

Social participation and social isolation

2010 edition

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Over the last years, important progress has been made in EU-SILC. This is the result of the coordinated work of Eurostat and the NSIs, *inter alia* in the context of the EU 'Living Conditions' Working Group and various thematic Task Forces. Despite these significant achievements, EU-SILC data are still insufficiently analysed and used.

In this context Eurostat launched a call for applications in 2008 with the following aims:

- (1) develop a methodology for the advanced analysis of EU-SILC data;
- (2) discuss analytical and methodological papers at an international conference;
- (3) produce a number of publications presenting methodological and analytical results.

The 'Network for the Analysis of EU-SILC' (Net-SILC), an ambitious 18-partner Network bringing together expertise from both data producers and data users, was set up in response to this call. The initial Net-SILC findings were presented at the international conference on 'Comparative EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions' (Warsaw, 25-26 March 2010), which was organised jointly by Eurostat and the Net-SILC network and hosted by the Central Statistical Office of Poland. A major deliverable from Net-SILC is a book to be published by the EU Publications Office at the end of 2010 and edited by A.B. Atkinson (Nuffield College and London School of Economics, United Kingdom) and E. Marlier (CEPS/INSTEAD Research Institute, Luxembourg).

This methodological paper is also an outcome from Net-SILC. It has been prepared by Orsolya Lelkes (European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research). Gara Rojas González was responsible at Eurostat for coordinating the publication of the methodological papers produced by Net-SILC members.



It should be stressed that this methodological paper does not in any way represent the views of Eurostat, the European Commission or the European Union. The authors have contributed in a strictly personal capacity and not as representatives of any Government or official body. Thus they have been free to express their own views and to take full responsibility both for the judgments made about past and current policy and for the recommendations for future policy.

This document is part of Eurostat's *Methodologies and working papers* collection, which are technical publications for statistical experts working in a particular field. All publications are downloadable free of charge in PDF format from the Eurostat website:

([http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/income_social_inclusion_living_conditions/publications/Methodologies and working papers](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/income_social_inclusion_living_conditions/publications/Methodologies_and_working_papers)). Furthermore, Eurostat databases are available at this address, as are tables with the most frequently used and requested short- and long-term indicators.

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Social participation and social isolation

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Abstract: There is little variation in the total level of social contacts: over three quarters of the population meet relatives or friends at least once a month in all the countries. There are major differences with regard to the intensity of these contacts. The Mediterranean countries tend to be among the most 'social', especially Cyprus, Portugal and Greece, where about 40% or more meet friends on a daily basis. Friendship ties appear to be nurtured more than family ones: in the majority of European countries, people are more likely to maintain close contact with friends than with relatives.

A number of former Communist countries tend to have a relatively small politically active population.

People with more social engagements tend to report higher levels of happiness or life satisfaction.

In 2006, 7% of EU citizens were found to be socially isolated: never meeting friends or relatives, or not being able to receive help if needed. Social isolation increases in old age and it is higher among those who are at risk of poverty.

Keywords: social participation, social isolation, risk of poverty, EU, social exclusion, happiness

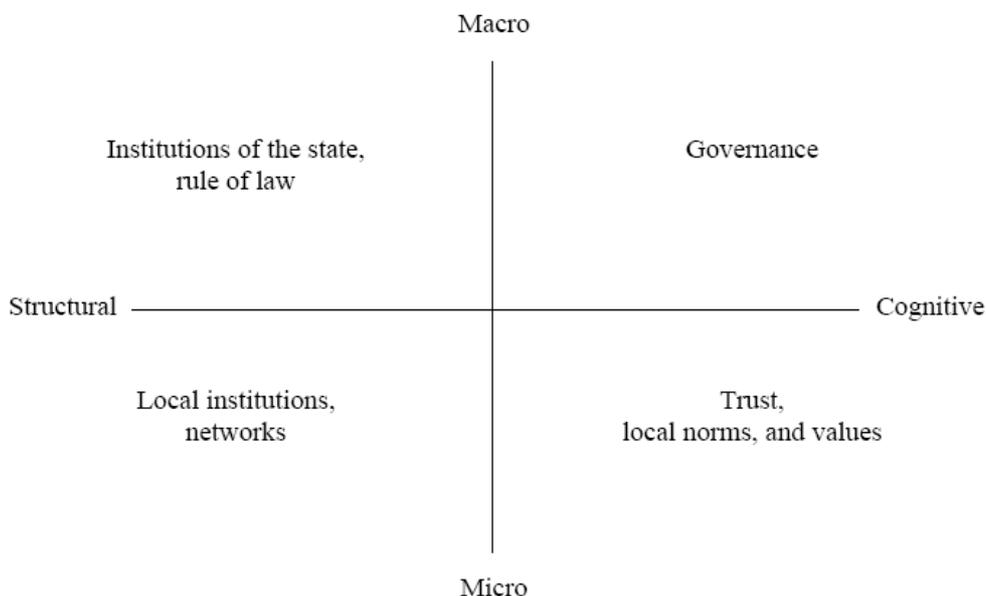
¹ I am grateful for comments received from Tony Atkinson, Conchita D'Ambrosio, Eric Marlier, Pieter Vanhuysse and colleagues at the European Centre.

1. Introduction

A possible interpretation of the award of the 2009 Nobel Prize for Economics is that it rewarded research on social participation. Perhaps few might have anticipated this outcome, especially within the discipline of economics. Why is it relevant for economics? As Elinor Ostrom (1990) argues, economic governance of common property resources can be based on the cooperation of individuals. Beyond simply thinking in terms of the market (a collective of selfish, rational individuals) versus state, privatisation versus nationalisation/regulation, as many economists might still do, Ostrom shows how self-governing situations of individuals may be successful. In her book entitled 'Governing the Commons' she describes how individuals may pursue joint benefits rather than their individual welfare.

What is social capital? There are many different interpretations of this in the literature. A micro level concept of social capital is associated with Putnam (1993), who views social capital as social networks, 'horizontal associations' between people. By including interaction between social groups rather than just individuals, Coleman (1980) introduced a vertical component to social capital. The broadest interpretation may be ascribed to Olson or to Douglas North, whose view of social capital includes the macro-level social and political environment, formalised institutional relationships, including the political regime, civil and political liberties, and also the rule of law (see Figure 1 for an overview).

Social capital can be seen as a resource 'that can be used by the actors to realize their interests', and thus it 'facilitates productive activity' (Coleman 1990, pp. 304-305). Social capital can be regarded as a goal in itself, as social relationships and interpersonal trust have proved to bring happiness to people's lives (Helliwell 2006). Marriage has the strongest effects (both in a positive and a negative way), but friends tend to be the source of companionship, and are leisure partners (Argyle 1999). People with stronger support networks were found to live longer (ibid, p. 362). Granovetter (1973, 1983) distinguishes between 'strong ties' which provide emotional support, and 'weak ties' (acquaintances) which have a broader reach, and thus can be more useful in providing information or access to resources (e.g. jobs) or organizing collective action. Note, however, that social networks can also have adverse effects on individuals (mafia, gangs), and can even create 'epidemics' of obesity, smoking and substance abuse (Christakis and Fowler 2009).

Figure 1: Dimensions of social capital

Source: Grootaert and Bastelaer (2001)

An OECD document produced in the year 2000 states the following: ‘There is still no consensus, however, on which aspects of interaction and organisation merit the label of social capital, nor on how to measure it and how to determine empirically its contribution to economic growth and development.’ (OECD 2000, p. 43)². Although many would perhaps still agree about the lack of consensus related to the concept of social capital, much has happened in recent years. The OECD itself has become actively involved in novel ways of measuring the progress of societies³, marked by a series of events⁴ and publications.

The National Accounts of Well-being developed by the UK think tank, New Economics Foundation, which include various measures of ‘supportive relationships’ and ‘trust and belonging’, have also attracted much attention (2009).

² For a reading list on measuring social capital, see e.g. the website of the Social Capital Gateway: <http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/NV-eng-measurement.htm>

³ For more information, see the Global Project on ‘Measuring the Progress of Societies’ homepage: www.oecd.org/progress.

⁴ The 3rd OECD World Forum is held in Busan, Korea, on the 27-30 October 2009.

A recent report by the 'Stiglitz Commission' (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009) includes 'social connections and relationships' as one of the dimensions of well-being, next to material living standards (income, consumption and wealth), health, education, personal activities including work, political voice and governance and the environment (present and future conditions). The recommendations of the Report include the following:

- Shift of emphasis from measuring economic production to measuring people's well-being.
- Quality of life depends on people's objective conditions and capabilities. [...] In particular, substantial effort should be devoted to developing and implementing robust, reliable measures of social connections, political voice, and insecurity that can be shown to predict life satisfaction.
- Quality-of-life indicators in all the dimensions covered should assess inequalities in a comprehensive way. (ibid, pp 12-15)

The World Bank increasingly supports participatory and 'bottom-up' approaches to development. The Bank measures the role of social capital in the implementation of the so-called Community Driven Development (CDD) projects, including sectors such as microfinance, youth inclusion, natural resource management, and urban development, and the impact of such CDD programmes on social capital.⁵

The aim of the paper is to provide empirical evidence on social participation across Europe. We use the term 'social participation' rather than 'social capital', because we are not focusing on its character as a resource, as a means for productive activities. Are there distinct country clusters based on geographical location or cultural proximity? Do these clusters differ for alternative measures of social engagement? Or is there a common pattern, highlighting the fact that some countries are simply more 'social' than others in various ways? Similarly, is being 'social' an individual personality trait: are socially engaged individuals more likely to be engaged in various ways? We can intuitively assume that meeting friends makes people happy. To what extent is this the case, for example compared to the effect of income? Are helping and volunteering a source of contentment, or do these activities reduce the well-being of the helper instead?

The second part of the paper focuses on social isolation, using a variety of measures. These highlight fairly extreme situations of social marginalisation. How is social isolation related to other measures of social exclusion; is there a

⁵ For more on the measurement of social capital by the World Bank, see <http://go.worldbank.org/BOA3AR43W0> (access date: 10 June 2010)

cumulative disadvantage? Or are these phenomena mostly driven by demographic explanations, such as gender or age?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the data used. Section 3 first describes the overall level of social contacts, followed by the level of voluntary engagement in social activities across the EU countries in section 3.2. This is followed by a brief validation of the cross-country levels of social participation (3.3). The first section concludes with an exploration of the relationship between happiness and social participation (3.4). Section 4 starts by providing an overview of social isolation across the EU. Section 4.2 explores relative differences by age and sex, while section 4.3 focuses on social isolation among the poor or the unemployed. Section 5 concludes.

2. Data

The calculations are based on the special module on Social Participation of the EU-SILC 2006 and on the European Social Survey 2006, with some additional information from the 2004 wave of the latter survey. The survey covers 24 of the 27 member states: Bulgaria, Malta and Romania are the countries not included⁶.

The 2006 EU-SILC module on social participation was surveyed on the same sample as the main questionnaire. However, in some countries, including Finland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Sweden, it covered only a subsample. The sample size for this module ranges from 6,779 individuals (Sweden) to 45,975 individuals (Italy).

The questions in the survey focus on the micro structural elements of social capital, using the terminology of Figure 1: Local institutions, networks between people. Cognitive aspects, such as trust or social norms, are not included. In terms of social contacts, relationships outside the household are included, in particular the frequency of personal meetings and contacts with relatives or friends. The survey only explores contacts and getting together with relatives (outside the household) as such, and does not distinguish between contacts with parents and children and contacts with other relatives.

