

What holds society together ?

by

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From: Marc Coester and Erich Marks (Eds.):
International Perspectives of Crime Prevention 3
Contributions from the 3rd Annual International Forum 2009
Forum Verlag Godesberg GmbH 2011, Page 9-18

ISBN 978-3-936999-88-4

Speech by the former Federal Minister of the Interior, Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble¹

What holds society together?

What holds society together? This question has major practical significance. We are facing this question at a time of fundamental change. Of course, there has always been change, but today we are living in a time of permanent, rapid transformation boosted by global technical, economic and scientific developments. Global communication in real time, which began with radio and television, has reached a completely new dimension thanks to the Internet. Modern information and communications technologies, open markets and increasing mobility lead to ever closer global networks. Individual workflows and entire businesses have been restructured on this basis, and individual careers have become much more complex.

Globalization affects all areas of life. Our society has become more heterogeneous both in cultural and religious terms, also thanks to immigrants who have come to our country. We have learnt that diversity is not a threat, but enriches our society. However, there is the risk that people simply co-exist without any interaction and lose sight of larger issues given the wide range of individual interests. The fact that the lives of young and old people increasingly drift apart also contributes to this development.

Furthermore, modern working life demands a great deal of flexibility. Temporary work contracts, frequent job changes and relocations may weaken a person's link with a familiar social environment. The demand for flexibility often conflicts with the basic desire to have a partner and a family, to establish close ties with others, to belong somewhere and take on responsibility.

These developments have created new freedoms as well as new insecurities. People may complain about the problems these developments have brought about. However, we cannot turn back time. We have only a limited influence on conditions. For this reason, we need to adapt and prepare ourselves as best we can.

A state with a free constitutional order has only limited powers. This is a prerequisite for a life in freedom. All-inclusive powers would ask too much of the state and too little of society and its citizens. Our free social order needs citizens who assume responsibility for their lives without losing sight of the common good. Freedom and responsibility must go hand in hand. The concept of freedom enshrined in the Basic Law is based on this idea. Growing diversity, flexibility, mobility and the increasing importance of the virtual world must not lead to a situation in which we begin to neglect the greater good. We must maintain a measure of common ground, which society needs to survive and overcome new challenges. As the minister responsible

¹ At the time Dr. Wolfgang Schäuble spoke in his function as the Federal Minister of the Interior.

for constitutional matters I consider it very important to protect, maintain and promote such a free society within the spirit of our Basic Law.

Every free society requires a high degree of voluntary consensus and shared ideas about how to shape one's life and live with others. What counts most, in the end, is to maintain a feeling of community. Without emotion, for example with pure constitutional patriotism, it is not possible to integrate people so that they are willing to assume responsibility for themselves and for society. People who feel they belong nowhere and have no one who cares about them – be it their family, their hometown, a club or their faith – will have a hard time reaching a point where they assume responsibility and dedicate themselves to a specific concern. For this reason each and every free society depends on identification, on role models, empathy, common values and memories as well as dedication to free coexistence.

There are some issues where we must be vigilant and take joint action: Some parts of the elite have replaced social responsibility with a concept of freedom that only benefits them. You can also call it greed and excess. Such a tendency often goes hand in hand with a loss of confidence not only in others, but also in the public order on whose shape and form this part of the elite has major influence. We should also be concerned about the decreasing willingness to dedicate oneself to common concerns, whether in sport clubs, in the non-profit sector, in civil protection, NGOs, community action groups or elsewhere. This is often accompanied by a lack of interest in democratic decision-making processes – characterized by phrases such as “political apathy” and “voter fatigue”.

Poor education, excessive media consumption, perceived injustice, the experience of exclusion and a lack of future prospects lead individuals to withdraw from society, which in turn harms social cohesion. In public discussions on the economic and financial crisis in the past few months it has become obvious that many people are asking themselves what their place in society is. We must take this insecurity seriously. And not only members of the majority society ask themselves this question.

How we manage the challenge of immigration has a huge significance for the cohesion of our society. Ralf Dahrendorf once said that we are living in a “runaway world”: Globalization and migration offer many new freedoms, but also give rise to new forms of social conflict. He considered today's migration flows as one of the greatest social challenges. Many immigrants are torn between their desire to belong and their fear of giving up their original culture. We need to understand this and make clear that we do not want to take anything from anyone.

Immigration opens up new opportunities for our country in a globalized world. Germany today is home to about 15 million people with an immigrant background. Most of them have already found their place in our society. Many immigrants are extremely

successful at school, at university or in their jobs. They have assumed leading positions in business, science and society.

