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**ARE WE TOP OR NOT? UNDERSTANDING THE PARADOX
ABOUT SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY**

Are we top or not? Understanding the paradox about social capital in the Basque Country

Abstract

Most studies on social capital usually integrate proxy variables such as cooperation, participation or trust, but very few explore deeply the underlying patterns of behaviour and the resulting social phenomena. Filling the gap of other precedent studies, this paper conducts a long-range study of the stock of social capital in the Basque with the aim of analysing the values that are at the core of the civic engagement in the territory. The structural and cognitive dimensions are approached through secondary data collected from official statistics websites and relevant studies in the field. This information confirms the paradox: at the national scale, the Basque Country is a leading community, but the region-specific research unveils a darker scenario of endogamic relations, institutional distrust and low participation. Therefore, despite the remarkable guiding role of numerous public organisations, further steps are needed to improve the connectivity of the different actors within the Regional Innovation System.

Keywords and JEL codes

Social capital (Z13), Economic sociology (A14), Regional Development Policies (R58), Institutions (D02), Networks (L14).

1. Introduction

In the global knowledge economy, no single actor possesses all the necessary knowledge, but is to some extent dependent on interaction with others. Thirty years ago, the traditional approaches of innovation systems concentrated strongly on the components within the structure, (Lundvall, 1992). Now, we know that their interactions are important determinants of innovation processes (Asheim and Coenen, 2006; Westlund, 2006; Edquist, 2011) and innovation policy should not only focus on the actors of the systems, but also on the relations between them.

In this context, there is a concept, originally from Sociology, which has been discussed recently in a large number of academic disciplines related to the space-and-learning literature: social capital. There is a broad set of definitions around this term, but simply put, if capital is defined as a store of value that facilitates action, then social capital is the value of relationships (Coleman, 1988; Baker, 1990). While human capital encompasses individual ability, social capital deals with opportunity. Social capital may operate at the level of an individual, a team, an organisation, an industry, a community, a nation, or an entire economy (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). Whatever the focal subject is, the social capital theory suggests that players gain access to various resources that accrue to them by virtue of their engagement in various kinds of relationships (Gabbay and Leenders, 1999). Individuals with more social capital get higher returns on their human capital because they are positioned to identify and develop more rewarding opportunities. At the firm level, strategy theorists have described the role of social capital in developing intellectual capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) and in giving access to resources otherwise unavailable to the company (e.g., Starr and MacMillan, 1990; Uzzi, 1999). And at the macro level, societies may benefit from social capital since it can enhance values such as solidarity, trust or associationism (Putnam, 1993).

This paper adopts the latter perspective, analysing certain chief values and norms inherited in relations among economic agents in the Basque Country (ES21). A long trajectory of innovation policy and a substantial investment of public funds have originated a rich set of actors (cluster associations, research centres, local development agencies, etc.), but one of the main challenges remains to enhance the effectiveness of the Regional Innovation System (RIS) as some results do not correspond to the inputs put in place in the last years (Magro, 2014). In that line, this contribution aims to (i) disentangle the stock of social capital in the Basque Country from the

national and regional viewpoint, (ii) understand the main values associated to social relationship and participation, and (iii) interpret if there is room for improving the connectivity of the innovation system.

The text is structured as follows: the second section provides the theoretical background on regional social capital and the research gap is introduced. Section three deals with the validity of the assessment tools to measure social capital and the information sources employed in the study. The fourth and fifth sections compile evidences about the stock of social in Spain and the Basque Country respectively, and the next section contains a contextual discussion where the paradox is emphasised. Finally, the main conclusions are mentioned in the last section.

2. Regional social capital

Macro-level social capital perceives it as a resource that benefits the broad socio-economic aggregate. Without abandoning the outcomes that it generates at the individual and group levels, this proposal highlights certain attributes of social capital that have the potential to favour the smooth functioning of the economy and society. In Putnam's groundbreaking study (1993), social capital at the macro level was mainly seen as a feature of civil society. However, with the expansion of social capital research in a large number of disciplines, the concept has come to be seen as having a much greater impact on regional development than was ever suggested by Putnam's civic society variables. Just like firms, territories have different features when it comes to dealing with knowledge transfer. Intangible assets, such as social capital, decide how effectively innovation networks function and differences in regional social capital thus help explain regional differences in economic development (Rutten and Boekema, 2007).

