Positive and Negative Social Capital and the Uneven Development of Civil Society in Southeastern Europe

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This article surveys alternative conceptions of social capital and presents empirical findings from research conducted in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia – Montenegro and Romania. A conceptual distinction between positive and negative social capital is made and emphasis is placed on inter-regional variation among South East European countries and on inter-ethnic aspects of social capital. Positive social capital is a necessary condition for developing civil society and for improving the quality of democracy, but a certain level of distrust towards institutions is also expected in democratic regimes. Alternative strategies to develop social capital in post-communist societies are assessed. In order to raise social capital, a combination of multiple strategies at the European, national and local levels is required.

Theoretical Framework

With the passage of time, some concepts become inflated with additional meanings until people who employ them mean completely different things, even if using the same term. ‘Social capital’ is such a concept. Associated with a variety of instances of social behaviour such as interpersonal and institutional trust, informal networks and formal voluntary associations, ‘social capital’ runs the risk of meaning too many things to many people. In this article, we discuss some conceptual issues arising from the multitude of meanings of social capital, and present some of the empirical findings of a questionnaire survey in Southeastern Europe (SEE) on social capital and civil society. Finally, we shift to policy issues and summarize alternative strategies to increase social capital in post-Communist societies where it is lacking.

Different perspectives interpret the concept of ‘social capital’ in different ways. For James S. Coleman, who coined the concept of social capital in Anglo-Saxon sociology, it is a set of norms and expectations underpinning and facilitating economic activity in the market system (Coleman 1990). Groups that have accumulated social capital can
also reap gains in terms of economic capital, in contrast to other groups having little social capital and therefore less success at accumulating economic capital. This perspective stems from mainstream American sociology and emphasizes individual and group behaviour.

We have underlined the Anglo-Saxon context in this use of the concept because ‘social capital’ has also been employed by Pierre Bourdieu in Francophone sociology (Bourdieu 1984, 1989); however, in his work, the term has a completely different meaning. According to Bourdieu, ‘social capital’ is one of the many forms of capital, including economic, cultural and symbolic. It is a social class asset insofar as members of the dominant social classes accumulate and share such capital. They form exclusive ties among themselves and, through mutual recognition and acknowledgement, reinforce their social class privileges. Thus, social capital serves for the reproduction of unequal social class relations. This perspective is influenced by Marxist approaches and social anthropology, and emphasizes the importance of social structures.

For Francis Fukuyama, an argument similar to that of Coleman can be made about societies. Some societies, in which trust abounds, eventually become more prosperous than others where trust is not widespread (Fukuyama 1995). This perspective stems from large-scale comparative sociology (of the Weberian tradition) and emphasizes the significance of value systems for economic development.

For Robert D. Putnam, who popularized the concept in political science circles, social capital involves aspects of collective behaviour beyond the norms and expectations underpinning profitable economic activity (Putnam 1993). It involves social networks of civic engagement and norms of reciprocity. Networks and norms are the sources of social trust in contemporary societies. Examples of relevant networks are choirs, cooperatives, sports clubs and political parties. Among the relevant norms, the most important is generalized reciprocity. Putnam insists on a specific variety of social capital, which he calls ‘civic community’, which is a specific way to structure collective action that proves beneficial to institutional development and the performance of democratic institutions. Civic community involves horizontal linkages among individuals, and horizontal linkages favour cooperation. They increase both the cost of defection for any individual, and the chances for collective prosperity for all individuals as a group (Bevort 1997: 241). This perspective stems from the pluralist tradition in Anglo-Saxon political science, and emphasizes political culture and the performance of institutions.

Finally, for Nan Lin, Karen Cook and Ronald S. Burt, ‘social capital’ is a form of investment with an expectation of returns. The investment is made by an individual and the returns are social. Examples of social returns are information, influence, social credentials and reinforcement of one’s own identity and recognition (Lin 2001: 6–7). This perspective stems from the sociology of organizations and networks, and emphasizes the rational, instrumental behaviour of individuals.

