

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS: THE INFLUENCE ON THE INTENSITY OF SOCIAL TRUST

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***Abstract.** European integration is a complex process primarily because of the multitude and variety of ways in which it is achieved. In reality, European integration is not an option for the countries that are part of European social environment. In other words, a society-nation that is part of the European Union, by the very acceptance of membership, has assumed the effectiveness of European integration. The consequences of not honouring this contract are felt throughout the European social area and manifest themselves as forces that are inimical to social and economic development in the European Union. European integration is linked with social trust and how it manifests itself in the various national societies of the European Union. Social trust is a belief in the honesty, integrity and reliability of others - a "faith in people". (Cary Funk, 2007). We try to answer the question whether there is a determining relationship between social trust and European integration, whether we have a one-way or two-ways causal relationship. The phenomenon of social trust is based on the most diverse motivations, which is why we have introduced social work activities as an explanatory factor and a possible form of trust cultivation. Social work is a professional field that is mainly oriented towards the knowledge and improvement of serious problems facing a society. The basic hypothesis of this study is that social trust is based on people's confidence in the possibilities of solving or ameliorating social problems. In the end, this material succeeds in arguing the need for monitoring and the need to stimulate social trust in the European Union.*

***Keywords:** European integration, social integration, social work, social trust*

## **1. Social integration**

The issue of social integration is linked to the long-term existence of global societies. In fact, the sustainability of a social environment is largely a consequence of positive evolution. This social development must provide its citizens with two feelings that are transformed into beliefs: the prospect of a daily life in which basic needs are overcome and the prospect of a future marked by increased public comfort. The construction of global societies has as its main objective social homogenization over a large area. In this context the similarities that define communities must be emphasized, cultivating the perception and acceptance of these similarities. At the same time public opinion accepts a tolerant perspective on the differences between social spaces. These differences are often underlying characteristics of social identity, therefore they will not be abandoned. Public discourse does not aim to eliminate differences, but these differences should be understood at the level of common perception as cultural attributes

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that cannot be transformed into arguments for socio-cultural evolution and development. Otherwise, such arguments become forms of domination, ways of hierarchization, which sooner or later generate social conflict.

If we look at social integration from the perspective of the construction of a global social area, such as the European Union, we observe two forms of social integration that coexist and need to be regulated in order to ensure social cohesion. The first is the social integration of communities within the global construction. We can say that what we have here is mass integration, supported and promoted through social values. Second, but no less important, is individual integration. This is actually the form of understanding or interpretation that the citizen gives to mass integration. People's exposure to the cultural values of a social environment is different. At the same time, the capacities of understanding and interpretation are different from person to person. That is why, at the individual level, the forms of manifestation of social integration are very different. These differences make it necessary to set limits of behavioral expression, barriers that cannot be crossed without consequences. However, as breaches of behavioral limits are not usually serious forms of action requiring legal regulation, the consequences or countermeasures remain the responsibility of those around them, of others in the vicinity. This is why social activism is becoming a valuable form of civic expression which actually contributes to social integration.

## 2. Social integration of the masses

Vincent Verhagen has conducted a study on the development of the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) for cards and its role in European integration from 1992 to 2010 (Verhagen, 2015). In this context, five fundamental aspects that contribute decisively to the phenomenon of European integration are highlighted: European culture, European law, European technology, European economy and European politics.