In consonance with social capital at other agglomeration scales, regional social capital is a two-sided concept. On the one hand, it originates from the embeddedness of actors in regional webs of social relations. A city or a region does not possess one uniform kind of social capital but a number of partly disparate, partly competing social capitals, formed, carried and reproduced by various groups in that localisation (Westlund and Larsson, 2016). These group-based social capitals have more or less common denominators, which form the base for the necessary bridging links between them and are crucial for regional development. Social capital, however, does not develop automatically from interactions. Instead, it takes time for trust to develop

(Mackinnon et al., 2004) and the norms, values and customs of a region play an important role in building mutual credibility.

Numerous studies mention collective assets at the macro level as exogenous variables that affect social capital. For example, van der Meer (2003) finds that in regions with higher associational density, citizens who are not even involved in associations have developed more trust in others and in political institutions. Equally, trustworthy institutions can uphold generalised trust, which in turn may have a direct impact on interaction and networking (Stolle, 2004). In this vein, the role of the state and political institutions has recently been introduced into the discussion about the sources of generalised values. Some authors rightly have pointed out that the capacity of a society to ensure cooperation among its citizens is determined by its historical experience and is strongly path dependent (Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995), but there are policy options available to stimulate the development of social capital. Finally, the family background is determinant for all these exogenous variables to influence over social interactions, with the role of the parents especially important as they may model the attitudes and norms of their children (Hooghe and Stolle (2003).

In the last decade, several assessments of the Basque STI policy have exposed the need to upgrade the connectivity of the different actors of the RIS (Navarro, 2010; OECD, 2011; Aranguren et al., 2012, Magro, 2014), and some researchers (e.g., Etxabe and Valdaliso, 2016) have dared to measure social capital and suggest some improvements for the policy network. Nevertheless, very few studies have conducted a structured analysis of the values that are implicit in the norms of reciprocity and trust that configure the base for relationships. In 2011 Barandiaran and Korta nicely portrayed the stock of social capital in the territory of Gipuzkoa, but this work so far is to be done for the Basque Country as a whole. This fact inspired the need to accomplish a deep historical revision of social capital in the region.

Furthermore, this contribution tackles further investigation gaps in the literature about social capital. First of all, traditional economic research generally considers nations instead of regions, and from this research perspective, this paper tries to estimate the set of sociocultural factors that are mostly shared by agents at the regional level. Second, following the evolutionary approaches that emphasise the importance of incorporating a long-term perspective into research strategies, it attempts to capture the specificities of the Basque case in the recent history. And finally, it pays special attention to cognitive elements such as trust, reciprocity,

participation or cooperation because they may explain the mechanisms through which tacit knowledge is spread and innovative routines are developed over time.

3. The measurement of social capital at the macro level

Historically, the first attempts measured social capital at the micro/meso level, referring to attributes and propensities that facilitate mutually beneficial collective action among members of a community. However, since the theoretical leap forward that Putnam made in regarding social capital as a feature of regions and nations, social capital is gauged on the basis of attitudinal and membership data at this level and an increasing number of international surveys have made possible the cross-country comparisons. Generally speaking, these datasets are characterised by the use of two types of indicators: proxy indicators and distal indicators, that is, direct or indirect indicators. The proxy indicators are outcomes of social capital which are related to the key components of networks, trust and reciprocity. Other types of indicators used for measuring social capital are distal indicators. They are mostly related to the population (e.g. life expectancy, unemployment rates, rent per capita, distribution of households, etc.), aspects of political organisation, or social exclusion and disintegration (Stone, 2001: 5).

Some scholars (e.g. Knack and Keefer, 1997; Paldam, 2000; Grootaert, 2001; Glaeser et al., 2002) criticise the various measurement systems of this macro approach. It is true that social capital cannot be solely treated as a black-box macro-instrument producing social goods, but the complex nature of the causal chain that goes from the dynamics of social relations to collective cohesion or generalised trust does not imply a lack of empirical rigor per se. In that line, the assessment of social capital requires a precise understanding of the way in which social capital operates at the macro level, and a more stringent operationalisation is needed in order to demonstrate that social capital actually makes a difference for individuals and/or the collectivity.