For the purposes of empirical research, a useful definition of ‘social capital’ would capture both its attitudinal and social structural aspects. Such a definition could be the following: social capital is a set of attitudes and relationships including interpersonal trust, trust towards institutions, and participation in formal and informal associations and organizations. In other words, social capital involves relationships,
shared knowledge, beliefs and patterns of interaction used by groups or actors (Ostrom 1994). In the next section, we consider an application of this concept to the study of post-Communist Southeastern Europe.

**Positive and Negative Social Capital in Southeastern Europe**

After the transition from Communism, Southeast European societies have experienced a period of prolonged instability as a result of successive wars in the region as well as the shock of the simultaneous transition to capitalism, the passage to pluralist democracy and—in the case of Western Balkans—the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The post-Communist states of the region have been unable to spur economic development and offer social protection. In general, the typical Southeast European state apparatus has been very weak after 1989 (Sotiropoulos 2002).

The parallel economic hardship and malfunction of political and administrative institutions may be associated with the distrust of local populations towards the political class, the bureaucracy and any social partners beyond their immediate kin, neighbours and community members. In this context, civil society in SEE has developed in an uneven fashion, which actually means that it has developed very little in terms of participation in organizations and associations. In the aforementioned insecure environment, individuals have sought to cover their social, economic and security needs by resorting to their wider families, community, racial, ethnic or religious groups. Membership in such groups has not only provided individuals with a sense of security, but also with a source of cultural identity. In addition to practical support, individuals have drawn on such groups for a reassuring set of traditional values (Gropas 2004: 64). The result is that a kind of negative social capital has developed in the post-Communist societies of SEE (and similarly in some countries of Eastern Europe).

With regard to SEE in particular, the idea of negative social capital has come out of the work of Ivan Krastev as well as the working hypothesis of Alina Mungiu-Pippidi about the nature of societies of contemporary SEE. According to the latter, the post-Communist societies of the region have been neo-traditionalist. In contrast to positive social capital, in which typical Western civil societies are embedded and on the basis of which individuals form extended political, business and social ties with other members of their society (regardless of their family or other particularistic origins), negative social capital facilitates the weaving of close-knit informal social networks. These may be envisaged as social realms composed of a limited number of individuals who trust each other and no one else. The realms are marked by ‘social fences’ (Gropas 2004): informal, but functional, borders that are difficult for non-members to trespass. By contrast, for included individual members, such borders are functional for personal security and the construction of social identity. In other words, since 1989, in the post-Communist societies of SEE, the dominant pattern of social behaviour has been particularism rather than universalism (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004).

The distinction between positive and negative social capital bears some affinities with the distinction between formal and informal capital, which has been suggested for the analysis of economic performance in post-Communist countries (Haerpfer et al.
Positive social capital is understood as reciprocal social and economic relationships that facilitate economic exchange. By contrast, negative social capital may be understood as relationships found in protective guilds or local levels that function as excluding mechanisms and do not bring benefits to the wider society.

Another similar conceptual description is the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital put forward by M. Woolcock and employed by Xavier Bougarel (Mihaylova 2004: 66). Bridging social capital consists of relationships across groups or communities, whereas bonding social capital consists of relationships within the same group or community.

Our own distinction between positive and negative social capital does not focus on economic performance, is closer to the bridging/bonding conceptual distinction and is related to the potential for civil society development. We assume that positive social capital is conducive to the strengthening of civil society. By contrast, negative social capital has exclusionary effects, limiting social ties to small-scale communities, sectoral interests and professional guilds, like-minded groups of people, and minorities sharing the same religious, ethnic or racial characteristics. Thus, if negative social capital prevails in social relationships, there are no benefits for wider civil society.

**Research Methodology**

With this distinction in mind, empirical social surveys were carried out in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia-Montenegro and Romania in 2003 by several participants in a project titled ‘Integrating the Balkans into the European Union’ (IBEU). The project was funded by the European Union and had several modules or ‘working packages’ (migration, regional cooperation, informal economy and civil society and social capital). With regard to the latter package, research was carried out by the Romanian Academic Society (SAR, Bucharest), the Centre for Liberal Strategies (CLS, Sofia), the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP, Athens) and the South East European Studies Programme (SEESP, Oxford University). In order to measure social capital, researchers employed variables measuring interpersonal trust, trust in institutions, participation in associations and interest in politics (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004; Ganev et al. 2004).