Some immigrants, however, have trouble finding their way in Germany. We see this again and again in schools and on the labour market. More children of immigrant background go to *Hauptschule* (lower-tier secondary modern school) and fewer go to *Gymnasium* (grammar school), which would qualify them for university education. More foreign students than Germans drop out of school without a school-leaving certificate. The unemployment rate of immigrants is double that of Germans.

It would be wrong to use ethnic origin to justify the poor performance of individual immigrant groups. If you study the situation in detail, it becomes obvious that under comparable social circumstances there are hardly any differences to other groups of society. I believe this is clearly an area for policy-makers to act and create the right framework conditions by providing adequate assistance to children and young people at an early stage and by strengthening parenting skills in families so that all segments of the population can advance and participate in society.

We have already done a great deal in this area, but there is still much to do. Integration is a long process involving all generations and consisting of many small steps. It requires the majority population to demonstrate openness and respect and immigrants to accept a fundamental prerequisite: the willingness to make Germany their home and to take responsibility for the integration process. The receiving society has both the right and duty to expect that immigrants will make every effort to get to know and accept certain rules and values which serve as the basis of our society. This requires sufficient language skills.

We must find a way to live together in society so that no one has to give up their cultural identity and we are open to accepting one another and feeling like part of a community. To this end, we need institutionalized permanent dialogue forums, such as the German Islam Conference I founded.

The cohesion of a heterogeneous society and the feeling of community in diversity also depend on the ability to prepare for and overcome conflicts, and on common values, such as tolerance, respect, trust and empathy. The main objective is to overcome the feeling of otherness and reservations. State and society are called upon to reduce polarization and promote integration.

We should be concerned about social trends which have little in common with civilized forms of conflict resolution, in particular the readiness among many young people to use violence and commit violent crimes and the rise in extremist attitudes and offences.

Police crime statistics show that in the last fifteen years the number of recorded offences has steadily dropped. However, there has been an increase in the number of suspects of violent crimes, such as dangerous bodily harm, rape, robbery, murder and manslaughter. This includes all age groups. However, the increase is mainly due to higher figures among young people.

Police crime statistics do not provide a full picture, because they only include reported offences. There are signs that people are increasingly willing to report crimes. However, we do not know the exact dimension of this phenomenon. And we do not know how many crimes go unreported. For this reason we need reliable studies on unreported crime. The Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony was commissioned by my ministry to conduct such a study. Some 50,000 students of grade four and nine in randomly selected counties were interviewed. The results we obtained were quite surprising and also encouraging:

Since 1998, youth violence has remained at a constant level or even decreased, in stark contrast to the dramatic rise sometimes reported by the media. These mainly positive trends are accompanied by an increase in preventive factors and the decrease of living conditions conducive to violence.

Hence, we need to take a more nuanced look at the issue of youth violence and must not be misled by reported horror scenarios. However, we must not be complacent. On the contrary, we need to focus on those factors that may encourage violence among young people. These include the experience of violence in one's family, alcohol and drug use, and the acceptance of violence or a macho culture sometimes mixed with feelings of ethnic or religious superiority. The effect of movies and computer games glorifying violence should not be underestimated either. The greatest influence on young people, however, is exerted by their immediate environment. Those who have violent friends are most likely to resort to violence themselves.

Violence is caused by many factors and follows its own specific dynamic. The use of violence, which is often directed against innocent by-standers rather than carefully chosen targets, obviously generates a feeling of "making something happen", i.e. of substantially influencing daily life at school and demonstrating one's own self-importance, a feeling usually unknown to those who use violence. Our practical work needs to pay more attention to these findings.

The trends in left-wing and right-wing extremism are also a reason for concern. Both types of extremism are directed against our society's free democratic consensus and aim at dividing and destabilizing our system. Both phenomena are a warning that all of us are responsible for protecting our freedom, democracy and the rule of law.

Left-wing extremists again demonstrated their willingness to use violence in Berlin and many other cities on 1 May this year. The brutality with which these so-called

protesters attacked the police and injured hundreds of people is terrifying.

In right-wing extremism, the “autonomous nationalists” have become a form of action with a high propensity to use violence in demonstrations – particularly against violent left-wing extremist counter-demonstrators. On both sides the main perpetrators are young people.

The problem with extremist violence is that perpetrators become radicalized because they feel uprooted, unwanted and unaccepted by society. Marginalized by society, they have hardly any resistance against the lure of rabble-rousers of all kinds. As one detective told me, “These young people are looking for something to believe in. It is only a question of who gets to them first – Scientologists, neo-Nazis or Islamists.”. Nowadays, Islamist violent offenders are also being radicalized in Germany – a relatively new trend which we are very concerned about.