There are some country-specific issues related to data quality in EU-SILC:

- The number of missing values in *Ireland* is particularly high (33%) for all the variables, because there were no proxy interviews for the module.
- Two variables (participation in activities of political parties or of churches) are completely missing for *Belgium*, due to the ban on political and religious topics in national surveys.
- A programming error occurred in *Denmark* concerning the four variables related to contact with friends or relatives (coding the value 'never' as 'missing'). The corresponding figures for Denmark were thus omitted.
- Non-responses are also very high in the *United Kingdom*, particularly with respect to helping others (53%). A further four variables measuring contact with friends or relatives also have an above average share of 'missing' (17% for frequency of contacts with friends, 9% for the others).

⁶ Bulgaria and Romania were not EU Member States in 2006, and data from Malta were not included in the microdata available to researchers (i.e. the Users' database).

- There was an alteration in the *UK* questionnaire referring to the *ability to ask any relative, friend or neighbour for help*, and so the question was worded differently from that in the other countries. Therefore, these results have been omitted.
- There was a programming mistake in *France* related to the variable on the *ability to ask any relative, friend or neighbour for help*, as this question was only asked of those who needed help (in contrast to other countries, where everyone was asked). This resulted a high percentage of missing values (67%), and the likelihood of a bias in the results.

The European Social Survey (the ESS: freely available from <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>) is a multi-country survey which covered 23 different countries in 2006, with a sample size of between 958 (Cyprus) and 2 733 (Germany) individuals. In addition to social participation variables, the survey also contains information on subjective well-being⁷, thus offering the potential for a validation (albeit limited) of EU-SILC results and for a supplementary analysis of happiness. When respondents who are under 16 or over 80 are excluded, the total sample size in the 23 countries is 32 980.

⁷ See Fitzgerald and Widdop (2008) for more details.

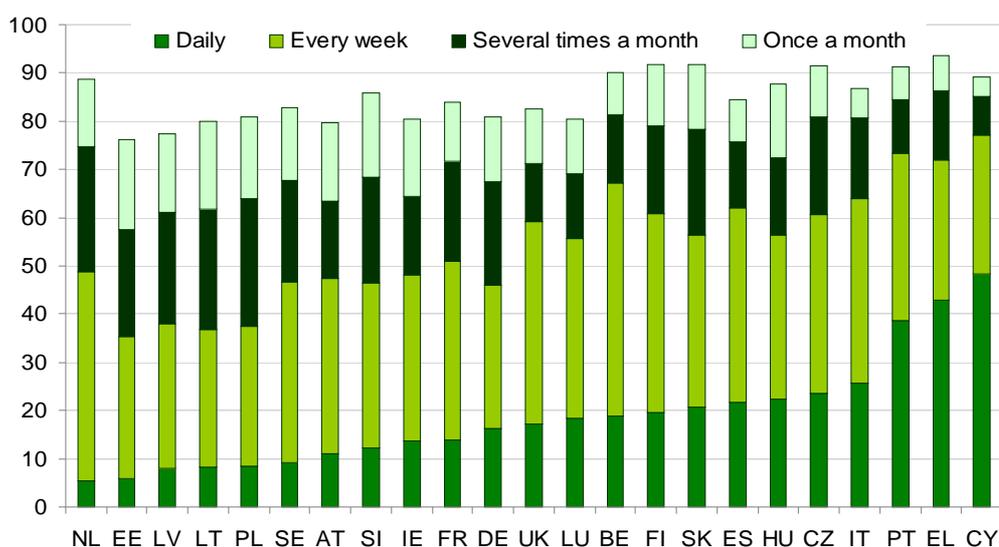
3. Social participation

We will explore two main aspects of social participation, namely: social contacts with friends and relatives, and involvement in voluntary activities. Variables relating to social contacts describe the frequency of meetings or contacts with relatives or friends. Variables relating to voluntary activities include helping others, and participating in a wide range of associations and groups, with specific details on their respective types.

3.1 Friendly Europe: frequency of social contacts

There is little variation in the total level of social contacts: more than three quarters of the population meet relatives or friends at least once a month in all the countries (see Figures 2 and 3). If we focus on daily or weekly meetings, however, there is much greater cultural divergence across Europe. The Mediterranean countries tend to be among the most 'social', especially Cyprus, Portugal and Greece, where about 40% or more meet friends or relatives on a daily basis. At the other end of the scale are the Baltic states, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, where only 5-9% meet relatives every day. The difference between the two extremes, i.e. between the Netherlands and Cyprus in terms of the share of population meeting relatives daily, is ninefold. All in all, the cultural differences arise not with respect to maintaining relationships with friends or relatives as such, but rather with respect to the intensity of these contacts.

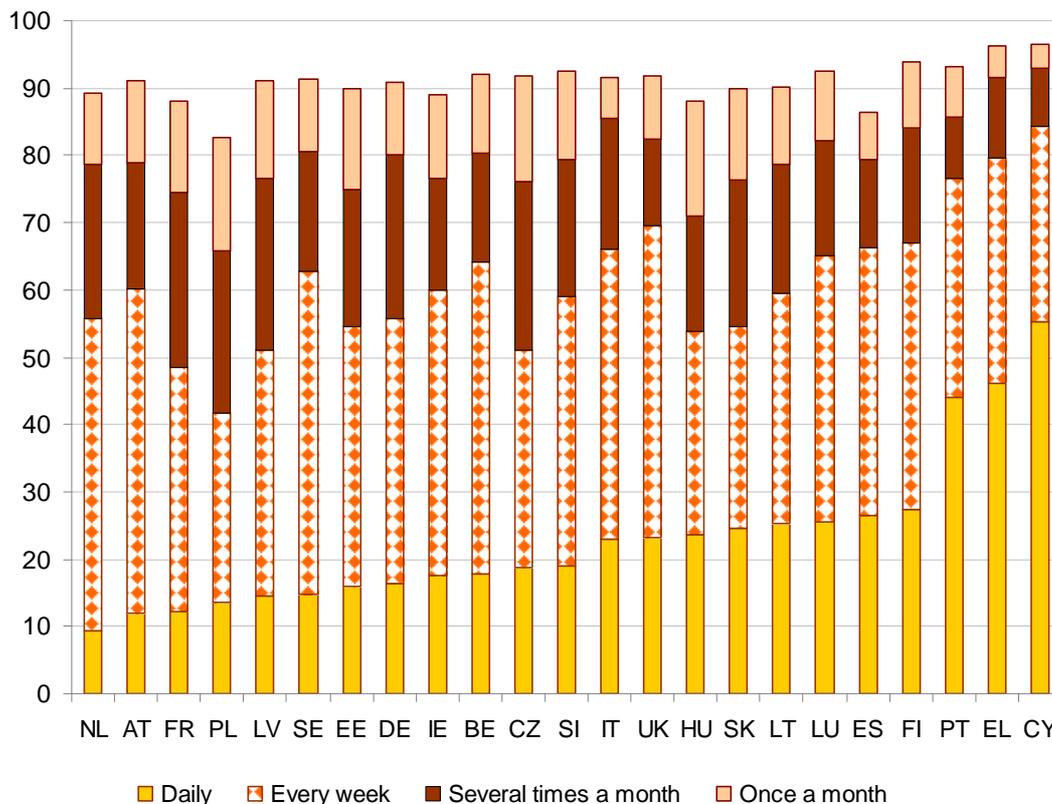
Figure 2: Frequency of getting together with relatives (%), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

Survey question: 'Frequency of getting together with relatives' - Answers: 1 Daily, 2 Every week, 3 Several times a month, 4 Once a month, 5 At least once a year, 6 Never.

Figure 3: Frequency of getting together with friends (%), 2006

Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

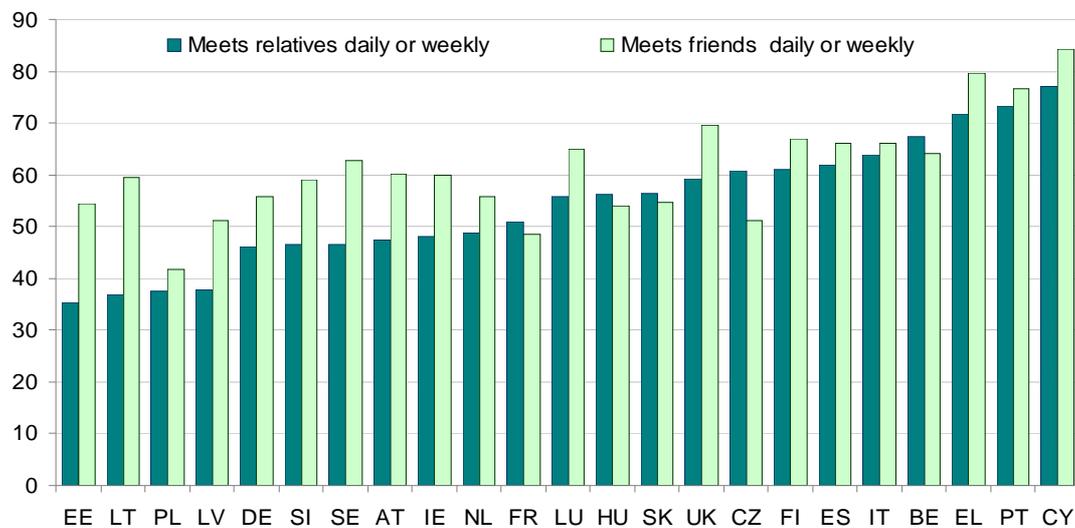
Survey question: 'Frequency of getting together with friends'- Answers: 1 Daily, 2 Every week, 3 Several times a month, 4 Once a month, 5 At least once a year, 6 Never.

Friendship ties appear to be nurtured more than family ties: in the majority of European countries, people are more likely to maintain intense contact with friends than with relatives. As Figure 2 shows, this is particularly the case in the Baltic States, DK, DE and some other countries, where the majority of the population meet relatives less often than every week. Note, however, that this measure does not explore the depth and nature of these relationships, or the potential personal support arising from them. We do not know whether people get together with a few close friends or with a continually changing circle of acquaintances ('strong ties' or 'weak ties'). Thus, 'getting together with friends' might mean rather different things in specific cultural contexts.

On the one hand, the importance of friendships comes as no surprise. Intimacy has transformed, and social bonds (just like partnerships) now have little to do with external laws or expectations, but instead are based on choice and internal understanding between two people (Giddens 1992). Thus, people are more likely to elect to spend time with people of their own choice, rather than those defined by kinship. On the other hand, the difference in favour of friends is relatively small and, in many countries, kin ties are maintained with about the same intensity as those with friends.

A number of countries can be called 'family-oriented', with over 60% of the population meeting relatives at least once a week: these include the Mediterranean countries, such as CY, PT, EL, IT, ES, but also BE, CZ and FI (Figure 4). In these countries, except for CZ, there does not appear to be a trade-off between maintaining intense contact with friends and relatives, and frequent contact with friends seems to be a social custom too (with over 60% of the population).