This set of variables is akin to the mainstream of comparative research on social capital. The questionnaire used in the survey does not conceive social capital either in the context of an instrumental logic (e.g., in the way Lin et al. 2001 do) or in the context of a social class domination logic (e.g., as Bourdieu 1984 used to do). Rather, the questionnaire echoes the theoretical perspectives of Anglo-Saxon sociology and political science. At the same time, it follows the way of past research, such as the World Bank’s integrated social capital questionnaire.

In Romania the survey was carried out by the Centre for Regional and Urban Sociology and supervised by SAR (Bucharest). In the rest of the SEE countries it was carried out by BSS Gallup International and supervised by CLS (Sofia). The samples were stratified random samples of the general population. The sample included 1,021 respondents in Bulgaria, 1,021 in Macedonia, 1,600 in Romania, 816 in Serbia and 402
in Montenegro. (Although Serbia and Montenegro constitute a single independent state, for analytical purposes Serbs and Montenegrins were sampled separately.) In all cases, the same research design was used.

The research was based on a common questionnaire. Most of the questions were ‘closed’, and the main themes were various forms and measures of trust. Typical questions included inquiries about trusting most other people as opposed to trusting only one’s own kin; trusting the government, the parliament and the president of the republic and trusting the rest of the institutions such as, for instance, the justice system and the local government; and participating in formal and informal collective activities, such as being a member of an association or taking part in a community activity.

While the general impression from the survey is that of a general distrust of other people and institutions, some findings are particularly interesting because they convey a differentiated image of post-Communist SEE societies. In what follows, we will mention which of the five groups of respondents (Bulgarians, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Romanians or Serbians) clearly differed from the rest in comparative terms with regard to each of several themes of our survey. In other words, we will focus on which of the five groups responded positively or negatively to particular questions by a larger percentage than the other groups.

Some Empirical Findings

Compared to the rest of SEE individuals, Serbs and Macedonians claim to a larger extent that they have been cheated by others and keep their word only to those who deserve it. It also seems, on the basis of the survey, that Bulgarians and Macedonians believe that ‘only your kin can be trusted’ to a much larger extent than Romanians, Serbs and Montenegrins (Table 1). This does not mean that the latter three groups believe that most people can be trusted: Serbs and Montenegrins, for instance, appear to have very low trust of most other people. In terms of the conceptual framework used in this article (positive versus negative capital, functional social borders, circumscribed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Interpersonal trust (percentage of respondents who fully agree or agree with the statements)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Romania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only your kin can be trusted.</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people can be trusted.</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our people can be trusted more than foreigners.</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would rather deal with people I know than with strangers when renting an apartment.</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data provided by Romanian Academic Society (SAR) on the basis of survey research conducted by BSS Gallup International, the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia) and SAR in 2003.
social realms), people who show such low trust function in circumscribed, small-scale social realms. In other words, the invisible social borders within which individuals function in their social interaction seem to be quite circumscribed generally in SEE. This is particularly the case in Bulgaria and Macedonia, where such borders often seem to coincide with the outer rim of one’s own extended family.

Perceptions about the rule of law may reveal the extent to which the formal adoption of liberal constitutional principles does not necessarily lead to their substantive implementation. This may have two aspects: the extent to which individuals perceive that authorities are bounded by the law, and the extent to which individuals themselves feel bounded by the law. With regard to the first aspect, at least half the Romanian and Bulgarian respondents believe ‘all are not equal in front of the law’. Regarding the second aspect, the majority of Macedonians and almost half of the Montenegrins believe that ‘only good laws should be respected’, while the majority of Bulgarians and Macedonians claim that ‘laws should not be barriers’ to people’s attempts to accomplish something (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004: 57). In the same vein, Bulgarians and Macedonians agree that ‘some people are above the law’ to a larger extent than the rest of the respondents. Among the ‘people who are above the law’, ‘politicians’ and ‘the rich’ stand out (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004: 58).