**Figure 1.** European integration approach (Source: Verhagen, 2015). Fundamentals of mass integration

The scheme proposed by Verhagen actually highlights the main areas of mass integration. Theoretically, it seems relatively easy to implement general regulations that ensure similar functionality and results in the forms of manifestation of the five

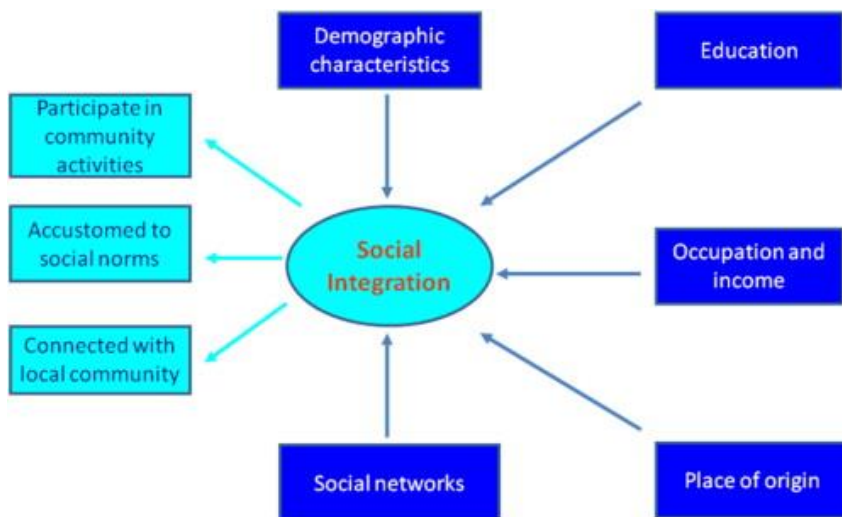
fundamental aspects that characterize a social environment. In practice, however, the particularities of the countries that make up the European Union create barriers to standardization, barriers that are difficult to overcome on the one hand, and on the other impose a kind of inertia that manifests itself in a tendency to revert to the original form, despite the regulations and strategies imposed. We rightly believe that, of the five fundamental areas that characterize the state of a society, the most difficult to operate in (from the perspective of European integration) is the cultural area. Culture is a form of establishing social identity, it is the result of hundreds of years of collective experience and is promoted at an individual level from a young age, through the education system, through the specific nature of relationships within social networks and, last but not least, through the patterns of reaction that society promotes in the context of significant life events or experiences.

At the same time, society is a vast concept, difficult to manage scientifically. That is why few authors offer clear definitions of the term. The broader or more ambiguous the object defined, the more pronounced the tendency to define by metaphor, definitions which not only fail to clarify the phenomenon, but also tend to complicate interpretation by suggesting or opening up additional avenues of interpretation. I appreciated Max Haller's proposal that "a society can be considered as a (relatively) large number of people, living on a certain territory, connected to each other by dense communication patterns and manifold, close relationships, and hold together also by social and political institutions. Usually, the nation-state has been considered the paradigmatic form of such a society. In the age of European integration and globalization, the nation-state becomes connected more and more with other states and the world as a whole. Therefore, it loses some of its autonomy" (Max Haller, 2008). We retain the expression "held together by social and political institutions" because these institutions are responsible for regulating social life. From the point of view of the integration of societies into the global space, it is precisely the organization of these social and political institutions in such a way that their functioning is in harmony with the functioning of similar institutions found in the other societies that make up the global space. In this way, we are faced with a certain decrease in the level of autonomy, but we must not forget that this autonomy is felt strictly at the level of administrative and political management, while at the level of citizens' daily lives, the decrease in the degree of autonomy can be felt at most from the point of view of obligations to comply with additional rules, which are often explained and are in the interests of the community. In the European Union there are central societies and marginal societies. They are not defined in terms of geographical criteria, but in terms of their overall economic, administrative and social performance. They are societies with greater potential and experience and they will play a more important role in the evolution of the global society. They are role models for other societies and the standard of living or lifestyle is perceived at a higher qualitative level. As a result of this phenomenon, there is little or no public awareness of the decline in autonomy, and changes or additions to social norms are perceived as natural steps in the development process, which will eventually bring them closer to a standard of living similar to that in the core societies. A legitimate and consistent question therefore arises in relation to the problems arising in the context of the construction of the global space. In other words, which of the two types of societies are easier to integrate into the global space, the core societies or the marginal ones. Here we are faced with a paradox, a contradictory situation, because the high level of social culture should facilitate integration into the global space.