We need to take action long before young people start down the path of extremism. Not only do we - the state and society - need to do something to prevent violence and extremism, we must also act so that young people at risk feel they belong to society and know: They belong to us, we need them, they can do something meaningful for themselves and society as a whole. Many of them would prefer to be part of society. This feeling is much more common than the need to display fundamental opposition.

In order to underline this need for action, the Federal Minister for Family Affairs, Mrs von der Leyen, and I as the Interior Minister launched a joint initiative intended to identify existing problems, raise public awareness for questions of social cohesion and present possible solutions. We asked ourselves: What are the foundations of our society and how can we strengthen and reinforce them in order to promote peaceful coexistence? Who are the relevant stakeholders? These are questions we need to discuss in a broad public debate. The answers could form the basis of a national strategy to promote social cohesion.

We will never be able to fully prevent violence and extremism, but through education and respect, civic education, tolerance and an effort to provide appropriate living conditions, we can encourage people to act responsibly.

It is decisive to set the right course for children and young people. Some time ago, I learnt in a presentation of a neuroscientist that children who grow up in an insecure environment are much more likely to have difficulties with socialization and finding a place in society, which can have various consequences right up to a greater willingness to use violence. This is where we need to start and promote social and emotional skills which are indispensable for peaceful coexistence. Then we will be more successful in mastering conflicts and respecting diversity.

We must bring those who are on the wrong track back into our midst. There are examples demonstrating how to reach this goal effectively. The Federal Agency for Civic Education in cooperation with an independent institution, the Violence Prevention Network, has developed a programme helping young prisoners with right-wing extremist attitudes to be reintegrated into society. This programme is voluntary and starts six months before the prisoner is released. After their release the young men receive professional assistance for up to one year. The programme's results speak for themselves: Only 7 per cent of these men become repeat offenders. I would like to see more resources going to these projects so they could be offered regularly in prisons.

This approach based on the finding that social behaviour is crucial to peaceful coexistence must start much earlier, in families, kindergartens and schools. We must support parents, whenever necessary, because a person's social life including a constructive way to deal with one's feelings and conflicts begins in families. Children and young people must have the opportunity to learn in their daily lives that aggression and conflicts are part of life. They must learn ways and means to deal with them without violence.

We are well advised to follow the principle that "prevention is better than cure". Successful prevention is more sustainable than any kind of cure. This is one conclusion of the expert opinion provided by Dr. Steffen. I also agree with her that crime prevention is a task for society as a whole involving all policy areas and all state and non-state actors. Families, clubs, religious communities, kindergartens and schools should all work together to reduce violence and extremism through comprehensive assistance at an early stage and progressive steps of sustainable prevention, before they develop further and become firmly established. This also requires close cooperation between researchers and practitioners.

We need a change of paradigm in our prevention policy and to move away from a short-term policy focusing on individual anti-violence projects towards holistic assistance at an early age. International studies show that it is necessary to start preparing children for a complex and open society at the earliest opportunity. A comprehensive strategy must be drawn up which reduces polarization and exclusion and helps young people develop a sense of belonging and integrate into society.

The Papilio project of the city of Augsburg can serve as an example of such holistic assistance at an early age. It focuses on early universal assistance for all children in kindergartens regardless of any behavioural problems or identifiable risks of criminal behaviour and violence. The project promotes social and emotional skills. It strengthens exactly those skills and attitudes which tertiary prevention has to work so hard to impart. I am convinced, and the evaluation of the Augsburg project also demonstrates this, that such initiatives strengthen the ability to solve conflicts and reinforce social responsibility in our society.

In an open society, people need to learn to assume responsibility for their own lives and settle conflicts peacefully. They must be able to experience diversity not as a threat, but as a benefit for society. In order to curb violence and extremism we must focus even more strongly on prevention and concentrate on factors which have a positive impact on social cohesion. This is decisive for a preventive security policy.

A sense of community can take root and grow best, if the preconditions for peaceful coexistence in freedom and security are present. Your conference programme shows that a vast range of offerings and activities exist in our country to pursue this objective. These include simple things such as help with daily life, assistance for people who need to see public authorities or fill in forms, leisure time activities for young people or private tutoring for neighbourhood children. Over the past few weeks and months I have seen a number of initiatives and presented two of them here, which concentrate on reintegration and the promotion of social skills. There are good and effective projects in many places. These approaches and their successes must be identified and made known to a greater public.

Your commitment to crime prevention is an important contribution to a society in which we can live in freedom and security. The initiatives and projects presented here promote peaceful coexistence in society. You all represent qualities which are essential for our democracy: close attention, dedicated commitment and constructive involvement. Thank you very much for this.

I wish your conference and your continuing efforts every success and a common impetus for the future.

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