This set of themes is reiterated in the questions about trust in key institutions (Table 2). Only a small minority of the Romanian, Serbian and Macedonian

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Romania</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Serbia</th>
<th>Montenegro</th>
<th>Macedonia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>President</td>
<td>41.0</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>49.9</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>23.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosecutor</td>
<td>30.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post office</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone state company</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>28.0</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health system</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>50.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax office</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public television</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>46.9</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>61.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data provided by Romanian Academic Society (SAR) on the basis of survey research conducted by BSS Gallup International, the Centre for Liberal Strategies (Sofia) and SAR in 2003.
respondents are content with the performance of the courts in their country. Among all relevant institutions, Romanians trust political parties, parliament, the courts and the prosecutor, the least. Compared to the rest of the respondents, Serbians and Macedonians express much more discontent with the performance of the courts, parliament and local government in their countries. The problem with the legitimacy of the courts notwithstanding, the most important finding, however, is the difference in trust shown towards administrative institutions in contrast to political institutions. Elected political institutions (e.g., parliament, the government) enjoy much less trust compared to other institutions whose management is appointed or consists of professionals (e.g., the army, the police, newspapers).

In this research, the strength of civil society is measured by the percentage of respondents who are members of a formal or informal organization and the corresponding percentage of those who have recently attended a community or political activity. While on all these counts membership and participation are generally very low, Serbs and Montenegrins clearly stand out as participating in organizations or activities to a much larger extent than the rest of Southeast Europeans (Mungiu-Pippidi 2004: 58). By contrast, Bulgarians and Macedonians seem to engage the least in civic participation. This is an indication of an inter-regional variation—namely, the uneven development of civil society. Compared to Serbia and Montenegro, where no clear pattern is visible, people in Bulgaria and Macedonia show more trust if they reside in smaller communities (e.g., villages, small towns) than in larger communities (e.g., urban centres) (Ganev et al. 2004).

The aforementioned survey research on social capital has shown that there are probably functional social borders within each SEE society, not only on the grounds of attachment to one’s own extended family or the local community or the propensity to join organizations and collective activities, but also on the grounds of ethnic origin (Ganev et al. 2004). In Bulgaria, compared to the general population, the Roma show comparatively low levels of all kinds of trust, but also comparatively higher levels of civic participation. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria shows the same tendencies, but seems to trust Bulgarian political and administrative institutions very little. In Macedonia, the Albanian minority shows comparatively higher trust in kin and a higher propensity to participate in informal organizations compared to the rest of the population.

More importantly, the vast majority of Macedonians agree with the statement ‘there are ethnic groups within our borders which pose a threat to our sovereignty’ (Table 3). Interethnic differences in trust and civic participation are much less pronounced in Serbia and Montenegro. Compared to the general population in Serbia, Muslim Serbs show comparatively higher trust towards other people, while Serbs of Hungarian descent are more active in civic organizations. Compared to the rest of Montenegrins, Muslims and Albanians show less trust towards people of other countries/nations or towards ethnic groups. Also, Serbs who believe that ‘there are ethnic groups within our borders which pose a threat to our sovereignty’ are twice the number of Montenegrins who believe so (Table 3). In Romania, residents of regions with the highest ethnic homogeneity, such as Moldova (which is also a poor region), trust other people much
less and their kin much more than residents of ethnically-mixed regions. Finally, about a third of Romanians (i.e., a lot more than the corresponding percentage of Bulgarians or Montenegrins, which is 25 per cent) believe that ‘there are ethnic groups within our borders which pose a threat to our sovereignty’.