*The paradox of the integration of societies into the global space:* this is also evident in the European Union. Compared to central societies, marginal societies are losing autonomy and are faced with changes in social normativity, with an increase in the number of regulations and laws in administration, which leads to a certain discomfort in everyday life and in the political and administrative management system. However, marginal societies remain easier to integrate into the global structure, precisely because there is the social motivation manifested in the desire for the marginal society to reach a standard of living comparable to that existing in the core societies. In relation to the core societies, here we find a phenomenon of national social anthropocentrism, based on economic performance and lifestyle performance, which over time have been superior to other societies. On the other hand, there is always a tendency for a number of problems in core societies to be understood as a consequence of global species-building efforts. Resilience actions and resilience funds are aimed at narrowing the gaps between core and marginal societies, but they entail costs perceived as one-way phenomena: developed societies give and less developed societies receive, so we have a phenomenon which, from the point of view of core societies, is listed under costs. The increase in costs leads to a decrease in benefits, which sporadically generates initiatives of social resistance in relation to the evolution of the global space.

### **3. Social integration at the individual level.**

Note the attempt to build global societies, which has been going on since ancient times. Empires or colonial systems are nothing but global societies. Beyond the authority supported by the army, in these cases coherent administrative rules were often imposed, often superior to local administrative specificities. Yet empires and colonies have endured under constant threat, eventually falling apart. One of the reasons for these failures should be sought in the inconsistencies between the social integration of communities and social integration at the individual level. Community integration proved insufficient and the lack of social integration at the individual level eventually led to the collapse of global systems. This is why individual motivation and the possibility of building a global identity on the part of the citizen are huge stakes for the maintenance and consolidation of global society. Social integration at the individual level is not easy to delineate or monitor. Figure 2 shows a model of social integration of the individual. The analysis of the adequacy of social integration at the individual level is first and foremost oriented towards the phenomenon of migration. In the early stages of the construction of the European global space, the phenomenon of internal migration is amplified. The greater the differences between marginal and central societies, the more intense the migration. There is therefore a directly proportional relationship between the differences between societies on the one hand and the intensity of migration on the other.



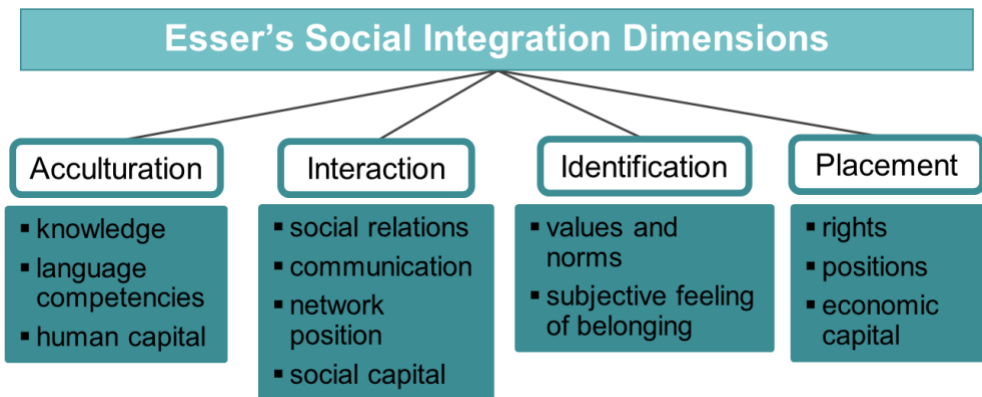
**Figure 2.** Graphical model of social integration (Source: Chen, Wang, 2015)

