

EGOISM AND SOLIDARITY IN A SHRINKING SOCIETY

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Abstract. *The article deals with some social and economic drivers of demographic change in Bulgaria. Migration of socially vulnerable groups which represents a significant proportion of overall migration can be explained by a failure of basic mechanisms of solidarity in society. Redistributive solidarity at the level of the whole society and solidarity between generations are given as an example. The case of using the EU funds in Bulgaria illustrates inequality generating territorial distribution, which cannot but reinforce migration to more urbanized regions within Bulgaria and emigration. The result is massive loss of working age generations and rapid ageing of the population. In the last section a modified simulation of income distribution in an artificial society and real empirical distributions of incomes in Bulgaria are used to illustrate some possible effects of ageing on poverty and inequality. The key conclusion is that Bulgaria needs to rethink its policies designed to serve a young, homogenous and self-reliant society. Bulgarian society is shaped by rather disruptive demographic forces generating inequality and ageing, which require a much stronger emphasis on solidarity.*

Key words: solidarity, demographic change, European funds, ageing, inequality

This article discusses the severe shortage of solidarity in our society as one of the possible reasons for the ongoing unfavourable demographic processes: migration of vulnerable groups as a result of socio-economic coercion, declining population and high levels of poverty and inequality that may even increase further.

I am trying to argue that part of the migration processes, namely the one that gives rise to profound social problems and marginalisation can be explained by a failure of the main mechanisms of solidarity in society. Dysfunction happens both on a micro level in compactly populated territorial units and at the macro level in society as a whole. To support my point, I give the example of the distribution of EU funds in Bulgaria. The EU funds are expected to produce a certain effect of social and territorial cohesion in a country whose system of redistribution is not particularly attuned to tackle poverty and inequality and which has altogether regressive components in its tax system.

The final section examines the impact of a declining and aging population on inequality and poverty. The reasoning is illustrated with a modified version of one of the models in the so-called artificial societies and with empirical data on cohort inequality in Bulgaria.

The main conclusion from the observations is that our society may need to change its priorities. To date we have created incentives for a young and socially homogeneous society in which everyone cares for themselves. Instead, it is necessary to get prepared for a society that will need strong solidarity between generations and between different social groups.

TYPES OF SOLIDARITY AND OVERALL DEFICIT OF SOLIDARITY

Solidarity is a concept related to many other concepts that have both ethical and wider social and economic content. Solidarity is empathy, readiness to help, empathy, a force binding individuals into groups. In actions of solidarity individuals invest time, energy and other resources to help each other. Solidarity can most fruitfully be defined precisely as a preparedness to share resources with others through personal contribution to those in struggle or in need or through taxation and redistribution organised by state (Stjernø: 2005).

Solidarity is undoubtedly relevant to the preservation of a group or community. Solidarity is a form of connectedness, either direct or indirect, with the other group members. According to a well-known axiom of the theory of social networks, strong connectedness, which we can interpret as the number and intensity of relationships with other members of the group increases the duration of group membership and reduces the likelihood of leaving the group, while ties to individuals who are members of other groups tend to reduce the duration of membership (Thye and Lawler: 2002, 5).

Individuals that are highly integrated into their group through high connectivity can be said to take in some sense a central position in the group niche, while less integrated individuals occupy peripheral or marginal position. The idea of niche seems very productive in this sense. The concept was taken from environmental studies and quite fruitfully introduced in the social sciences (e.g. Popielarz & McPherson: 1995). Every group has its own spatial or structural kernel. The members of the group closer to the kernel have much more relations to other members of the group and fewer relations to members of other groups. This makes them much more likely to stay longer in the group.

Relations at micro social level, between what we might call micro generations occur mainly in the family or among close relatives. Macro-level relations are happening in society between macro generations or whole cohorts. Some call this formal or cold solidarity. Cold solidarity such as the payment of social security contributions or taxes which will benefit poorer members of society is aimed at fellow citizens whom one does not know (de Beer and Koster: 2009, 21). Relationships in small settlements or other territorial communities stand in between. They share some of the characteristics of personal microsocial intergenerational relations and some of the characteristics of the relationship between macro generations in the big society. For example, within communities people generally know each other personally and have respect for their fellows, but on the other hand, even within small communities some decisions require representation or forms of collective bargaining, which do not exist in the family.

People may depend on each other in two ways. They may depend on someone else because they cannot provide for themselves or because they need each other to achieve common goals. On this basis we can distinguish unilateral and reciprocal solidarity. Unilateral solidarity is directed from one side of the relation to the other, in reciprocal solidarity there is an element of reciprocity and mutual assistance, which may not necessarily be symmetrical (de Beer and Koster: 2009, 18).