Although a different long-term project based on periodic panel studies would be necessary to offer confirmed empirical findings, some patterns may be discernible on the basis of this survey research. Bulgaria and Macedonia seem to be cases where functional social borders are somewhat more clearly drawn around one’s own kin group or community. We may also hypothesize that, compared to the rest of SEE, functional social borders in Serbia and Montenegro extend further beyond one’s own kin or neighbours, and include individuals of similar status or interests with whom one participates in collective action. In all SEE countries, and particularly in Bulgaria and Macedonia, functional social borders of trust and distrust separate ethnic and religious minorities from the rest of population.

In addition to the research summarized above, there has been a lot of research on social capital and civil society in post-Communist Eastern and Southeastern Europe in recent years. There is a dominant thesis claiming the following: because social capital is low and civil society is weak in post-Communist societies, democracy is of low quality and political institutions perform much below the optimum level (Rose 1994 Howard 2002). The other side of the coin of this thesis is that where civil society has become stronger in the post-Communist world, democracy has developed too (Green 2002). On the other hand, there is research contradicting the above thesis. Dowley and Silver claim that when using aggregate measures, there is no positive correlation between social capital and democratization. It is only at the individual level of analysis that a positive correlation is observed between social capital and individual attitudes supportive of democracy (Dowley and Silver 2002: 524). On the whole, however, most research concludes that there is a lack of social capital and an underdevelopment of civil society in post-Communist Eastern Europe (e.g., Tempest 1997, Elster et al. 1998, Mishler and Rose 2000, Tismaneanu 2002, Giatzidis 2002). In the next section, we summarize and discuss seven possible strategies that may serve to ameliorate the general condition of low social capital and weak civil society in SEE.
Strategies to Develop Social Capital

If trust is weak and social capital sparse, what is to be done to increase them? There are several responses to this question. The responses constitute strategies to increase social capital. Obviously any such endeavour is linked to reform at various societal levels. Increasing and, even more so, transforming social capital (from being negative to positive) requires resources and commitment on the part of ‘social engineers’, who may attempt this increase, which takes a lot of time. The level of resources, commitment and time devoted to the increase of social capital depends on the strategy selected to pursue such an endeavour.

Most strategies involve large-scale social change and, for that matter, face high costs and low probabilities of success. Some strategies are out of the question; take, for instance, the observation that Protestant and Confucian societies consistently show higher levels of interpersonal trust than Christian Catholic and Christian Orthodox societies (Inglehart 1999). The correlation between type of religious dogma and level of interpersonal trust may be spurious: one should control for level of economic development, historical traditions of associationism and so on. Even if this correlation is not spurious, it would be out of the question to suggest a wholesale change of the dominant religious dogma in societies with low levels of trust, such as the post-Communist societies of SEE.

Other responses to the problem of how to increase trust may be more realistic and couched as strategies of reform. A first strategy may be called ‘top-down’, while a second strategy, ‘bottom-up’ (Offe 1999). The first strategy is institutional development, which means that initially a set of political and administrative institutions are created and then progressively acquire legitimacy by showing a record of efficiency, effectiveness, accountability, responsiveness and transparency. Relevant examples are the foundation of reliable legal institutions such as the justice system, and the safeguarding of human rights for all, including powerless groups and minorities. If this happens, then it is expected that trust towards institutions will increase.

A first counter-argument opposing this strategy is that an increase in efficiency would not bring about an increase in trust towards institutions. As shown in Table 2, it is mostly representative and political institutions rather than administrative institutions that suffer from lack of trust. While the reform of public administration is pertinent, improvements in the functioning of political institutions such as the central government, parliament and the courts are also required. Higher subjective evaluations by individual citizens of the performance of administrative institutions may not lead to an increase in social capital as the problem of public discontent and distrust lies in particular with the politically accountable institutions. A second counter-argument with regard to this strategy is that institutional development at the level of the state may lead to the creation of overbearing institutions that may stifle individual and civic initiatives springing up from the level of society. Relations of trust cannot be fully produced ‘from above’ (i.e., by the state). State intervention in social relations beyond a certain threshold may prove dysfunctional for social trust, as has been the case with trust in societies under Communist rule.
The second strategy is the development of individual participation in voluntary associations and community projects. Citizens may come to trust other citizens beyond their immediate kin, neighbourhood and professional circles. Interpersonal trust rises and with the passage of time is expanded in concentric circles until it is transformed into trust in political and administrative institutions. In Eastern Europe before 1989, relevant examples were cases of collective mobilization such as Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia and Solidarity in Poland (Warren 1999): instances of collective mobilization and participation in associations, which, of course, did not increase trust in the institutions of the Communist state. However, they helped increase interpersonal trust among participants and trust in new institutions, such as dissident movements.

