

Short report

Forum Frauenkirche Online, February 2022

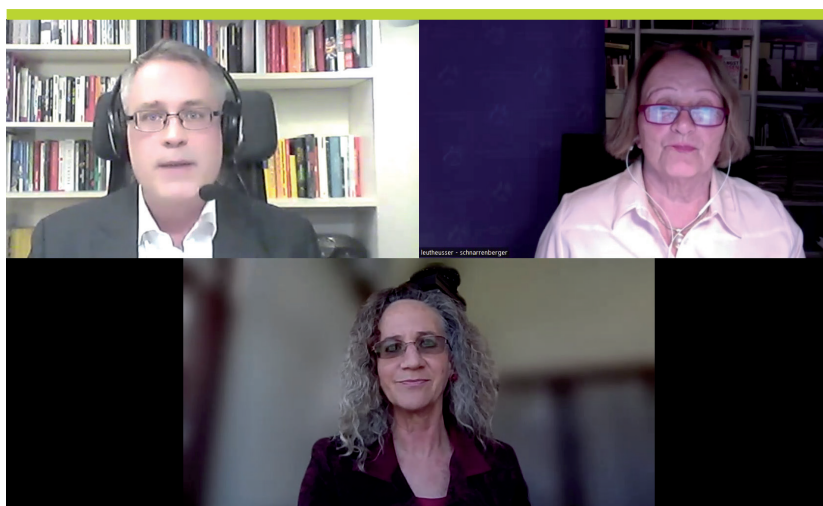
sef:



Addressing Social Polarisation Actively: By Dialogue and a Firm Stand?

Michèle Roth

When societies are drawn into the maelstrom of ever-increasing polarisation, there is a risk of division and even violent confrontation. But there is also a wealth of experience worldwide which can be used to prevent the drifting apart of societies. This was the starting point for the Forum Frauenkirche Online on 10 February 2022. It aimed to identify strategies for actively countering social polarisation. What can politics and society do to overcome rifts and build trust? And what are the options when dialogue is (apparently) no longer possible? These issues were discussed by former Minister of Justice Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger and Lena Slachmuislder from Search for Common Ground at the invitation of the Development and Peace Foundation (sef:), Bonn, the Frauenkirche Foundation Dresden and the Saxon State Agency for Civic Education. The discussion was chaired by radio presenter Bastian Wierzioch from Leipzig.



Bastian Wierzioch (Chair), Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger and Lena Slachmuislder (clockwise)

The pandemic and social media as drivers of polarisation

At the start of the discussion, both panellists confirmed that growing social polarisation can be observed in Germany and worldwide. Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger added that this polarisation is evident not only in the discourse but increasingly also in behavioural patterns and at street protests. The pandemic is not the cause, but it is a key driver. Social media are another major accelerator: they have encouraged the coarsening of language and have a very extensive reach. For example, there is the problem of group-specific abuse, which has nothing to do with intensified problem-oriented debate.

At the same time, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger cautioned against making generalised judgements about people who protest against the coronavirus restrictions. Their motives vary considerably, and there is a risk that people with justified concerns will be driven into the arms of those whose aim is to undermine democracy.

A sense of powerlessness and complexity as causal factors

Lena Slachmuislder attested to this risk, based on her decades of experience in various regions of the world. The feeling that one's own concerns are not being taken seriously by politicians and society and that there seems to be no prospect of being able to change one's situation in any way makes people across the world susceptible to manipulation and

abuse. Social media, with their information bubbles, can reinforce enemy stereotypes by inciting fears and constantly reinforcing a sense of grievance. This can result in a narrative that justifies violence as the only way to gain a hearing for one's concerns.

Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger drew attention to a further causal factor: the increased complexity of current political challenges, which are difficult to comprehend and in many cases can only be solved at the European or global level. This applies to the major topics of climate change and migration, for example, as well as to the current pandemic. The rifts within societies are not only horizontal; there is, in addition, growing alienation between the political level and citizens in many instances. This issue was raised in a question from the audience, which cast doubt on the qualifications of many politicians. In response, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger said that what counts is not only politicians' technical expertise, especially since their knowledge levels are bound to vary from one field to another. What matters, above all, is their ability to communicate and adopt a consistent position in the debate.

