

Manifold vectors of cohesion

The metaphor in the title of the collection – vectors of cohesion – suggests both direction and tension. A vector is a segment with a certain direction, and several vectors can mutually reinforce or neutralize each other. Similarly, societal cohesion is not a static condition, but a dynamic, and simultaneously – fragile configuration, in which forces of different directions – ideological, historical, political, emotional – can create both unity and division. This collection of articles is an attempt to outline these forces, reflecting theoretical substantiation, as well as elements of actual tension in the society of Latvia.

The concept of societal cohesion is not unequivocal. Its meaning changes with time, language, political situation and cultural context. Unlike technical terms in the natural sciences, societal concepts are simultaneously normative and descriptive – they express both “what is” and “what should be”. Cohesion can be interpreted as trust, as belonging, as participation, as a commonality of values, as a sense of security, as collective responsibility or likewise. However, each of these interpretations reveals a certain hierarchy of values and political choice.

For this very reason, it is important to recognize that cohesion is not an ideologically neutral goal. It can be defined from the positions of nationalism or multiculturalism, communitarianism or liberalism, economic utilitarianism or civic idealism – even dictatorships and authoritarian regimes appeal to feelings of cohesion and build their ideology around them. We do not undertake to offer the single “ultimate” definition. On the contrary – our goal is to shed light on the diverse opinions, approaches and understandings that

influence the use of the concept of cohesion in contemporary Latvia.

This collection of articles is part of the project “Vectors of societal cohesion: from cohesion around the nation-state (2012–2018) to a cohesive civic community for the security of the state, society and individuals (2024–2025)” (VPP-KM-SPASA-2023/1-0002) of the State Research Programme “Development of a cohesive and civically active society”. The project combines philosophical, sociological, legal, media, cultural and psychological aspects to understand and promote societal cohesion in contemporary Latvia. The aim is to analyse both the existing cohesion policy and its development since the 1990s, and to identify its shortcomings, prerequisites and future development trends. The project aims to develop public understanding of the processes of community formation, the role of language, identity, media influence, historical memory and public participation, offering theoretically sound and practically applicable solutions. This means not only academic cooperation, but also theoretical pluralism. The overall goal was not uniformity of views, but mutual understanding, in which the different vectors can reciprocally reinforce and explain, rather than cancel each other.

Nine thematic working groups were established for the implementation of the project, which included a wide range of scholars representing the University of Latvia and partner institutions – from philosophers and lawyers to sociologists, anthropologists, linguists and art researchers. Each group focuses on its own aspect – media literacy, language policy, urban and regional space, identity concepts, the legal system, as well as psychological and emotional participation.

The innovation contributed by the project is its holistic approach: cohesion not as a slogan, but as a process of mutual harmonization of values, experiences, institutions and lifeworld. Instead of merely integrating minorities into the structure of the majority, the project sought the basis for a sustainable, democratic and diverse civil society, whose unity is strengthened not by sameness, but by mutual recognition, trust and joint responsibility.

An additional significant novelty is the involvement of a philosophical perspective alongside the traditionally dominant sociological, political and legal sciences. The philosophical approach enables delving into the content encompassed by the concept of cohesion, its historical interpretations, anthropological assumptions and normative foundations. It helps to ask the questions: how to unite, what to unite, why and on what basis to unite? This perspective illuminates the moral and ontological dimensions of societal integration, enabling reconsideration of the notions of community, belonging, identity and solidarity, as well as prompting reflection on the philosophical assumptions of various cohesion policies. Thus, philosophy in the project acts not only as a theoretical background, but also as a critical method for developing a deeper, meaningful and thoughtful understanding of societal cohesion.

An essential characteristic of the project is the unity of theoretical reflection and practical action. The concept of cohesion is not viewed here as an abstract idea or normative ideal, but as a living experience that unfolds in specific places and situations. Therefore, the project created direct, concrete, practical contact with communities in Riga, Liepāja and Gulbene, where researchers not only observed and analysed, but also engaged and participated in the so-called community labs. This approach yielded an opportunity to test theoretical concepts in practice and to discover how cohesion is formed (or – no less importantly – not formed) in the environment of everyday interaction and co-creation. Thus, the project

combines the conceptual level, empirical research and direct practical involvement, confirming that cohesion cannot be understood or strengthened solely from the outside – it must transpire through presence, joint responsibility and shared experience.

The articles included in this collection address a wide range of topics. The authors analyse the conceptual and historical foundations of cohesion, integration policy and its contradictions, identity, the role of language and the challenges of the education system, Russian messianism, migration, and even cinematography in Ukraine. Some articles focus on the symbolic order – narratives, memory, the ability of art and culture to structure a sense of commonality. Others are based on empirical data, examining models of public perception and participation, as well as institutional relations. Such thematic and methodological diversity reveals a view of cohesion as a multidimensional phenomenon – one that cannot be reduced to a single indicator, a single map or a single formula.

However, despite this diversity, some common motifs permeate most of the articles. Firstly, the awareness that cohesion is not an end in itself. It is a means that allows society to function, build trust, overcome crises and develop. Secondly, cohesion must not be imposed – it can only be experienced, lived and consciously cultivated. Thirdly, cohesion requires space and time – specific contexts, spaces of relationships, joint work, not just formal documents. And finally – cohesion calls for a certain cultural maturity: the ability to differ without losing mutual respect, and the ability to cooperate without forfeiting individual responsibility.

The historical path of Latvian society renders the issue of cohesion particularly complex. The legacy of the Soviet occupation, the ethnolinguistic structure, the doctrine of the restoration of independence, and the long years of the prevailing assumption that integration into Europe would in itself ensure the stability of society – all these factors have

created a situation in which there are no simple solutions. Until now, the societal cohesion has frequently been based on the hope that the common language, economic growth, or educational policy will be sufficiently strong unifying factors. Meanwhile, reality shows that without a more profound cultural and symbolic commonality, these tools remain mechanically blunt.

Hence, the main task of this volume is to remind us that cohesion is also a cultural and philosophical issue, not just a description of a situation in terms of quantitative measurements. It is a question of how people live together – how they talk, listen, feel, argue and are beholden to each other. In his essay “Building. Dwelling. Thinking”, Heidegger writes: “The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*.”¹ The cohesion could be explained similarly

– we are not cohesive yet, but we are trying to become that way. This attempt is at once political, aesthetic, practical, and ethical.

I would like to express profound gratitude to all the authors who participated in the creation of the current collection – with their opinions, knowledge, data and conceptual constructions, and to acknowledge the shared efforts invested in this collaborative work by the University of Latvia Press, colleagues in the project and all the co-authors. Instead of representing a point, this book is a thought in motion, a vector that hopes to encounter other vectors – readers, thinkers, decision-makers, members of society.

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¹ Heidegger, M. *Building Dwelling Thinking*.
In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York:
Perennial, 2001, p. 159.