Figure 4: Percentage of population who have frequent personal contact with relatives and friends, 2006



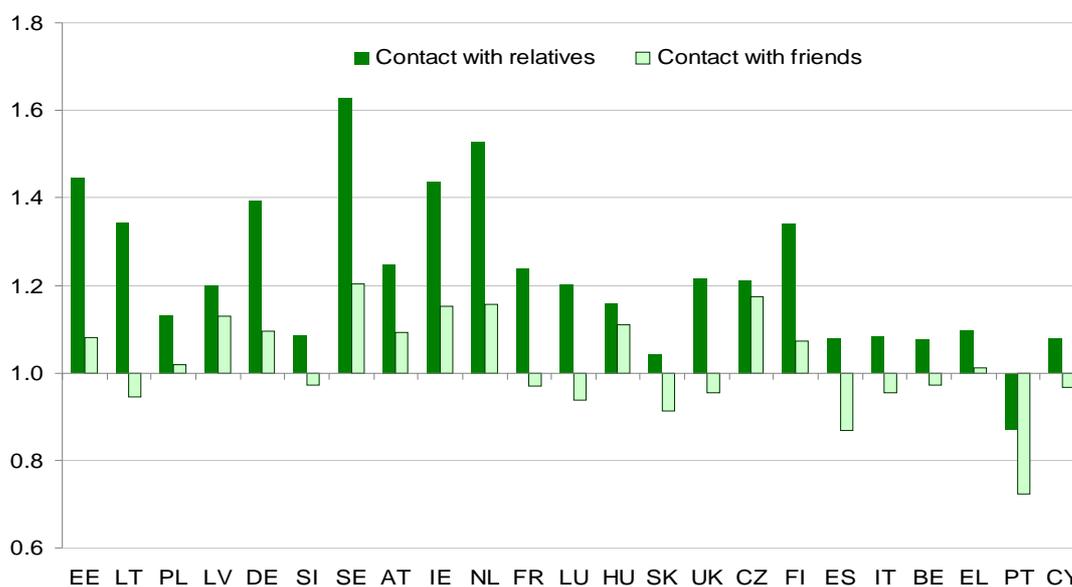
Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

So far we have discussed the issues of personal contacts. However, friendships, love relationships, professional contacts, etc are increasingly nurtured in a virtual way: via mobile phones or the internet. Does this virtual reality crowd out personal interaction? Is there a new era of 'cyber intimacy'? The survey also explores contacts by phone, e-mail, sms or other means, enabling us to compare the frequency of these interactions with those of personal meetings. Figure 5 shows the ratio of those with remote contact compared to those with personal meetings, focusing on interactions on a daily or weekly basis. This calculation also controls for country fixed effects and variations in the actual level of social contact, and highlights the differences between these two groups. Values greater than 1 show that a larger share of the population is engaged in remote contacts, while values below 1 reveal that personal meetings are the dominant form of maintaining relationships in the particular country.

'Cyber intimacy' also seems to be more widespread in relationships with *relatives*, and more prevalent in countries with lower levels of social contacts. In EE, DE, IE, NL and SE at least 1.4 times (40%) more people phone or e-mail relatives than the number who actually meet them. Countries are ranked according to the prevalence of meetings with relatives, so those on the left pane are relatively deprived. As the height of the dark bars suggests, remote contact tends to be more prevalent in those countries where relatively fewer people meet their kin regularly (daily or weekly).

Figure 5: 'Cyber contacts' versus personal meetings: ratio of those with 'cyber contacts' compared to those with personal meetings minimum once a week, 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: Countries are ranked according to prevalence of meetings with relatives (as in Figure 3)

'Cyber contact' = on the phone, by e-mail, sms or other means at least once a week

DK omitted (see Section 2)

Personal meetings seem to be prevalent in *friendships* across much of the Mediterranean. In ES, IT, CY, and in particular in PT, many more people see friends at least once a week than those who keep up contact in a virtual way. Similarly, personal meetings with friends dominate in LT, SI, FR, LU, SK and the UK. Note, however, that PT is the only country where interaction with *relatives* is predominantly on a personal level.

Table 1: Correlation matrix between measures of social contacts

| | Frequency of getting together with relatives | Frequency of getting together with friends | Frequency of contact with relatives | Frequency of contact with friends |
|--|--|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Frequency of getting together with relatives | 1 | | | |
| Frequency of getting together with friends | 0.23 | 1 | | |
| Frequency of contact with relatives | 0.50 | 0.19 | 1 | |
| Frequency of contact with friends | 0.15 | 0.61 | 0.38 | 1 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

'Frequency'= Daily, Every week, Several times a month, Once a month, At least once a year, or Never

On a personal level, personal meetings and remote interactions are not complementary; they actually tend to reinforce each other (Table 1). Those who meet their friends frequently are more likely to be in frequent contact with them on the phone, by e-mail, sms or other means. The correlation between these two variables is 0.61. Similarly, there is a positive relationship between personal and virtual contact with relatives (with a correlation coefficient of 0.50). This positive correlation applies to all the countries, and the strongest correlation is found in the case of Hungary (with correlation coefficients of 0.78 and 0.84), and the weakest is in the UK (0.36 and 0.48, respectively).

There is also a positive (although much weaker) correlation between contact with relatives and contact with friends. More sociable individuals thus tend to socialise with both, highlighting a personal preference for social interactions, rather than a trade-off, owing to time-constraints for example.

3.2 Social participation in voluntary activities

Participation in voluntary activities, including political, recreational and religious activities, or even any help to individuals, involves practically the whole population in CY (Table 2)⁸. On the other hand, less than half of the population said they had been involved in such activity in HU, CZ, FR, BE, IT and the Baltic States. Note that, according to this definition, one single act in a year would qualify, because the survey does not include a question on the frequency of or the commitment to such actions.

⁸ The figures for DK and UK appear to be outliers, but there is no information related to the alteration in the questionnaire.

Table 2: Participation in various types of informal activities during the last year, % of population per country (%), 2006

| | Participation in (activities of) | | | | | | | Total: activity in any of these |
|----|----------------------------------|--|------------------------------|---|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---|
| | helping others | political parties or trade unions | professional associations | churches or other religious org. | recreational groups | charitable org. | other groups or org. | |
| BE | 13.5 | | 7.2 | | 32.9 | 7.1 | 7.9 | 44.5** |
| CZ | 4.5 | 2.5 | 6.6 | 5.9 | 21.8 | 3.3 | 3.2 | 32.4 |
| DK | : | 12.8 | 12.0 | 11.3 | 33.7 | 11.8 | 7.7 | : |
| DE | 35.6 | 6.4 | 3.1 | 15.4 | 21.3 | 5.9 | 16.4 | 53.9 |
| EE | 31.2 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 5.3 | 14.6 | 2.3 | 1.1 | 44.9 |
| IE | 24.2 | 4.1 | 7.7 | 48.2 | 35.7 | 23.7 | 7.8 | 70.6 |
| EL | 19.0 | 5.1 | 6.0 | 29.2 | 8.2 | 3.3 | 5.6 | 50.4 |
| ES | 44.9 | 3.7 | 4.4 | 17.5 | 13.8 | 11.2 | 7.0 | 63.9 |
| FR | 17.4 | 2.7 | 1.0 | 1.4 | 23.2 | 1.5 | 10.9 | 41.0 |
| IT | 24.8 | 4.0 | 4.7 | 19.1 | 10.4 | 7.1 | 4.8 | 46.1 |
| CY | 67.0 | 8.3 | 10.3 | 87.3 | 29.8 | 15.5 | 3.2 | 95.5 |
| LV | 34.4 | 7.0 | 3.8 | 8.9 | 3.9 | 2.0 | 4.9 | 43.4 |
| LT | 14.0 | 2.0 | 1.7 | 21.0 | 6.7 | 1.8 | 2.6 | 36.5 |
| LU | 36.9 | 4.7 | 11.6 | 33.9 | 35.4 | 17.0 | 8.8 | 70.4 |
| HU | 11.1 | 3.2 | 2.7 | 3.5 | 5.8 | 1.6 | 6.3 | 21.3 |
| NL | 54.8 | 4.3 | 11.6 | 44.5 | 46.8 | 32.8 | 21.1 | 87.8 |
| AT | 30.9 | 5.6 | 3.7 | 13.6 | 22.9 | 6.6 | 2.4 | 52.8 |
| PL | 51.5 | 3.7 | 3.4 | 68.7 | 5.9 | 3.2 | 1.7 | 83.9 |
| PT | 28.5 | 2.8 | 3.3 | 43.0 | 11.2 | 5.1 | 2.3 | 61.7 |
| SI | 70.7 | 5.3 | 12.2 | 22.7 | 19.9 | 12.0 | 23.0 | 84.5 |
| SK | 31.7 | 7.3 | 3.4 | 35.9 | 19.5 | 8.1 | 13.9 | 64.1 |
| FI | 39.1 | 11.1 | 8.4 | 15.8 | 38.4 | 12.9 | 17.6 | 72.1 |
| SE | 36.3 | 8.9 | 9.8 | 19.6 | 37.1 | 11.7 | 24.6 | 71.3 |
| UK | :* | 2.4 | 4.6 | 10.6 | 35.2 | 8.4 | 3.0 | :* |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'Helping others' refers to (private) voluntary activities to help someone, e.g. cooking for others, taking care of people in hospitals or at home, taking people for a walk, shopping. It excludes any activity that a respondent undertakes for his/her household, in his/her work or within voluntary organizations.

'other groups or organizations': environmental organisations, civil right groups, neighbourhood associations, peace groups, etc.

Shading indicates the top five countries per column

* these UK figures are not provided due to the particularly high share of missing values (53%) (see Section 2).

** as data on activities in political or religious organizations are missing for BE, the total figure is likely to underestimate the extent of activities

Most frequently, people tend to provide informal help to others, which includes cooking, taking care of people in hospitals or at home, taking people for a walk, or shopping. Other frequent activities relate to churches or recreational groups. Over two thirds of the population are engaged in religious activities in CY and PL, and over 40% in IE, NL and PT. Over one third of the population is engaged in recreational groups in IE, LU, NL, FI, SE, UK and DK. Less popular are political or professional organizations, where participation reaches only 12-13% in the most active countries (DK, LU, NL, SI).

The French population appears to have a particularly low level of involvement, especially in activities in professional associations and religious or charitable organizations. According to personal communication with country experts, this is confirmed by alternative national surveys.

Countries with the highest involvement in various voluntary activities include those from quite different regions of Europe: the Scandinavian countries (DK, FI, SE), and IE, LU, CY, and NL. Altogether, in 10 out of 24 countries at least 2 out of 3 persons claim to take part in some sort of informal activity. All in all, the data do not support the identification of clear country clusters (as e.g. in the 2007 Monitoring Report of the European Observatory on the Social Situation, Social Capital Network⁹).

Does the intensity of social interactions matter in terms of being embedded in a social network? We explored whether being able to receive help or being willing to provide help to others is related to the intensity of contacts with friends and kin. As Tables 3 and 4 show, there is relatively little difference between daily and weekly intensity of meetings, but the ability to ask for help or the prevalence of providing help declines as meetings become more sporadic.

⁹ They find that 'First, from a comparative pan-European perspective, there seem to be broadly four groups of EU countries, according to their level of social capital endowments and capacities for collective action. The first -very rich in social capital resources- consists of the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. The second group comprises countries of medium-to-high, albeit well below the Scandinavian paradigm, levels of social capital resources, that is the Anglo-Saxon (UK and Ireland) countries and key countries of continental Western Europe. The third group comprises the South and East European countries, while the candidate Balkan countries, namely Bulgaria and Romania, constitute the fourth group.'

