

Foreword

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The discussions and reflections at the symposium focused on crisis tendencies and developmental trends – which can often be characterised as ambivalent and full of risks – in many European countries and on the level of the functioning of the European Union.

On one hand, we are witnessing the ontological uncertainty of individuals, and a crisis of their cognitive-meaningful positioning in the micro-environment as well as globally. On the other hand, we find that modern societies are ever more politically-ideologically polarised, making it increasingly difficult to reach a basic consensus for productive policy management and decision-making. This became apparent with the pandemic when many countries, especially in sub-systems like healthcare, emerged weaker, burdened by numerous dysfunctions and anomie phenomena. We acknowledge external factors such as (weakly regulated) globalisation, climate change, the complex transition to ‘sustainable’ forms, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza – all of these factors are accumulating. However, at the same time there is greater deceit, the pursuit of narrow interests or ignorance, cynicism and solipsism. A strange hybrid is arising between the hyper-technological knowledge society (led by artificial intelligence, robotics, neuroscience and genetics, along with the ideology of transhumanism) and a postfactual (post-truth) society where scientific facts or arguments carry little weight, are subject to a priori challenges or interpretations, and the argument of power holds more sway than the power of argument.

We may speak of a fluctuation (and transition) between an advanced, sophisticated techno-science and the significant cognitive simplifications (and dissonances) in the form of conspiracy theories. Moreover, in civil society and across the whole social and political environment for some time fluctuations have been visible from one extreme to the other, with one ideological extreme triggering another. Some modern societies are somewhat ‘eccentric’, unstable, or as the American sociologist Etzioni put it over 60 years ago, „drifting societies“, lacking

the ability for (democratic) consensus yet not totalitarian either. In our opinion, we can speak of anomie in the form of the loss of core values and normative disintegration. Originally, anomie was defined as a state of normative disintegration of society, resulting from the absence of norms and laws (or the fact these norms and laws are no longer valid and new ones do not yet exist). However, other situations that lead to similar outcomes are possible as well. Overregulation, or the unreflective and highly improvised use of legislative documents also results in people disregarding or ignoring them. This once again signifies an erosion of the social contract.

This is happening in all areas, including science policy where we are dealing with the so-called normative elaboration/construction that aims to establish a new paradigm (vision) of open science. Here, the bureaucratic link between legitimacy and procedure (labelled „Legitimation durch Verfahren“ by the German social systems theorist Luhmann decades ago) overshadows the content or vision. This allows – especially in manipulative and extremely dense legislative processes – the use of discretionary power to decide who produces ‘excellent’ open science, or expertise and adheres to the prescribed procedures, which can cause a new cycle of clientelist ‘in-breeding’. Underlying this is a nihilistic will to power, perhaps in the form of an experiment in ‘cultural hegemony’.

These (anomic) occurrences are not new, nor is the *forma mentis* behind them. In recent years, however, the components or symptoms of such anomie, like amnesia, chameleonism and mimicry, the focus on (non-strategic) short-term thinking, cognitive dissonance, and seeking refuge within like-minded groups (in-groups), have become increasingly pronounced. While it may not yet be prevalent everywhere, this mentality is spreading across all institutions, occupational groups, including politics and science (starting in science policy), and largely determines the fate of European societies and the EU itself. The symposium’s primary focus was on how to limit and counter this mentality with social innovations that go beyond anomie and the crisis of meaningful positioning and strategic thinking.

This volume consists of contributions presented at the international symposium entitled European societies in times of anomie and cognitive-ethical dissonance, which was organised by the Institute for Developmental and Strategic Analysis between 17 and 21 April 2024 in Strunjan, Slovenia. The contributions are divided into three main parts. In part one, general discussions connected to the topic are presented. Part two contains several case studies of different countries. The last part represents abstracts of unpublished work by the Institute and offers insights into possibilities for future research.