is strongest where we have something in common with others, especially where we are from the same ethnic background...It raises the question of how generalised generalised trust actually is’ (Delhey and Newton, 2005: 324).

appropriate to listen to Haller's proposal (2002) that a team of researchers from different cultural environments should be established for the implementation of European comparative surveys in order to reduce errors occurring for cultural reasons and variable institutional arrangements. These should be researchers who do not blindly follow empiricist principles but have a sense of social hermeneutics, as established in the sociological tradition from Weber to Schutz and beyond (for a more epistemic point of view, see Cicourel, 1972; Habermas, 1971; Luckmann, 1980; and for a more empirical point of view Ruschemeyer, 1992; Alvesson and Skoeldberg, 2000, Ragin, 1987). Regarding the semantic aspects of the question about trust, it is desirable to carry out pilot sondage in the form of discussions in focus groups at the national level as well as in such composed by participants from different countries in order to find out how the trust question is being understood and what meanings are attached to it.

5. Discussion and conclusion

At the beginning we set ourselves three goals. The first was to determine the structure and distribution of social capital in the European context. Here, we encountered the problem of the quality and credibility of data obtained through comparative surveys, especially concerning the EVS/WVS database. Our starting point was the hypothesis that the use of data from a single database is problematic and that – at least in the stage of interpretation – one should strive towards triangulation, i.e. a combination of different types of data. In the end, we asked ourselves how to improve cross-national surveys, primarily regarding the investigation of social capital.

Concerning the first goal, it would probably be wrong to reach any major conclusions or make additional statistical analyses on the basis of data of questionable quality. In fact, that was not really our task. We believe that a sensible interpretation is one based on a wider contextual (qualitative) insight which, of course, takes into account corrections of errors in measurement (for example, the case of the Greek sample). In this framework, it is possible to speak of four groups with regard to the distribution of social capital at the European level. In fact, the significant differences are only discernible between the first and the fourth group. Some countries are difficult to classify, as they have borderline scores. The first group with the largest stock of social capital of course includes the Nordic countries (but Finland is also a borderline case), and the Netherlands. The fourth group consists of countries with weak social capital. This includes both countries outside the EU and EU members. Namely Poland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, the Ukraine and Turkey. If the high trust levels in Belarus is to be believed, this country could be classified between the fourth and third groups. The differences are large, for instance the ratio of Sweden to Portugal is one to eight in membership in the EVS and one to six in the ESS (if we take all memberships or one to five if we take the share of respondents who are members in at least one organisation) and one to six in active involvement.¹⁶ The southern EU members

¹⁶ One author draws attention to the relatively high proportion of active members (in relation to all members) and argues: 'Nevertheless, these figures hide to a certain extent the fact that in some Southern and Eastern European countries those people who decide to join an association more often do so in an active way' (Morales, 2004:12). This observation can be respected but the fact is that lagging behind in

Portugal and Greece according to both data sets but also Spain and Italy according to ESS actually have relatively undeveloped civil societies. It is the large lagging behind which has not been adequately explained or whose explanations have been unconvincing, for instance in the sense of path dependency (Chrisoforou, 2005).

The second group with a solid level of social capital includes (Western) continental and Anglo-Saxon countries, all of them EU members. However, it is sometimes hard to delineate the border separating the third group. While some countries are close to first group (Belgium), others are closer to the third group. Such a case could be Germany with its low level of active members in voluntary organisations (in the EVS but not in the ESS). Otherwise, besides Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the third group also consists of the Mediterranean countries Italy, France and Spain. All these three economically developed countries have lower or similar scores in active participation than the new three EU members from Eastern and Central Europe (but Italy and Spain show higher level of trust). In contrast to authors who argue that 'there are no large differences in mean scores across the regional patterns' (Oorshot and Arts, 2006: 160) we arrived at more differentiated conclusions. Between the first and fourth groups a very clear borderline can be drawn while differences between the second and third groups are not so pronounced.

It is possible to establish that there is no systematic connection between generalised trust and participation in civic organisations. As mentioned, the Scandinavian countries are an exception but the ESS indicates that this exceptionality may be losing ground (the cases of Finland and partly Denmark).

In the longitudinal sense, a fall in generalised trust is perceptible (in some places it is very drastic, in others it is not very significant). Regarding participation in associations, the situation is improving in most countries (particularly in EU members), although certain cases involve a regression.

The second highlight refers to issues concerning cross-national surveys. In connection with them, some errors and inconsistencies were found which appeared due to the inappropriate technical design of such researches and also because of semantic-cultural factors which have not been paid much attention partly in the stage of preparing and conducting the survey as well as in the phase of interpreting and generalizing of the data. A certain role is assumed to be played by country-specific institutional arrangements leading to the poorer comparability of answers concerning participation in voluntary associations.

In addition to the comparison (logical control) of two or more data sets, in the future more attention should be paid to the dialogue between the national databases or national case studies and cross-national data (see Ruschemeyer, 1991). Only such a dialogue can

associational involvement is actually increasing in these countries. With respect to the creation of social capital it can be said that a critical mass is needed in the sense of broader participation and not only an active minority.

produce a more contextual and ‘hermeneutic’ view of the quantitative findings. The inclusion of qualitative studies is also desirable.¹⁷

Concerning social capital research in a narrower sense, let us draw attention to two matters. The first refers to the expansion of the repertoire of indicators; without doubt, less formal and even virtual (internet) forms of interaction and exchange are also important. It is also a fact that different phenotype applications, for instance in studying the co-effect of human and social capital or transfer of knowledge, require different indicators to be available (e.g. co-operation between industry and institutes). Nonetheless, we must be aware that the wider use of indicators would lead to a further dilution of the already loosely-defined (‘metaphorical’) notion of social capital. This will bring up the need for a theoretical reconsideration of this notion.

On the other side, the high expectations of the explanatory potential of social capital should be eased. We must realise that the research so far conducted at best only explores the embryonic and potential aspects of these phenomena. Put differently, we know something about the accumulation and availability of this resource, but we know very little about the mechanisms of exerting an influence (spillover effects) on society and its actual utilisation and reproduction (Torsvik, 2004). This is not just about structural (networks, organisations) and cultural dimensions (norms of reciprocity, altruism, confidence...), but also about the *processual* dimension which has largely not been explored since it is only methodologically accessible by using a more complex research design based on triangulation, qualitative case studies and transdisciplinarity.

For the beginning, instead of quick measurements and routine statistical analyses in the sense of ‘hit and run’ research, greater attention will have to be paid to more reflexive approach when dealing with existing (secondary) data as well as to considerations about the provision of better quality input data. This is the sole way in which European social sciences can deal with the theoretical challenges brought about by the dynamics of European integration (enlargement of the EU) and the only way they can make their policy-relevant contribution in efforts to create an European knowledge-based area which will not only be more competitive but will also manage to preserve an adequate level of societal cohesion. The same holds from the point of view of multi-level governance where the notion of civil society and its self-organising capabilities depending on the accumulation and reproduction of social capital play a key role in maintaining cohesive and democratic order at both the national and European levels.

¹⁷ Let us cite the following: ‘More and more diverse, quantitative data would be helpful to give a better picture of trends, and more qualitative research is needed to disclose the meaning and mechanisms of voluntary involvement in relation to feelings of community and happiness and to the quality of civil society and of politics’ (Dekker and van den Broek, 2005: 56).

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