A third strategy is economic development. The idea behind this strategy is that with the economic advancement of a society as a whole, there is also an increase in individual resources including personal wealth, status and knowledge. This leads to a sense of subjective well-being. This sense, in turn, is translated into higher levels of interpersonal trust. By contrast, economic decline and increasing scarcity of resources are related to a decline of trust because limited resources are to be distributed among the same number of individuals who previously enjoyed prosperity. However, the relationship between prosperity and trust is not linear. The decline of trust in advanced industrial societies, including the United States, indicates that—above a certain threshold—higher prosperity may also mean lower institutional trust (Warren 1999: 8). An explanation for this paradox may be that prosperous citizens become more demanding of their governments than they used to be in the past when they trusted government to spur and monitor economic development or when they feared government because they felt poor and powerless.

A fourth strategy is an increase in both hard and soft security. Clearly, uncertainty about the national frontiers of a country is associated with low trust in institutions. Obviously, large-scale national wars, civil wars and even recurrent border skirmishes, clashes between armed gangs and domestic political violence, dampen trust. The same holds true with uncertainty about soft security, including personal safety, job security and the value of currency, conditions of hygiene and the natural environment, the state of basic infrastructure and, generally speaking, the predictability and prospects of everyday life. The point is that ‘those whose lives are more insecure can less afford to trust, since for them betrayed trust is relatively more consequential. On the other hand, the rich in resources can afford to trust, and when they do trust, they also benefit’ (Warren 1999: 12). In other words, economic prosperity, security and trust are closely linked. A counter-argument to the fourth strategy is that, by itself, economic prosperity (i.e., higher rates of economic growth) may not bring about a concomitant rise in trust. In SEE as in the rest of the contemporary world, as long as governments do not include in their agenda the aim to redistribute at least part of the wealth being created, people who belong to the middle- and low-income strata will continue to distrust institutions and feel insecure. For trust to increase, the value of economic growth should be balanced by sincere efforts to create and safeguard solidarity and social cohesion. Obviously, the last two strategies (pursuing economic development and security) are closely intertwined.
A fifth strategy is to instill altruistic trust in society, for instance, through socialization and formal education. The argument is that in every individual there are moral resources that can be tapped. On the part of each individual, the increase of trust would require them to take the risk of forging new social relations beyond one’s ability to predict the outcome of these relations (Mansbridge 1999). Developing altruistic trust would require the deployment of moral sanctions against those who would defect, as well as demonstration of the benefits of respect for and virtuous actions towards other members of one’s society. This is clearly a strategy that is very difficult to implement, requiring long-term and concerted efforts on the part of associations, local communities, mass media and schools.

A sixth strategy is to reinforce local institutions. This strategy is not identical with administrative decentralization nor does it exactly coincide with the ‘bottom-up’ strategy mentioned above (Strategy 2). Rather, it may involve the distribution of incentives to build new small-scale institutions such as business enterprises and social services centres (Rose 1994: 29). In other words, this strategy focuses on small-scale and gradual building of trust at the local level rather than large-scale nationwide civic initiatives ‘from below’. However, a counter-argument disputing this strategy claims that the development of civil society and social capital at the local level is impeded for a number of reasons. These include familial egoism, the powerlessness of local officials and the lack of concern shown by the central governments of post-Communist countries for local community customs and norms (Skapska 1997: 158–159).