Table 3: Ability to get help and frequency of getting together with relatives or friends, 2006

| Frequency of getting together with relatives or friends | Ability to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help | |
|---|--|------|
| | Yes | No |
| Daily | 95.2 | 4.8 |
| Every week | 94.1 | 5.9 |
| Several times a month | 91.9 | 8.1 |
| Once a month | 87.9 | 12.1 |
| At least once a year | 79.6 | 20.4 |
| Never | 54.5 | 45.5 |
| Total | 93.1 | 6.9 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database
 NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

Table 4: Willingness to provide help and frequency of getting together with relatives or friends, 2006

| Frequency of getting together with relatives or friends | Helping others (participation in informal voluntary activities) | |
|---|---|------|
| | Yes | No |
| Daily | 37.5 | 62.5 |
| Every week | 38.0 | 62.0 |
| Several times a month | 32.7 | 67.3 |
| Once a month | 28.8 | 71.2 |
| At least once a year | 24.2 | 75.8 |
| Never | 10.1 | 89.9 |
| Total | 36.0 | 64.0 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database
 NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

There is a particularly marked cut-off point for those who never meet friends or relatives (or who do not have any). Only 55% of these are able to ask someone for help, which is much lower than among those who do have some personal contacts with relatives or friends, even if only once a year (80%). Similarly, only 10% of those with no personal contacts say that they have helped someone outside their household, but this figure is more than double (24%) among those who have met kin or friends once a year. This evidence suggests that there is a cut-off point for those who never meet friends or relatives, and these people are most at risk of being socially isolated. We will focus in particular on this group of people in a later section of this paper.

3.3 Robustness of the results: comparison with the European Social Survey

In order to test the robustness of the results at the level of social participation across EU countries, the EU-SILC results were compared with those of the European Social Survey (ESS), including two waves of the ESS. Tables 2 and 3 present data for the subset of countries for which comparative data are available. Although the survey year of EU-SILC 2006 and ESS 2006 is identical, there are differences in the actual date of the survey, which may influence outcomes. In order to take account of this to some extent, ESS 2004 results were also included. For the sake of the comparison presented in Table 5, a new variable was generated on the basis of EU-SILC data, showing the frequency of meeting relatives *or* friends.

Table 5: Share of population meeting relatives or friends at least once a week, (%). Comparison EU-SILC 2006 and ESS 2004 and 2006

| | EU-SILC 2006 | | ESS 2006 | | ESS 2004 | | Difference: EU-SILC vs. ESS 2006 | Difference: EU-SILC vs. ESS 2004 |
|----|--------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|--|--|
| | % | Quartile group | % | Quartile group | % | Quartile group | pp | pp |
| PL | 57.0 | bottom | 44.8 | bottom | 45.9 | bottom | 12.3 | 11.1 |
| EE | 65.3 | bottom | 56.7 | 2 nd | 49.7 | bottom | 8.6 | 15.6 |
| FR | 70.3 | bottom | 65.9 | 2 nd | 66.6 | 2 nd | 4.4 | 3.8 |
| HU | 70.9 | bottom | 33.9 | bottom | 35.6 | bottom | 36.9 | 35.3 |
| DE | 71.3 | 2 nd | 55.5 | bottom | 52.5 | bottom | 15.8 | 18.9 |
| AT | 72.2 | 2 nd | 72.4 | top | 67.7 | 2 nd | -0.2 | 4.6 |
| SI | 72.4 | 2 nd | 53.0 | bottom | 55.2 | 2 nd | 19.3 | 17.2 |
| NL | 73.5 | 2 nd | 77.6 | top | 72.9 | top | -4.1 | 0.7 |
| SK | 73.8 | 3 rd | 62.1 | 2 nd | 65.0 | 2 nd | 11.7 | 8.8 |
| IE | 74.5 | 3 rd | 67.5 | 2 nd | 69.5 | 3 rd | 7.0 | 5.1 |
| SE | 78.0 | 3 rd | 71.8 | 3 rd | 68.9 | 3 rd | 6.2 | 9.2 |
| ES | 81.4 | 3 rd | 79.3 | top | 76.6 | top | 2.1 | 4.8 |
| BE | 84.1 | top | 69.5 | 3 rd | 71.0 | 3 rd | 14.5 | 13.1 |
| FI | 84.5 | top | 67.6 | 3 rd | 71.1 | top | 16.9 | 13.4 |
| UK | 84.6 | top | 69.5 | 3 rd | 69.2 | 3 rd | 15.1 | 15.4 |
| PT | 88.7 | top | 87.7 | top | 83.8 | top | 1.0 | 4.9 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database; ESS 2004; ESS 2006

NB:

ESS question: 'How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues?' Answers: 1 never, 2 less than once a month, 3 once a month, 4 several times a month, 5 once a week, 6 several times a week, 7 every day

EU-SILC question: 'Frequency of getting together with relatives' and 'Frequency of getting together with friends' Answers: 1 Daily, 2 Every week, 3 Several times a month, 4 Once a month, 5 At least once a year, 6 Never.

For the sake of comparability, in the EU-SILC data the two variables showing frequency of getting together with relatives and with friends were aggregated (taking the value of the more frequent visits, i.e. if someone visits relatives daily, and friends monthly, then the joint variable takes the value of 'daily').

'at least once a week' = 'every day' or 'several times a week' or 'once a week' (ESS)

'at least once a week' = 'daily' or 'every week' (EU-SILC)

'pp' = percentage points

In general, the estimates of social participation tend to be higher in EU-SILC. In most countries, the share of the population having social contacts that are (at least) weekly is higher in the EU-SILC survey: in 8 out of 16 countries the difference is greater than 10 percentage points (pp). Part of this trend is likely to be due to a framing effect. While in the EU-SILC survey the response categories start from the more frequent option and move to 'never', in the ESS the reverse order is used (see Notes to Table 5). Thus, people might be more inclined to declare a greater frequency of contacts in EU-SILC. However, this framing effect does not really explain the particularly high disparity between the

two surveys in the case of Hungary: whereas over two out of three (71%) respondents claim to meet with friends or relatives at least once a week in the EU-SILC data, only one in three (36-37%) report that they do so in the ESS surveys.

In order to control for the potential framing effect related to the particular survey date or the survey question highlighted above, we have created country groupings (quartiles) showing the ranking of particular countries. The comparison of these country groups presents a relatively stable picture across countries. The countries with a low level of social contacts include Poland, Estonia, France and Hungary according to the EU-SILC data set, and these also rank in the bottom or 2nd quartile according to the two ESS surveys. Similarly, at the top end, the position of Belgium, Finland, UK and Portugal seems to be confirmed by the alternative surveys, in which these countries are also at the top or in the 3rd quartile. Interestingly, while the Netherlands fares poorly in the EU-SILC country list, it is among the top quartile in both ESS waves.

The questions related to helping others (not counting household members or work in voluntary organizations) produce rather different results in the two surveys. When people are asked whether they helped anyone in the past 12 months (EU-SILC), far fewer of them give a positive reply, as compared to the (ESS) alternative, where the actual frequency of such help is explored in more detail. Perhaps the wording also makes a difference, as EU-SILC refers to 'informal voluntary activities', while the ESS just mentions 'help to others'. The difference in figures is manifold: EU-SILC presents a picture of a more anti-social Europe where in most countries less than half of the population helps others, while the ESS presents a different picture where helpful people are the dominant group. This highlights the huge difference that a particular survey question can make. The high share (100%) in the EU-SILC data for the UK counsels caution and should sound the alarm in terms of potential error.

Due to this difference in the share of the population reporting that they have helped others in the two alternative surveys, only the comparison of country rankings seems to be plausible. There is some similarity between quartile groupings. Both surveys rank HU and PL in the bottom quartile, among countries where people help the least. Similarly, FR, IE and EE tend to be in the bottom or second quartile in both surveys. At the other extreme, DK and SI appear among those at the top, followed by CY, FI, SE (these latter three countries are either at the top or in the 3rd quartile). There is a large disparity in the relative ranking of AT, NL and the UK in the two surveys, which counsels caution when interpreting the EU-SILC results.

Table 6: Share of population helping others (outside their own household) and those engaged in political action during the last year (%). Comparison EU-SILC 2006 and ESS 2004 and 2006

| | Help others | | | | | Political actions | | | | |
|----|--------------|----------------|----------|----------------|--|-------------------|--------|----------------|--------|--|
| | EU-SILC 2006 | | ESS 2006 | | Difference: EU-SILC vs. ESS 2006 | EU-SILC 2006 | | ESS 2004 | | Difference: EU-SILC vs. ESS 2004 |
| | % | Quartile group | % | Quartile group | | pp | % | Quartile group | % | |
| HU | 11.1 | bottom | 52.7 | bottom | -41.6 | 3.2 | bottom | 0.9 | bottom | 2.3 |
| BE | 13.5 | bottom | 75.6 | 3 | -62.1 | | | 3.9 | 3 | -3.9 |
| FR | 17.4 | bottom | 71.4 | 2 | -54.0 | 2.7 | bottom | 4.5 | top | -1.9 |
| IE | 24.2 | bottom | 71.0 | 2 | -46.8 | 4.1 | 2 | 4.7 | top | -0.6 |
| PT | 28.5 | bottom | 39.2 | bottom | -10.7 | 2.8 | bottom | 1.7 | bottom | 1.1 |
| AT | 30.9 | 2 | 86.6 | top | -55.7 | 5.6 | 3 | 10.6 | top | -5.0 |
| EE | 31.2 | 2 | 44.3 | bottom | -13.1 | 3.7 | 2 | 2.4 | bottom | 1.3 |
| SK | 31.7 | 2 | 75.3 | 3 | -43.6 | 7.3 | top | 2.9 | 2 | 4.4 |
| DE | 35.6 | 2 | 81.4 | 3 | -45.8 | 6.4 | 3 | 3.2 | 2 | 3.3 |
| SE | 36.3 | 3 | 88.9 | top | -52.6 | 8.9 | top | 3.3 | 3 | 5.5 |
| FI | 39.1 | 3 | 83.4 | top | -44.3 | 11.1 | top | 4.3 | 3 | 6.8 |
| ES | 44.9 | 3 | 63.3 | bottom | -18.4 | 3.7 | 2 | 7.4 | top | -3.7 |
| PL | 51.5 | 3 | 52.0 | bottom | -0.5 | 3.7 | 2 | 2.7 | bottom | 1.0 |
| NL | 54.8 | top | 70.9 | 2 | -16.1 | 4.3 | 3 | 3.8 | 3 | 0.6 |
| CY | 67.0 | top | 72.8 | 3 | -5.8 | 8.3 | top | 3.1 | 2 | 5.2 |
| SI | 70.7 | top | 85.1 | top | -14.4 | 5.3 | 3 | 3.0 | 2 | 2.3 |
| UK | 99.5 | top | 67.6 | 2 | 31.9 | 2.4 | bottom | 2.2 | bottom | 0.2 |
| DK | 100.0 | top | 88.8 | top | 11.2 | 12.8 | top | 4.6 | top | 8.2 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database; ESS 2004; ESS 2006

NB:

Help others

EU-SILC 2006: informal voluntary activities in the last 12 months, including cooking for others, taking care of people in hospitals/at home, taking people for a walk, shopping. It excludes any activity that a respondent undertakes for his/her household, in his/her work or within voluntary organizations. Answers: Yes, No.

ESS 2006: help others not counting family/work/voluntary organisations, how often past 12 months. Answers: 1 never, 2 less than once a month, 3 once a month, 4 several times a month, 5 once a week, 6 several times a week, 7 every day. (Categories 2-7 were merged together for the sake of comparability).