“Integration is a chaotic concept: a word used by many but understood differently by most.” And this is very likely to remain the case, despite the numerous studies and articles that have been and will be published on this phenomenon. Social integration of individuals is and will remain a topic of great interest in political discourse. Social integration at the individual level is a phenomenon felt and experienced by the citizen, as opposed to the social integration of communities, which is a much more abstract phenomenon from the perspective of public perception. The construction of political capital is mainly oriented towards social phenomena that are intensely felt at the individual level and easily understood by the population. The political discourse's interest in integration at the individual level has direct consequences in terms of the general opinion about this phenomenon. As a rule, political discourse covers certain segments in the debate and analysis of social issues and almost never imposes a comprehensive perspective. Figure 2 shows us five criteria for determining social integration: demographic characteristics, education, occupation and income, place of origin and social network (Chen; Wang, 2015). Among these criteria for determining social integration we have socio-demographic characteristics that are relatively easy to identify, as in the case of occupation and income or place of origin. But beyond the identification of these characteristics remains the analysis and explanation of the forms of influence, which are different depending on the situation or category in which a subject finds himself at a given time. On the other hand, it is difficult to delimit the determination criteria, such as social network and especially demographic characteristics. When we talk about demographic characteristics we are interested in those aspects that give identity to the social environment of origin, so here we have some cultural characteristics. Even if these graphical schemes provide methodological recipes for investigating social integration, the explanatory factors are complex phenomena and at the level of public perception the phenomenon of integration is difficult to determine. Nevertheless such analyses can seriously contribute to the organization of educational strategies and in particular at the level of intercultural education.

Also in Figure 2 we observe that social integration generates significant effects on phenomena such as participating in community activities, accustomed to social norms,

or connection to local community. A person's progress on these phenomena provides a possibility to assess and monitor social integration. Connection to the local community is beneficial from the perspective of social development, it stimulates social participation and the involvement of the individual in actions to improve or solve the problems facing the social environment. Social participation and connectedness to the social environment will generate a sense of trust, which is why societies in which individuals and communities are characterized by a high degree of integration will also be characterized by social trust.

Analyzing social integration at the individual level is not complete without a psychosocial perspective. We find suggestive the approach of Hartmut Esser who considers language as the key to social integration (Harmut, 2006). It is obvious that one cannot talk about good social integration outside forms of communication. We have at least a directly proportional relationship between communication and integration, if not a causal relationship. Social environments where we find large amounts of communicative expression and interaction are societies with very good chances for strong social integration. Of course forms of communication are not only positive. Even conflict contexts arise and are sustained against the background of communicative relations. I do not consider it necessary to insist on negative communication contexts because they lead to restricted communication actions, the warring parties avoid long periods of communication that consume resources and can create problems.



**Figure 3.** Dimensions of Social Integration (source: Mittelstädt, Özen, 2015)

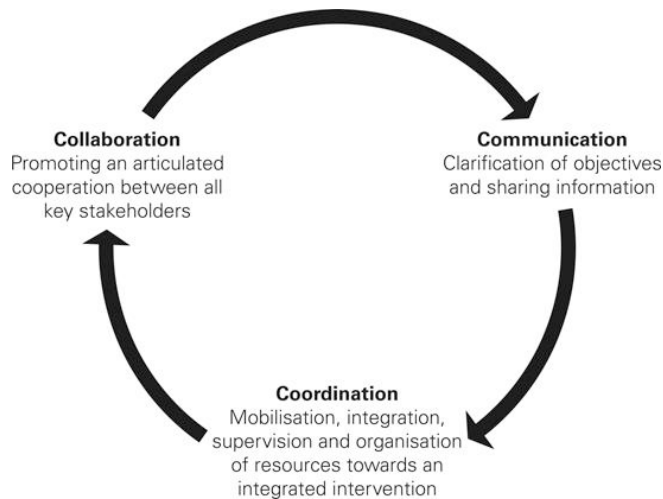
Esser's psychosocial perspective explaining the state of integration is based on four dimensions: acculturation, interaction, identification and placement. The perspective introduced by Esser is valuable because it emphasizes the importance of relationships and interactions between members of a society. In fact integration at the individual level is explained here primarily through social networks. The identification dimension refers to the acceptance of social norms and values at the individual level, which is immediately associated with a sense of belonging. In turn, this sense of belonging requires the construction of a positive identity in the relationship between the individual and society. This positive identity associated with social trust is a guarantee of the sustainability of the social environment. In other words, we conclude that the sustainability of the global society is achieved on the basis of positive identity and a sense of social trust.