A seventh and final strategy is European Union-driven change towards the development of civil societies. This is a strategy coming from the external international environment of SEE that ideally produces positive results for selected countries on their way to accession to the European Union (EU). The EU has set the development of robust civil societies as a major objective for the accession countries of the region (Bechev and Andreev 2004). In practice, this strategy has informed EU-driven processes such as the Stabilization and Association Process involving selected countries of the region, as well as specific EU-funded projects such as CARDS. It is too early to judge whether external pressure on the part of the EU has borne any fruit. However, the strategy is already a part of the frame of mind of decision-makers in Brussels and the capital cities of the region under study.

Conclusions

In this article, we have argued that social capital and civil society are intertwined in the sense that social capital is understood as trust in other people and institutions. Increased social capital is translated in the propensity to join voluntary associations and to trust political and administrative institutions. This positive kind of social capital is contrasted with negative social capital wherein people trust only a small set of individuals with whom they have kinship, local or particularistic bonds. Negative social capital also means that people distrust political and administrative institutions. Thus, sets of invisible borders cut across social relations, constituting narrow enclaves of social interaction. The borders may be socially functional for the economic and
political agents and the privileged individuals who partake in the above enclaves, but are dysfunctional for society as a whole. The reason is that borders give rise to particularistic networks that reproduce distrust (i.e., negative social capital) and become the dominant mechanism through which social interaction takes place. Networks advancing particularistic interests operate as parallel, narrowly defined communities of interest within the larger social and political system.

Beyond particularistic networks of negative social capital, the pattern of invisible borders of social interaction is indirectly reflected in sets of attitudes of the general population. The relevant attitudes of individuals reflect the illegitimacy of institutions, the suspicion and cynicism which prevail in social encounters, and the disrespect for rules and widespread non-compliant behaviour reported in SEE. However, such attitudes do not imply that there is ‘something wrong’ with Southeast European peoples. Similar attitudes are widespread in other transition societies. Bulgaria and Romania do not lag behind other former Central and East European Communist countries such as Hungary and Poland in terms of trust towards political and administrative institutions in general; whereas Greece shows levels of interpersonal trust lower than those of most post-Communist SEE countries (evidence from the European Social Survey of 2002 and the project ‘Democratic Values in Central and Eastern Europe’ of 2000; see Pollack et al. 2004: 209; Malnar and Bernik 2005: 2, 7, 8). It should be noted that a certain amount of distrust towards institutions is common, if not also necessary, in contemporary democracies. In contrast to authoritarian political regimes, distrust is expected in democratic regimes.

Our research has highlighted that there is generalized low trust in people (interpersonal trust) and even lower trust in institutions (social trust). Distrust in political parties and parliament, on the one hand, and trust in the church and the military, on the other, are trends observed not only in SEE, but also in other East European countries such as Hungary and Poland. In short, SEE is not a world apart from the rest of Europe, and further research should be able to establish grades of differentiation among and within countries (e.g., among ethnic groups). For instance, in the main body of this article we have argued that, with regard to social and interpersonal trust, there is intra-regional variation among Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia and Montenegro.

As far as trust in institutions is concerned, it is better to distinguish between specific political and administrative institutions than to lump all institutions together. This is so because, while social trust in general is indeed low in SEE, trust towards political institutions is markedly lower than trust in administrative institutions. The way out of the impasse created by particularistic ties in neo-traditionalist societies such as those of the region under study may be sought in the seven alternative strategies suggested in this article in order to increase the available positive social capital. Strategies aimed at restraining the spread of negative social capital may be prioritized as follows: first, the increase of legitimacy of the most important political institutions and the building of political accountability; second, the reform of public administration and the empowerment of local government; and, third, the promotion of political participation of citizens in civil society initiatives.
In conclusion, it is difficult to say which single strategy will bear more fruit with regard to social capital development. Probably, none of these strategies is—by itself—adequate to bring about an increase in social capital. At the same time, all of the strategies are too vague. We could set two criteria that policy recommendations should fulfill. The first is the complementarity of suggested strategies, and the second is the specificity of the policy measures to be suggested. Strategies targeted at increasing positive social capital may be formed at the EU, national and local levels, and it is the task of collective actors at all these levels to work together in order to uplift SEE out of its current state.

References