Political actions

EU-SILC 2006: Participation in activities of political parties or trade unions during the last 12 months. Answers: Yes, No.

ESS 2004: Have you worked in political party or action group during the last 12 months?

Answers: Yes, No.

'pp' = percentage points

Data referring to political actions (for more details on definitions, see the notes to Table 6) appear to be much more consistent, despite the two-year gap between the two surveys. The leaders in public engagement in political activities include first of all DK, followed by AT, SE, FI, and NL. Laggards include HU, PT, EE, PL (most of them ex-Communist countries) and, somewhat surprisingly, the UK. There is a big difference between the two survey results in the case of FR, IE, ES, and CY. In the case of FR, IE and ES, the EU-SILC results rank these countries among the least politically active, whereas the ESS ranks them among the most active. However, the difference is only 0.6 pp for IE in terms of the extent of political engagement measured across the two surveys. In contrast, CY is ranked as highly active in the EU-SILC, whereas it is modestly active in the ESS country ranking.

The comparison of these surveys thus confirms a number of key findings. A number of other ex-Communist countries also tend to have a relatively small politically active population, Hungary appears to fare poorly in all measures examined here: i.e. meeting relatives or friends, helping others or political actions. EE and PL are also among the laggards, while the evidence is more mixed for SK and PL.

These results also highlight the different facets of social participation: prevalence of personal contacts may not necessarily correlate with help to others or with political engagement. Whereas the first measure of personal meetings is the most private, and political engagement is the most publicly oriented, help to others outside the household is perhaps closer to the private sphere. For this reason, it is somewhat surprising to see that there is often little connection between the intensity of personal meetings and the provision of help.

From a personal point of view, ES, BE, FI, UK and PT are the most 'social', as they were shown to be the countries with the greatest frequency of meeting friends and relatives in all three alternative surveys (with values over 80% in the EU-SILC). Among these, only FI was found to be among the third or top quartile of countries with the largest share of people helping anyone outside their household or of those engaged in political actions. The discrepancy is particularly large for PT, which appears to be a country with intense personal contacts, but little engagement in political activities or in helping others.

3.4 Social participation makes people happy

Both life satisfaction and happiness are positively correlated with social participation (Table 7). Thus, people who are engaged in local activities, who meet friends or relatives regularly, and who help others are more likely to report higher levels of happiness or life satisfaction. The relationship is positive, albeit somewhat modest: other personal characteristics also play a major role in well-being. As the extended literature suggests, income, employment status - but also health, marital status, age and a number of other factors - influence the

level of subjective well-being. In order to capture the specific relationship between social participation and life satisfaction, we have checked for the effects of personal characteristics and also for those of country differences.

Table 7: Correlation between measures of subjective well-being and social participation, 2006

| | Life satisfaction | Happiness |
|---|-------------------|-----------|
| Happiness | 0.69 | 1.00 |
| Involved in work for voluntary organizations | 0.14 | 0.13 |
| Help others (not counting family/work/voluntary organizations) | 0.15 | 0.14 |
| Help or attend activities organised in local area | 0.13 | 0.12 |
| Meets with friends, relatives or colleagues at least once a month | 0.16 | 0.19 |

Source: Own calculations based on ESS 2006

NB: Life satisfaction: 'How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?' Answers on a scale from 0 to 10

Happiness: 'How happy are you?' Answers on a scale from 0 to 10

Activities (voluntary work, help others, local activities) refer to the past 12 months

Table 8: Happiness and social participation, ologit regression, 2006

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Meets with friends, relatives or colleagues at least once a month | 0.869** (0.045) | 0.921** (0.044) | | | |
| Involved in work for voluntary or charitable organisations, past 12 months | 0.117** (0.027) | | 0.238** (0.024) | | |
| Help others not counting family/work/voluntary organisations, past 12 months | 0.223** (0.029) | | | 0.331** (0.027) | |
| Help or attend activities organised in local area, past 12 months | 0.063* (0.027) | | | | 0.202** (0.024) |
| Observations | 23803 | 24206 | 24183 | 23973 | 24088 |
| Log likelihood | -45755 | -46647 | -46704 | -46248 | -46514 |

Source: Own calculations based on ESS 2006

NB: Dependent variable: 'All things considered, how happy are you nowadays'? Answers on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.

Scores of 0 to 2 were combined due to small cell sizes.

The equations include personal controls (marital status, income group, gender, age, educational level, labour market status, health), and country fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses; * significant at 5%; ** significant at 1%.

Our exploratory regression results show that all measures of social capital are positively correlated with self-reported happiness, after controlling for differences in marital status, incomes, labour market status, age and a number of other characteristics. Regular social contacts appear to have the strongest effects, followed by helping others and participation in voluntary organisations, as shown by the size of the estimated coefficients. The magnitude of the net effects is fairly large (similar to that of income or unemployment), but is not presented and needs to be treated with caution, as such models based on cross-sectional data cannot estimate persistent personality traits, and they therefore change the results substantially (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004).

All in all, social contacts, helping others or being engaged in voluntary organizations are activities that are positively correlated with well-being. We have tested the findings above with the alternative dependent variable of self-reported life satisfaction and found similar results, only with slightly smaller coefficients.¹⁰ Social activities are most likely to make people happy. On the other hand, we expect the causality to run in the other direction too: people with an optimistic disposition are more likely to want to engage in social activities.

¹⁰ In case of regular contact with friends (row 1, column (2)) it equals 0.730**.

4. Social isolation

According to our culturally and psychologically imprinted knowledge, 'It is not good for man to be alone', as stated in the Book of Genesis. Indicators referring to never meeting relatives or friends can be regarded as an extreme degree of isolation, quite different from contemporary social standards, given that people in most countries typically meet every week (the median values are not presented here). We have also shown earlier that there is a particularly marked cut-off point for those who never meet friends or relatives (or do not have any) in terms of being able to receive help or to provide help. In other words, having contact at least once a year makes a substantial difference in terms of the ability to receive help.

In this section, we will explore social isolation via the following indicators: (1) no potential to get help if needed, (2) never meets relatives, (3) never meets friends, (4) no contact with relatives, (5) no contact with friends, (6) combination of (2) – (5).

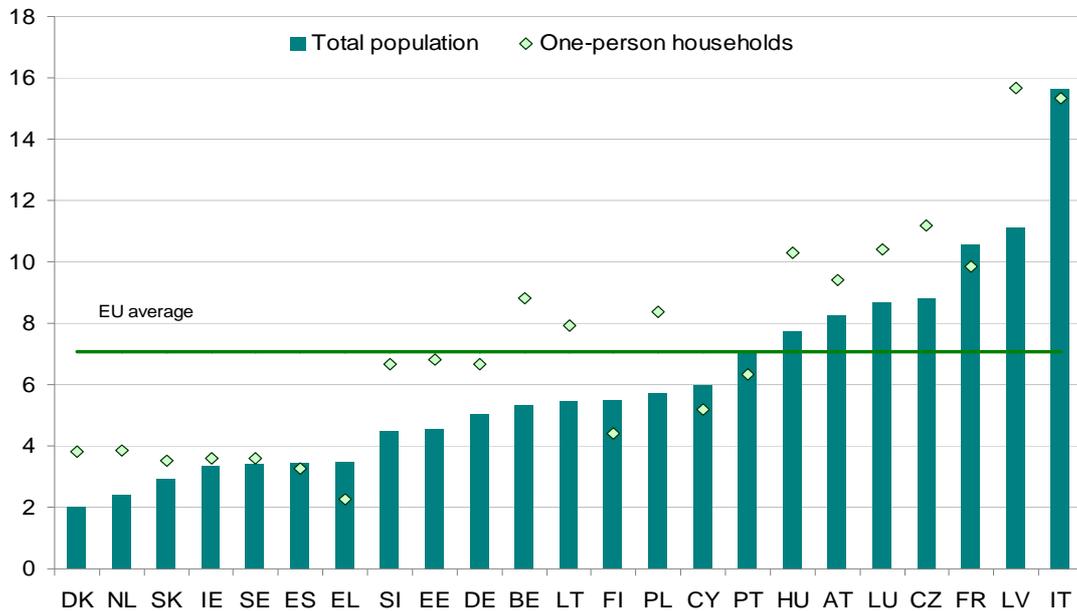
4.1 An overview

A key indicator of social isolation is the lack of potential to get help if needed. By far the majority of people in European countries are able to draw on the help of a relative, friend or neighbour, if necessary. The share of those in the EU who say that they cannot count on such help is 7% on average and the range is between 2% and 16% (Figure 6). Although the questionnaire investigates help from relatives and friends who do not live in the same household as the respondent, we tested whether this had been interpreted correctly, by narrowing down the indicator to those who live alone. Social isolation of one-person households in most countries is, as expected, greater than that of the total population.

In DK¹¹, NL, SK, IE, SE, ES and EL, few people regard themselves as socially isolated, among both the general population and those living alone. On the other hand, a relatively high share of the population in AT, CZ, FR, HU, IT, LU and LV believe that they cannot ask for and receive help. In IT and LV, the ratios are up to 15 and 16% respectively among those living alone. Interestingly, SK - with its low level - is markedly different from the neighbouring countries CZ, AT and HU, all of which have above-average levels. IT also appears to be quite distinct from other Mediterranean countries, especially EL and ES.

¹¹ Interestingly, there is an explicit policy (and perhaps also political) interest in the research and understanding of social capital in the country: the Government of Denmark has provided the World Bank with resources of about US \$1.0 million to support operations which promote and strengthen social capital, and to develop indicators and methodologies to learn from this experience (The World Bank 1998).

Figure 6: Social isolation across EU countries: unable to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help (%), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

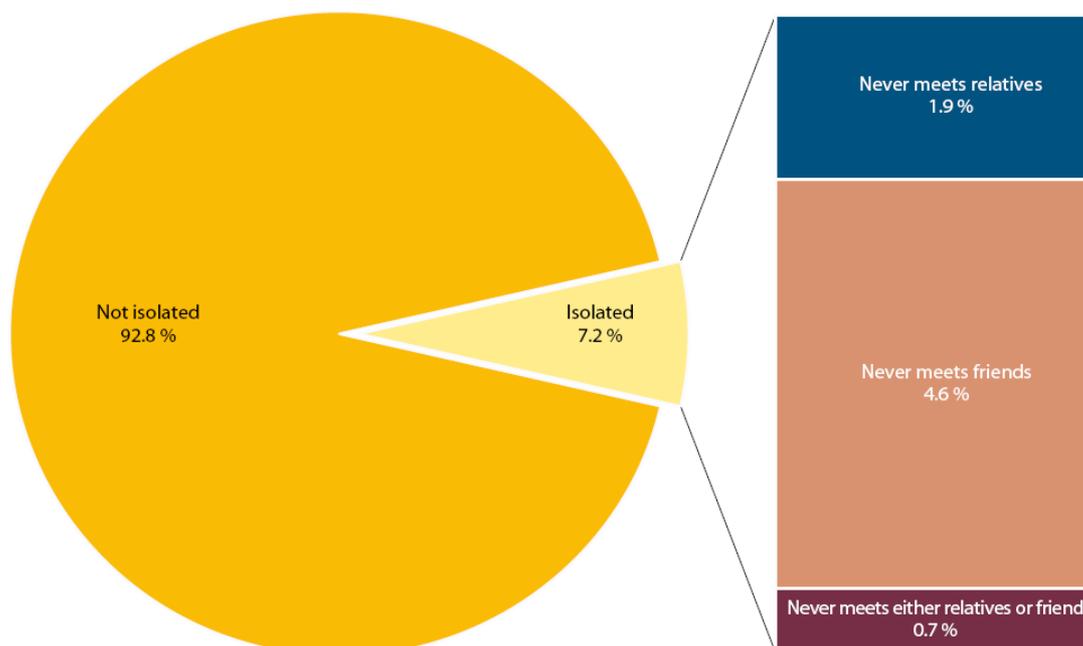
NB: EU average: refers to the total population, 23 countries

Survey question: 'ability to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help'. The question is about ability for the respondent to ask for the help irrespective of whether the respondent has needed it or not. Only relatives and friends who don't live in the same household as the respondent are considered.