#### **4. Social integration and social work**

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (IFSW, 2014)”. This definition was approved by the International Federation of Social Workers General Meeting and by the International Association of Schools of Social Work General Assembly in July 2014. What is not quite clear from this definition is that social work is mostly concerned with serious societal problems. Social development and social cohesion, social justice or human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity; are in fact core values of democratic society, priorities in social development. Linked to these, but in a radical form, are the serious problems of certain categories of people. Drug abuse, poverty, delinquency, physical disability or domestic violence are just some of the phenomena that arise in the context of social environments and are problems that need to be monitored and controlled in order to prevent their spread. These kinds of problems can negatively influence the development and evolution of societies and also involve substantial costs. These costs manifest themselves in different forms. For example, in relation to drug use, there are societies (e.g. Denmark), where addicts who have gone through several programs to overcome drug dependence and there are no satisfactory results, are given monitored access to certain psychoactive substances. There are two reasons for this measure: on the one hand, financially, the costs of rehabilitation programs are higher than the cost of the drugs on offer, but more importantly, these people who have reached a maximum degree of addiction are usually unable to support their consumption financially, and this situation is a motive for crime. In other words, this is a measure to prevent theft, robbery and violence.

From what has been said, it emerges that social assistance is intended to solve social problems that generate costs, tense situations or negative emotional contexts at social level. This erodes positive perceptions of the social space and social trust, which, as we saw in the first part of the paper, is a major obstacle to social integration. On the contrary, a good management of social problems specific to social care will provide a generalized sense of trust that works both ways or in other words for all actors involved in the process of social integration. On the one hand we have societies or citizens who want to integrate into a social environment and who will be more motivated to respect and assume normative systems and social values, because the better the perception of the social environment, the greater the motivation for integration, which is a strong impetus to respect the norms and values specific to the social environment of reference. Social integration, on the other hand, depends on the ability and willingness of those already integrated to accept, and the absence of major social problems or at least their effective control generates a feeling of acceptance, making society permeable in terms of integration processes.

The profession of social work is precisely the way of intervening in acute social problems, which are costly for the community and which are tending to increase in terms of the number of people experiencing these problems. Vera Lloyd has studied the forms of intervention that characterize community social work services and proposes a graphical representation of the intervention exercised by social workers, reproduced in this article in Figure 4 (Lloyd, 2020).



**Figure 4.** Process of intervention (source: Lloyd, 2020)

The main point suggested in Figure 4 is that the process of intervention to ameliorate social problems is not unilateral. On the contrary, the effectiveness of the social worker's actions depends on his or her ability to act in several directions simultaneously and to collaborate with the right social actors. Social work is a practice based on communication and the mobilization of those involved in the contexts in which social problems occur. Communication and mobilization are phenomena that stimulate participation and interaction between people. In a word, cooperation for mutual aid and the achievement of common goals is a social context that favors permeability from the perspective of social integration.

Moreover, welfare problems are obstacles to social integration. A positive representation of a social environment cannot be based on incomplete criteria, in the sense that, for example, income and access to good housing are not sufficient grounds for a positive feeling. If there is poverty and suffering all around, if social networks are limited and constrained by insecurity or feelings of threat, the public perception of the social environment cannot be positive, and as a result the permeability of integration is not increased. So if the social problems that social assistance addresses cannot be effectively ameliorated, integrated citizens, instead of showing tolerance and understanding for the new, will develop attitudes of opposition to integration.

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