A further contribution from the audience drew attention to colonialism as a cross-cutting problem with considerable divisive potential. Many anti-democratic tendencies and ideologies that are degrading to others have their origins in colonialism. Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger agreed that "colonial" attitudes are often present without being



Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger

labelled as such. This challenging topic should be integrated more fully into the public debate and should not only feature in academic discourses.

Ways out of the polarisation spiral

In situations of growing confrontation, mutual empathy and the ability to see others not simply as opponents but as people with their own fears and needs are easily lost. In such cases, Search for



Forum Frauenkirche: Lena Slachmuijlder

Common Ground adopts a three-step approach, as Lena Slachmuijlder explained with reference to the conflict between Syrian refugees and the local community in Lebanon. The first step is about "humanisation". This means creating opportunities for people to move beyond stereotypes and see each other as individuals, for example by playing football together. It would be naïve to expect two people who have experienced violence to sit down together and reach a point of reconciliation. People need to be empowered, step by step, to recognise the humanity in the "other" once more. As the second step, people must be encouraged to work together on solving problems. And finally, these solutions must be built into the system so that future conflicts can be resolved by similar means. It is not about achieving unity on all points; that is a myth. Ultimately, people should preserve their own identity while finding ways to cooperate, said Lena Slachmuijlder. In terms of its methodology, Search for Common Ground relies on dialogue, joint activities and working with the media. Due to its outsider role, it starts by listening, understanding the conflicts and finding allies who are familiar with the individual groups and the different sides in the conflict.

Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger was convinced by the basic approach, namely facilitating encounters and identifying common interests. She added that it is especially important to create opportunities for encounter and dialogue at commu-

nity level, in order to foster peaceful interaction instead of confrontation, e.g. with the “walkers” who attend informal protests in Germany at present.

And if there is no willingness to engage in dialogue – what happens then?

Difficulties arise if there is a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue and to accept certain rules, said Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger. In such cases, even listening can become a problem if the person sitting opposite is simply abusive and intent on inflaming the conflict. Here, citizens who wish to express their legitimate protest, e.g. to the coronavirus restrictions, should be aware that the limits to what is acceptable in a democracy are soon transgressed.



Impressions from the work of Search for Common Ground in Lebanon

So it is even more important to reach out to those who have a genuine concern and interest in problem-solving and to divert them away from those whose sole aim is to exploit discontent in order to pursue their own, often anti-democratic goals. Spoilers exist everywhere, Lena Slachmijlder added. No one likes to be told that they are wrong and should change their position. If we want to enter into dialogue with someone whose viewpoint we consider dangerous, we have a responsibility to ensure that we do not see that person solely in

terms of their opinion. Lena Slachmijlder warned against addressing differences directly in such situations. This simply pushes people into even more extreme positions. Instead, it is helpful to start by skirting around the contentious issue and finding common ground on another level, such as a shared identity as a single parent or sports fan.

More social participation and engagement

One participant pointed to another dilemma: democracy can only work if it is representative, but many people do not feel represented. He wondered whether one solution might be to make more use of citizens' assemblies. In response, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger pointed out that citizens' assemblies can only ever be a partial form of representation. Nevertheless, they are, in her view, a good add-on, especially at local level, as they provide citizens with a space where they can develop their own ideas. However, a measure of commitment is needed so that politicians genuinely engage with the proposals devised in these assemblies. Popular or citizens initiatives on a regional or local level (Bürgerinitiativen) are another participatory mechanism and work well in Bavaria. Lena Slachmijlder also emphasised the opportunity of avenues like citizens' assemblies, which, like jury duty, become an expected citizen duty. She encouraged people in the audience to explore diverse ways of engaging people, such as using theater or other formats which gamify participation to incentivize a problem-solving culture.

Promoting social cohesion is not only a task for politicians. This was apparent from a further input from a member of the audience, who called for citizens to take more responsibility, e.g. in the integration of refugees. Each and every one of us can do more for society, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger agreed. And Lena Slachmijlder added that the media and the churches, with their very broad reach, can play an important role in mediating, promoting understanding and trust-building, provided that they do not push people towards one single identity but encourage them to develop and embrace all their diverse identities.

Imprint

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