According to Krishna and Schrader (2002: 23), any assessment tool that aims to measure social capital must comply with some minimum requirements. The first condition is that structural and cognitive elements must be combined to constitute the beneficial collective action that we recognise as social capital. The structural dimension refers to the networks and organisations to which the actors belong, while the cognitive dimension of social capital assesses norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs related to solidarity, trust, and reciprocity. In practice, the

distinction between structural and cognitive elements is mostly of an analytical nature, because there is usually some degree of overlap and intermixing. The more people trust each other and the higher the degree of solidarity in a community, for instance, the more people will associate with local organisations and their expectations regarding future collective action will also be higher. Similarly, the smaller the extent of exclusion within a community, the more widespread is the network of mutual obligations and reciprocity among community members. All in all, the structural and the cognitive provide two different perspectives for observing social capital in practical situations, and both should be taken into account, adjusting their respective contributions from one context to another.

The other important requirement is to integrate quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Increasingly, social science research, including economic research, combines both methods in the quest for research designs best suited for assessing complex issues and concepts. Integration of complementary methodologies is a fruitful strategy for several reasons: to confirm and corroborate results via triangulation, to elaborate or develop analysis, to provide richer detail, and to initiate new lines of thinking through attention to surprises or paradoxes (Rossman and Wilson, 1994). Plus, it is even more important to combine quantitative and qualitative techniques when trying to analyse a complex and innovative concept such as social capital, because it can provide a deeper understanding of what individuals regard as social capital and a broader overview of the institutional framework in a particular region.

In what follows I introduce a multidimensional revision of social capital in Spain that fulfils the previous conditions. At the national level, it employs data from validated sources such as the CIS (the Centre for Sociological Research), the BBVA Foundation and IVIE (Valencian Institute of Economic Research). And for the special focus on the Basque case, information has been extracted from several studies carried out by Eustat (the Basque Institute of Statistics).

4. Stock of social capital in Spanish regions

As in other countries, the most empirical work measuring social capital in Spain has been implemented at the national level, and few studies offer an analytical view at the regional level. Even though it was conducted two decades ago, the analysis of Mota and Subirats (2000) remains to date the most comprehensive and detailed study. These authors followed Putnam's (1993) social capital investigation and applied its methodological approach to the Spanish case,

creating a social capital index based on three measurements: level of citizen engagement, level of membership in associations oriented toward the creation of public and private goods (per 10,000 inhabitants), and membership in twelve types of associations that have more general social aims (see Table 1).

The first measurement attempts to capture each region's civic attitudes and behaviour by tapping its citizens' active participation in public affairs. As Putnam (1993) warns, a structure with high social capital is characterised by the active participation of individuals in social and political affairs. In his opinion, citizens are not necessarily altruistic; they also seek their own interest, but in a way they are open to the interest of others, which should be revealed in the search for information about collective issues. In this line, Mota and Subirats constructed an index of citizen engagement across regions using three indicators: (i) the proportion of citizens with high interest in regional politics; (ii) the percentage of daily press readers in each region, and (iii) the proportion of citizens informed about their regional government's activities. The high scorers on the index were the Basque Country, Navarra, La Rioja and Catalonia (ibid: 139).

Apart from the individual attitudes committed to public affairs, the associative life is a relevant indicator of civic sociability. As Alexis de Tocqueville (1832, in Hooghe, 2008) said about the American society, the core of the civic commitment lies in participation in voluntary associations through which individuals develop the capacity for cooperation and a common responsibility in collective affairs. Similarly, Mota and Subirats distinguish associations that produce public and private goods. The former can be enjoyed by any individual in the community and generate a form of social capital stronger than the latter, which only produce goods for those who participate in creating them. Similarly, while the associations that produce private goods involve coordination, those that produce public goods involve cooperation, given the context of strong incentives not to contribute to the production of a public good. The results display that the Basque Country and Navarra are situated in the "collectivist" extreme containing the largest extension of philanthropic and welfare associations, which appears to be correlated to the greater degree of interest and information around public affairs referred above.