UK omitted (see Section 2)

Family ties are stronger than ties of friendship, in the sense that relatives are more likely to be a last resort in terms of personal contacts. While 2.0-16.8% of the population say that they 'never' meet friends, not even 'once a year', a smaller share - 0.6-5.2% of the population - say that they 'never' meet relatives (Table 9). When observing these groups, we find that there is relatively little overlap between them: only 0.7% out of the 7.2% who may be regarded as isolated by this measure on a European average say that they do not meet either of these groups (Figure 6). Thus, there are relatively few people who have neither of these personal contacts, however infrequent.

Figure 7: Social isolation at an EU level: share of population never meeting friends, relatives or either of these (%), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database
NB: DK omitted (see Section 2)

When an alternative measure of 'never' having a contact (including telephone, letter, fax, e-mail, sms) is used, the share is much higher: between 1.2% and 10.6% never have contact with relatives, and 1.9-21.5% never have contact with friends (Table 9). This indicates that relationships tend to be maintained via personal contact, rather than virtually. Note, however, that these relationships may not provide a feeling of security or belonging for many people, as is reflected by the low level of correlation between the measures at an individual level.

The share of those who never meet relatives is 1.9% and the share of those who meet neither relatives nor friends is 'only' 0.7% (Figure 7).

Table 9: Alternative measures of social isolation across EU countries (share of population affected), 2006

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (2), (3) | (4) | (5) | (4), (5) | (2), (3), (4), (5) |
|----|---|-----------------------|------------------------------|---|---------------------|----------------------------|--|---|
| | Not able to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help | Never meets relatives | Never contact with relatives | Never meets/ has contact with relatives | Never meets friends | Never contact with friends | Never meets / has contact with friends | Never meets / has contact with relatives or friends |
| BE | 5.4 | 3.4 | 5.7 | 2.3 | 5.2 | 9.0 | 4.8 | 0.3 |
| CZ | 8.8 | 2.7 | 4.0 | 2.1 | 6.1 | 7.9 | 5.4 | 1.0 |
| DK | 2.0 | : | : | : | : | : | : | : |
| DE | 5.0 | 2.9 | 2.2 | 1.4 | 3.1 | 3.0 | 2.2 | 0.2 |
| EE | 4.6 | 3.2 | 7.4 | 2.4 | 5.2 | 9.7 | 4.7 | 0.5 |
| IE | 3.3 | 2.3 | 4.4 | 1.0 | 3.2 | 5.3 | 2.1 | 0.3 |
| EL | 3.5 | 0.9 | 1.2 | 0.4 | 2.3 | 3.2 | 1.8 | 0.2 |
| ES | 3.4 | 2.5 | 5.7 | 1.0 | 7.7 | 13.9 | 6.2 | 0.4 |
| FR | : | 2.1 | 4.9 | 1.1 | 5.9 | 11.2 | 5.1 | 0.2 |
| IT | 15.6 | 4.0 | 4.8 | 2.8 | 8.5 | 11.2 | 7.6 | 1.8 |
| CY | 6.0 | 1.5 | 1.9 | 0.3 | 2.7 | 5.3 | 2.4 | 0.1 |
| LV | 11.1 | 5.2 | 10.6 | 4.2 | 16.8 | 21.5 | 16.5 | 1.6 |
| LT | 5.4 | 2.0 | 8.9 | 1.6 | 6.6 | 15.4 | 6.3 | 0.6 |
| LU | 8.7 | 3.3 | 6.2 | 2.0 | 4.8 | 10.0 | 4.3 | 0.5 |
| HU | 7.7 | 2.1 | 2.3 | 1.8 | 11.7 | 12.0 | 11.4 | 0.8 |
| NL | 2.4 | 2.3 | 4.0 | 1.1 | 5.4 | 8.6 | 4.2 | 0.2 |
| AT | 8.3 | 4.7 | 5.5 | 2.9 | 4.6 | 6.1 | 3.8 | 0.7 |
| PL | 5.7 | 1.6 | 5.6 | 1.2 | 4.9 | 10.1 | 4.1 | 0.5 |
| PT | 7.1 | 1.6 | 5.9 | 1.0 | 4.1 | 13.6 | 3.5 | 0.4 |
| SI | 4.5 | 1.8 | 6.0 | 1.3 | 3.6 | 8.4 | 3.0 | 0.3 |
| SK | 2.9 | 0.6 | 3.6 | 0.5 | 2.4 | 6.0 | 2.1 | 0.2 |
| FI | 5.5 | 0.9 | 1.9 | 0.5 | 3.4 | 2.9 | 0.7 | 0.0 |
| SE | 3.4 | 1.9 | 1.5 | 0.7 | 2.0 | 1.9 | 1.1 | 0.1 |
| UK | : | 2.7 | 4.9 | 1.3 | 3.4 | 7.5 | 2.1 | 0.2 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: The figures include also those who say they have no friends or have no relatives (flag with a value of -2)

DK: programming mistake (the 'never' category was changed to missing for (2), (3), (4), and (5))

FR: the question was only asked of a subgroup, those who needed help (1)

UK: the question is quite different from that in other countries (1)

Isolation from friends or from relatives appears to be due to different causes, which tend to be positively (albeit not strongly) correlated at an individual level. With respect to the country level, the countries which stand out in terms of a high degree of isolation from relatives (AT, IT, LV) only partly overlap with those in terms of isolation from friends (LV, HU). In HU, for example, relatively large numbers of people (11.2%) have no friends (never meet or have contact with

friends) yet the share of those with no relatives (never meet or have contact with relatives) is low (1.8%).

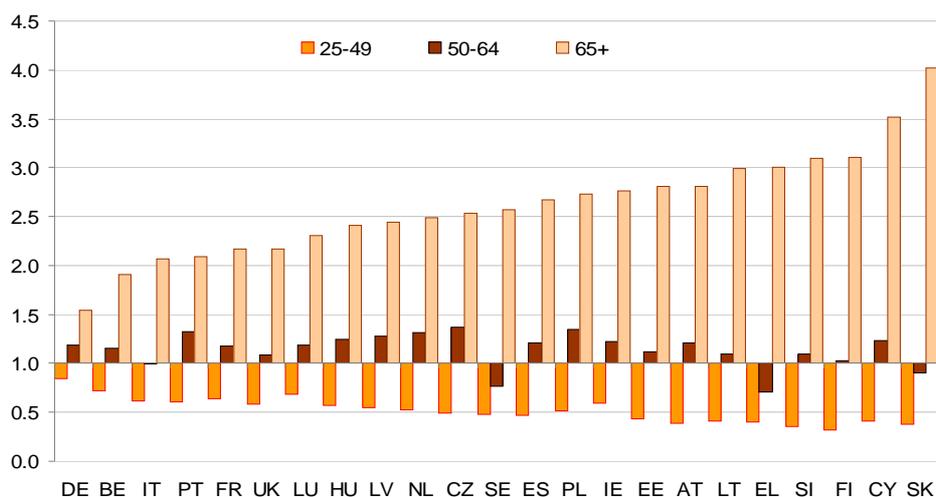
The share of those who do not have any personal or other social contact whatsoever with friends or relatives remains below 1% in most countries. Note that it is a very extreme measure of social isolation by definition – a situation in which possibly no sane human being would want to live, i.e. having no personal contact (not even once a year), not even a single telephone call. Given the possibility of personal choice here, and the small number of observations and the resulting measurement errors, we believe that this particular issue cannot be adequately addressed in this paper, and probably calls for specially targeted enquiries (if these people even open the door).

These findings imply that there is no obvious geographical explanation behind these patterns of social isolation: it is not Scandinavia versus Mediterranean, nor EU15 versus New Member States, nor small countries versus large. Instead of country differences, we are therefore now focusing on the differences across social groups within countries.

4.2 Social isolation by gender and age: it tends to increase with age, although there is a relatively good informal support

Social isolation can be regarded as a measure of social exclusion. How is it related to other indicators of exclusion, such as poverty or unemployment? Or is the role of demographics, age or gender more relevant in explaining the variation in the occurrence of social isolation?

Figure 8: Ratio of those with no friends by age groups compared to the total population, 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No friends'= no friends, never meets friends and no contact with friends

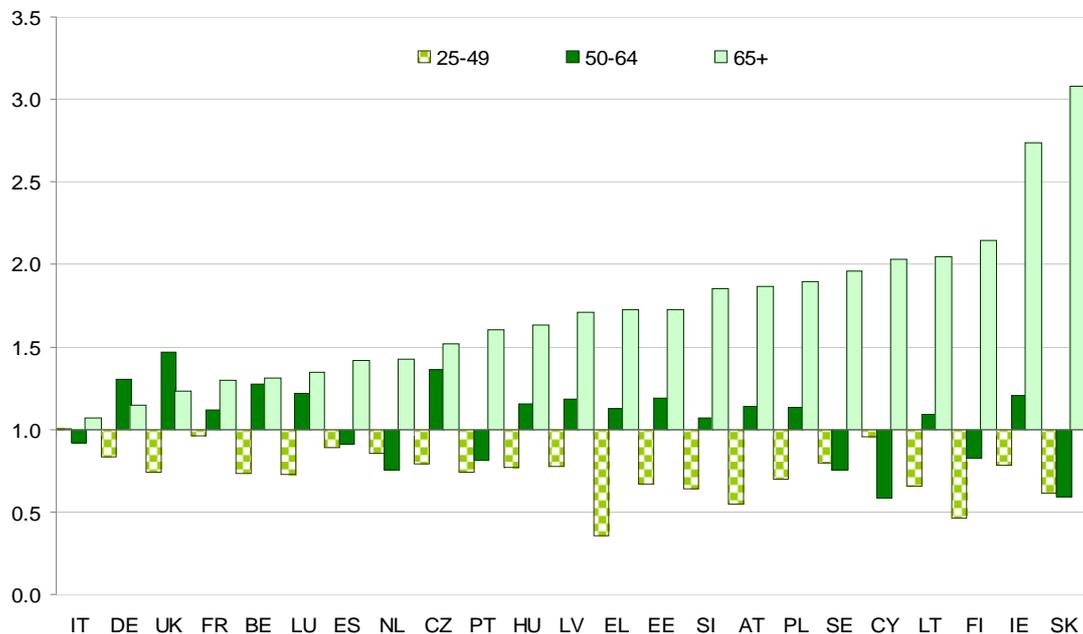
DK omitted (see Section 2)

The share of the population with no friends tends to increase with age in all the countries, due to the breaking-up of friendships or the death of friends, and the growing difficulties of replacing these relationships. In half of the countries, over 1 in 10 persons aged 65 or more has no interaction whatsoever with friends, either personally or in other ways. This number rises to over 1 in 4 in the case of HU and LV, indicating that many elderly people are isolated.

We calculated the ratio of those with no friends by age group compared to the total population, thus controlling for differences at country level. As Figure 8 shows, the relative disadvantage of those aged 65 or more is three times greater or even more in many countries, including LT, EL, SI, FI, CY and SK.

Family and relatives play a major role in preventing complete isolation in old age: significantly fewer people claim to have no relatives or no contact with them. In AT and LV, which are the countries with the highest share of elderly population with no (contact to) relatives, their share is down to 5-7%, which is a considerably lower ratio than in case of those with no friends. If we focus on the relative situation of the elderly, we find that their disadvantage is much smaller than in the case of friendships. Only in SK is the social isolation of the elderly as much as three times higher than for the population as a whole (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Ratio of those with no relatives or no contact with relatives by age groups compared to the total population, 2006



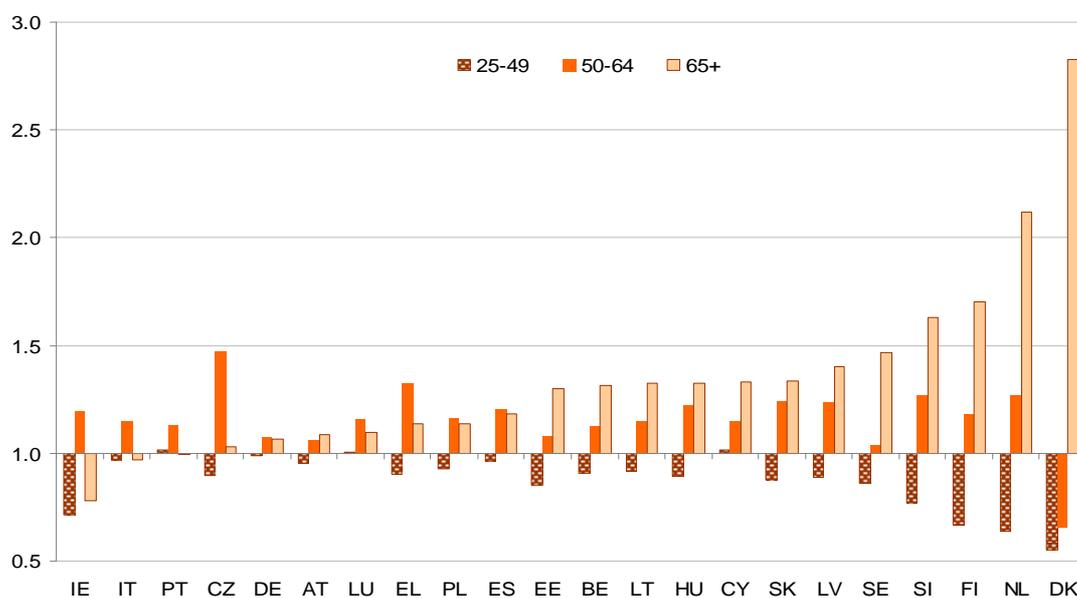
Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No relatives or no contact with relatives' = no relatives, never meets relatives and no contact with relatives

DK omitted (see Section 2)

The age spread of social isolation becomes even narrower in the case of the 'no help' measure. In a large number of countries the elderly do not seem to be worse off, or the differences by age are relatively small, especially compared to the alternative measure of 'no friends' (Figure 8). This suggests that, although the elderly are strongly affected by diminishing interaction with friends or relatives, as Figures 8 and 9 show, in many countries they can still rely on the help of others, to about the same extent as their younger compatriots. NL and DK appear to be outliers in this respect.

Figure 10: Ratio of those with no help by age groups compared to the total population, 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database
 NB: 'No help'= not able to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help
 FR and UK omitted (see Section 2)

Table 10: Social isolation by gender: share of population with ‘no help’, ‘no friends’ and ‘no relatives’ (%), 2006

| | No help | | No friends | | No relatives | |
|----|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|------------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| BE | 5.5 | 5.2 | 4.5 | 5.1 | 2.5 | 2.1 |
| CZ | 9.1 | 8.6 | 5.0 | 5.7 | 2.6 | 1.7 |
| DK | 1.8 | 2.2 | : | : | : | : |
| DE | 5.3 | 4.8 | 2.4 | 1.9 | 1.4 | 1.3 |
| EE | 5.1 | 4.1 | 4.5 | 4.9 | 2.5 | 2.3 |
| IE | 4.0 | 2.7 | 2.0 | 2.1 | 1.3 | 0.7 |
| EL | 3.4 | 3.6 | 1.2 | 2.4 | 0.3 | 0.4 |
| ES | 3.6 | 3.3 | 4.8 | 7.6 | 1.4 | 0.7 |
| FR | : | : | 4.7 | 5.5 | 1.3 | 1.0 |
| IT | 16.7 | 14.6 | 6.2 | 8.8 | 3.3 | 2.4 |
| CY | 6.4 | 5.6 | 1.9 | 2.8 | 0.4 | 0.3 |
| LV | 11.0 | 11.2 | 14.4 | 18.2 | 4.4 | 4.0 |
| LT | 5.7 | 5.2 | 5.3 | 7.2 | 1.8 | 1.4 |
| LU | 9.2 | 8.1 | 4.0 | 4.6 | 2.5 | 1.5 |
| HU | 7.8 | 7.7 | 9.6 | 12.9 | 2.0 | 1.5 |
| NL | 2.7 | 2.1 | 4.6 | 3.9 | 1.0 | 1.1 |
| AT | 8.2 | 8.3 | 3.2 | 4.5 | 3.3 | 2.6 |
| PL | 6.1 | 5.3 | 3.9 | 4.4 | 1.4 | 1.1 |
| PT | 7.3 | 6.8 | 2.9 | 4.1 | 1.2 | 0.7 |
| SI | 4.3 | 4.7 | 2.1 | 3.8 | 1.4 | 1.1 |
| SK | 2.7 | 3.1 | 1.5 | 2.6 | 0.6 | 0.5 |
| FI | 6.5 | 4.7 | 0.8 | 0.6 | 0.6 | 0.3 |
| SE | 3.1 | 3.7 | 1.2 | 1.1 | 0.8 | 0.6 |
| UK | : | : | 2.1 | 2.2 | 1.8 | 0.9 |

Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No friends'= no friends, never meets friends or no contact with friends

'No help'= not able to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help

DK, FR and UK omitted (see Section 2)

Bold denotes statistically significant differences (at 10% level) by gender

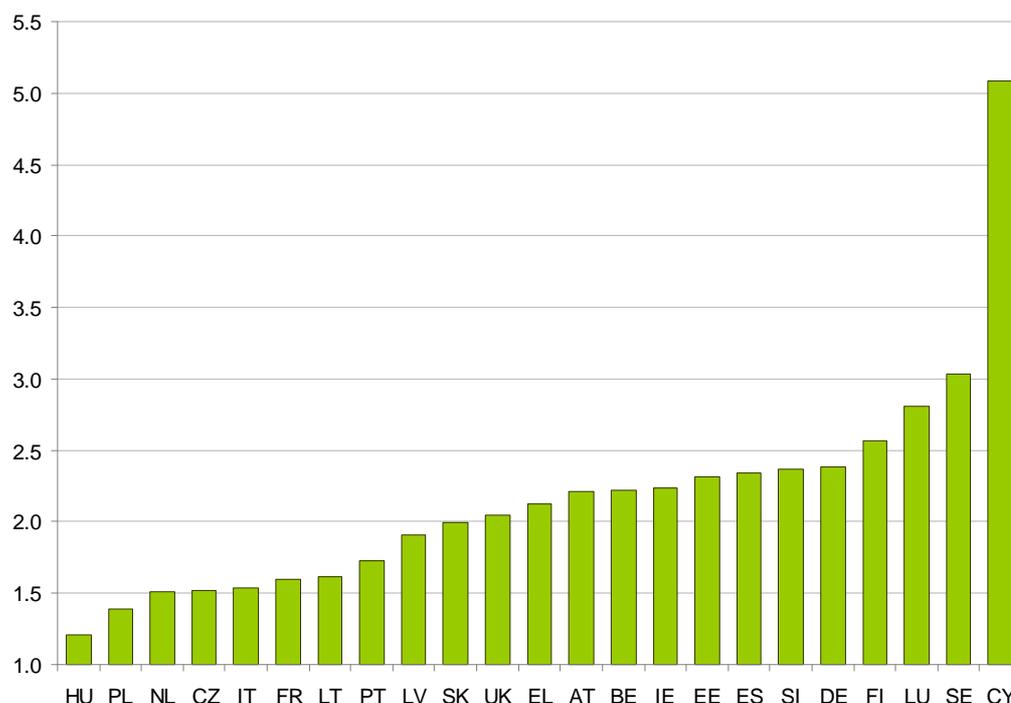
Gender differences with respect to social isolation are much smaller than those presented with respect to age, and these differences vary according to the specific measure used. More men are without help (in those six countries where gender differences are statistically significant), as Table 10 shows. Similarly, men are more likely to be without relatives (in all 12 countries where gender differences are statistically significant), as women may cultivate these contacts (at least at a minimum level) more than men do. On the other hand, a larger share of women are without friends (in 16 out of 17 countries where gender differences are statistically significant), which is probably largely due to the

longer life expectancy of women and their greater isolation in old age (as shown by Figures 8-10).

4.3 Social isolation is greater among the poor and the unemployed

Poverty may cause social isolation, e.g. if people cannot afford to go out with friends or to invite them to their homes. On the other hand, social isolation may also ultimately result in poverty or unemployment, as friends and acquaintances (primarily the so-called 'bridging social capital') can provide useful support in finding (good) jobs. The direction of causality is thus not clear. We know, however, that these states are not desirable, and the accumulation of social isolation and poverty or unemployment flags up the risk of social exclusion.

Figure 11: Ratio of those with 'no friends' by poverty status (Ratio between those at risk of poverty and those not at risk), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

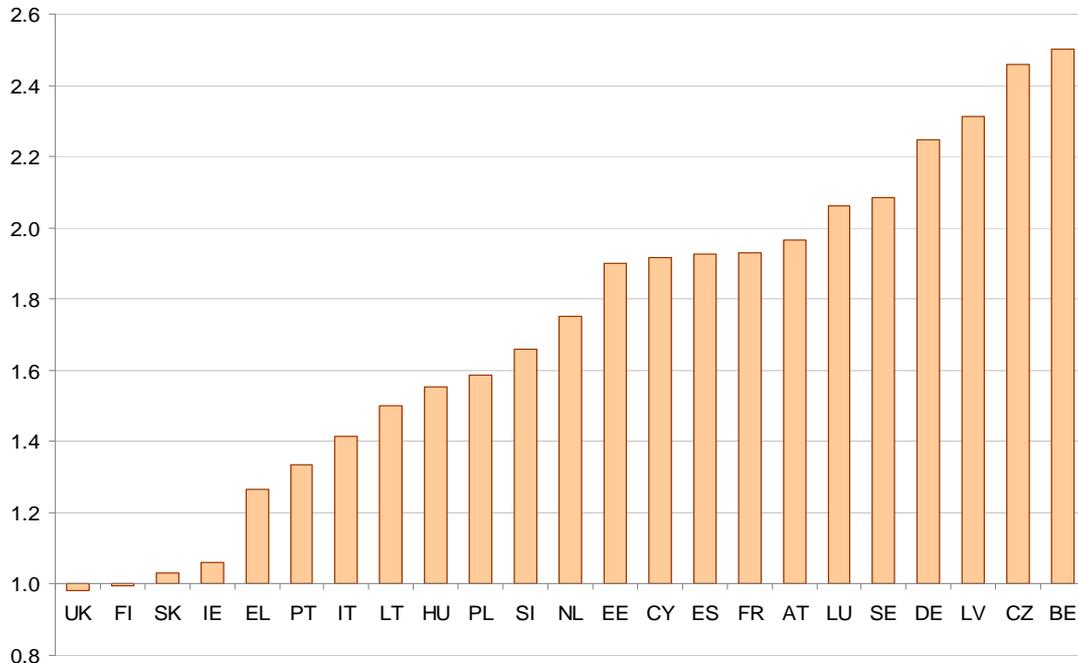
NB: 'No friends'= no friends, never meets friends and no contact with friends

DK omitted (see Section 2)

The population at risk of poverty (with equivalised household incomes below 60% of the national median income) tends to be exposed to greater social isolation: the share of those with no friends is significantly higher in all EU countries examined here (Figure 11). The relative disadvantage of those with low incomes is particularly high (with rates over twice as high) in 13 out of 23

countries. Cyprus, where 7.1% of the poor have no friends, stands out in particular, whereas the ratio is only 1.4% among the non-poor population.

Figure 12: Ratio of those with 'no help' by poverty status (Ratio between those at risk of poverty and those not at risk), 2006



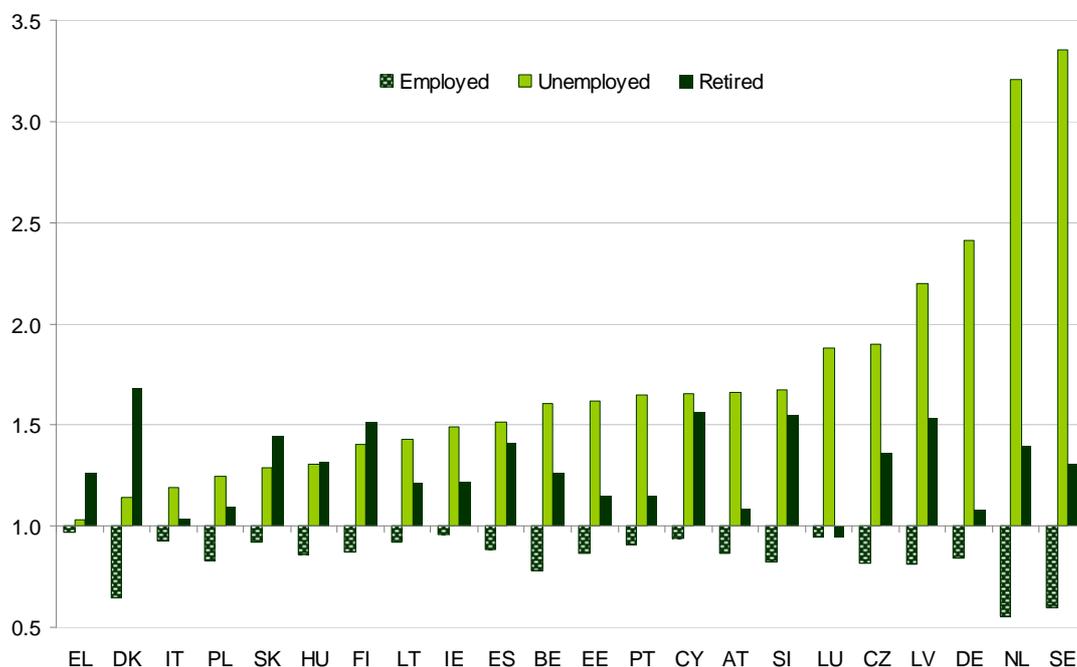
Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No help'= not able to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help

FR and UK omitted (see Section 2)

There is a similar difference by income level with respect to the measure of 'no help': a considerably larger proportion of those on poverty levels of income feel that they have no one from whom they could receive help (Figure 12). The differences are less pronounced than in the case of the 'no friend' indicator, and in some countries (SK, IE, FI) they are not statistically significant. In seven countries, however, the difference between the poor and non-poor population is still more than twice as large. For example, in Belgium 4.4% of the non-poor say that they are without help, while among the poor this ratio is 11.0%. In the Czech Republic, these rates are 7.8% and 19.3% respectively.

Figure 13: Ratio of those with 'no help' by employment status (Ratio between particular groups and the total working age population), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No help'= not able to ask any relatives, friend or neighbour for help

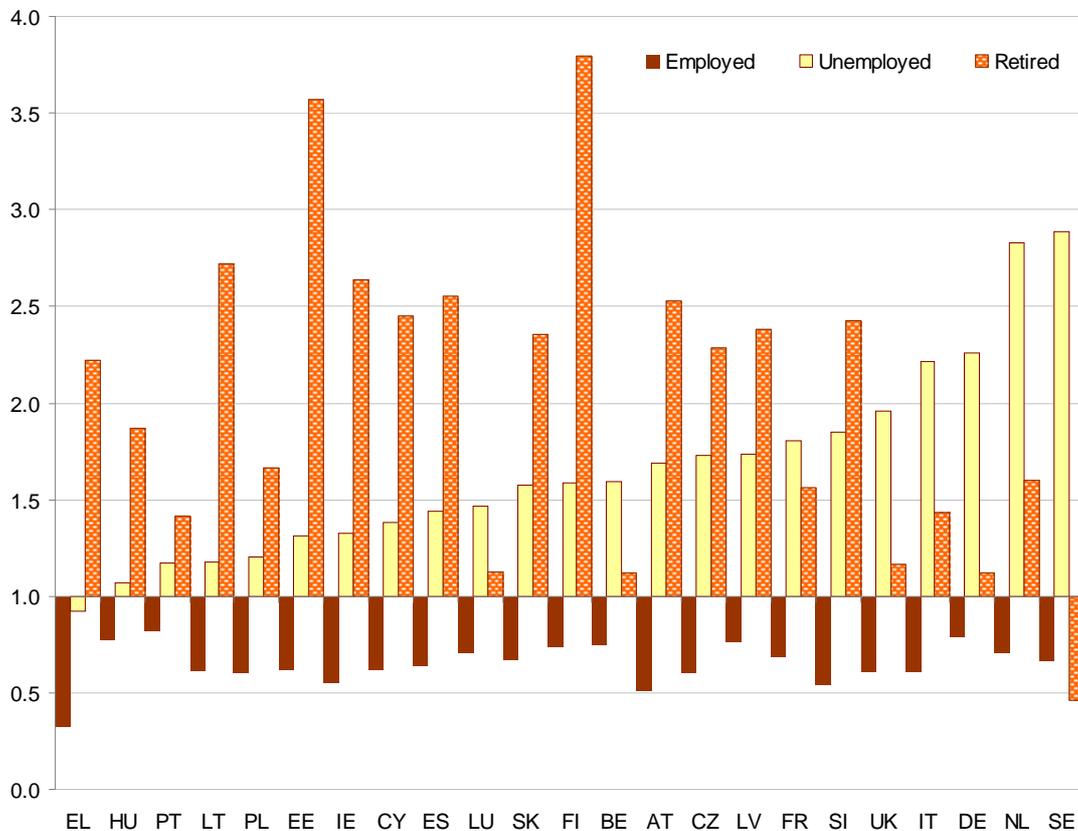
Employment status: self-defined current economic status (PL030)

FR and UK omitted (see Section 2)

A large share of the unemployed believe that they cannot rely on help; this share is greater than among the employed or even among pensioners (Figure 13). The relative situation of the unemployed is particularly poor in NL and SE. The relative disadvantage of the unemployed is greater in terms of not receiving help rather than having no contact with friends, as Figure 14 shows.

In contrast, the employed tend to suffer the least from social isolation by either measure. Employment thus protects from social isolation, or the lack of social isolation ensures employment: causality is expected to work in both directions.

Figure 14: Ratio of those with 'no friends' by employment status (Ratio between particular groups and the total working age population), 2006



Source: EU-SILC Users' database

NB: 'No friends'= no friends, never meets friends and no contact with friends

Employment status: self-defined current economic status (PL030)

DK omitted (see Section 2)

Retirement, together with ageing, is likely to lead to an increased risk of social isolation. Note, however, that in EE and FI the relative ratio of those with no friends among those who are retired far exceeds the ratio for those of old age (65 or over) (see Figures 13 and 14), which highlights the importance of labour market engagement and not ageing per se.

Comparing the unemployed and the retired – two groups without jobs – the unemployed appear to feel that they have no help, while pensioners are more likely to claim that they have no friends. Unemployed people tend to feel 'helpless' more, perhaps partly due to the loss of control in terms of their labour market situation (although the definition of unemployed is self-assessed here, we may assume that the majority of these are ready to work and want to work).

5. Conclusions

Cross-country differences in social participation appear to be significant, but they do not follow an overall geographic pattern. ES, BE, FI, UK and PT are the most 'social', as all three alternative surveys showed them to be the countries with the greatest frequency of meeting friends and relatives. A number of other ex-Communist countries tend to have a relatively small politically active population.

The validation of the data highlighted the significance of framing as such (wording of questions, sequence of answer categories), given the wide variations in the measured prevalence of social participation in the alternative surveys.

'Cyber' intimacy is on the rise, as people tend to have more virtual contacts than personal ones. On the other hand, it mostly applies to relationships with relatives. We may have a stronger preference for seeing friends, or we may choose friends where we live, which is a particularly relevant issue for those people who move for family or work reasons. On the other hand, virtual contacts and personal meetings tend to reinforce each other, rather than being complementary, as we are more likely to phone or e-mail friends whom we meet anyway.

Social contacts play a major role in our quest for happiness. Giving to others seems to be a gift for the giver as well: we found that those who help others or do voluntary work tend to be happier. These social activities are most likely to make people happy and satisfied. Social activities, including both on a personal level and on a community level, are most likely to make people happy and satisfied. On the other hand, we expect the causality to run in the other direction too: people with a cheerful disposition are more likely to want to engage socially.

Social isolation, focusing on the extreme forms of receiving no help at all, or not seeing relatives or friends at all, or having no contact at all, seems to affect a smaller fraction of the population in general than, for instance, the risk of poverty. So why is it a relevant issue? Social isolation poses a problem for two different reasons. First, it has a detrimental effect on personal well-being. Second, being socially engaged is a basic human need or functioning. Although we cannot account for the specific role of personal choice here (some people might just want to live as hermits, which we must respect), we can be certain that extreme social isolation is 'bad' for the individual, a situation which a rational individual may not want to live in. In order to reduce the problem of individual choice here, we have used extreme measures of social isolation.

There is evidence of cumulative social exclusion. The unemployed and those at risk of poverty tend to have a far greater exposure to social isolation. Social isolation may be a consequence of getting out of the labour market. On the other hand, it is also likely to be a cause of long-term marginalisation, because social capital enhances labour market opportunities. Differences by age proved to be significantly higher than differences by gender. In old age, relationship with kin increases in importance, and in many countries a relatively good informal support network ensures that these people do not remain without help (at least not relatively more than others).

The relationship between the state and the social engagement of individuals thus warrants close attention, as social participation as such does not appear to be an easy target for public policies. Civil society and the nourishing of personal contacts do not happen overnight. Nevertheless, a changing focus in public policy making is needed, and it is already a work in progress.

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