However, it should be noted that the value of civic engagement networks does not lie so much in the number of associations as in the proportion of citizens involved in voluntary organisations. Thus, by taking into account participation in twelve different types of

associations, Mota and Subirats arrive at an assessment of the density of associational life in each region. In general, the results of 1998 show that the level of participation is very low in all the regions and in all type of associations, being the Basque Country, La Rioja and Navarre the autonomous communities with the highest participation rates.

Using these three measurements, Mota and Subirats create a social capital index for Spain's seventeen autonomous communities (NUTS2). The findings identify eight regions with positive values in the index: the Basque Country, Navarre, La Rioja, the Valencian Community, Madrid, Aragon, Balearic Islands and Catalonia. It is remarkable that the Basque Country has by far the highest score and, additionally, is ranked in the first position in all the measurements.

The BBVA Foundation and IVIE (Valencian Institute of Economic Research) have also made a great effort to develop an index that estimates the volume of social capital among the OECD countries and especially in Spain, where they disaggregate by autonomous communities and provinces (NUTS3). It is an index based on a key principle: economic relations are an essential channel in the generation of social capital, which is the result of a process of accumulation of costly investments that generate economic returns (Pérez García et al., 2005; Peiró and Tortosa, 2012; Fernández de Guevara et al., 2015).

The most important differences between this approach and other indicators most commonly used in the literature are twofold. First of all, there is a recognised role of economic relationships in the generation of cooperation experiences. In various studies, social capital is regarded as a result of experiences of cooperation in non-economic spheres, such as the family, voluntary associations or citizens' movements. However, Pérez García et al. (2005) consider that the economic sphere is also a medium that can foster the accumulation of social capital, particularly when individuals personally experience sustained economic growth and can therefore benefit from the improvements this growth brings.

The second difference lies in the procedure used to measure the stock of social capital, which is similar to that used by economists to estimate other types of capital. According to this approach, the value of assets is based on the flow of expected future payments that possession of these assets will yield, once the associated costs to obtain them have been deducted. Social capital is therefore evaluated in the same way as any other type of economic activity: according to its expected future profitability. The proxies used to represent the behaviour of investors in

social capital are per capita income level and employment probability (determinants of the probability of obtaining a certain level of income), inequality (relevant for assessing the risk of non-participation or social exclusion), educational level (for its influence on reducing the cost of cooperating with other people) and access to credit (as a proxy for the probability of being trustworthy).

In general, the analysis of this index shows that until 2008, confidence in economic relations as well as in politics and collective institutions stimulated a sustained growth in the volume of social capital in Spain. However, since the Great Recession, there have been significant changes in many of the index's variables (income stagnation, job loss, increasing inequality or greater difficulty in accessing credit), returning to levels back at the beginning of the century. By territories, the northeast part of Spain hosted most of the regions with high social capital in 2005 (see Figure 1) and, according to the newest data from 2012, the Basque Country had the second highest score after Navarre. And among the three Basque provinces, Alava and especially Gipuzkoa are doing better than Bizkaia, the biggest and most populated territory in the region (Figure 2).

In sum, these two researches reflect the strong relative position of the Basque Country in comparison to other Spanish regions, but they may have important shortcomings. First, the work of Mota and Subirats is based on data compiled twenty years ago and should be updated to provide a more accurate perspective. And second, even though the economy affects confidence and therefore social capital, it seems to me that method of BBVA Foundation and IVIE has a significant economic bias that over-conditions the sign and magnitude of the index. For this reason, a correct interpretation of the situation in the Basque Country should incorporate other indicators of social and collective action that may provide a more precise and detailed picture of the region.

5. Stock of social capital in the Basque Country

Eustat, the Basque Statistics Institute, publishes regularly several studies that tackle the measurement of social capital, directly or indirectly. Especially important is the Social Capital Survey (from now on ECS, *Encuesta de Capital Social*), which aims to estimate the social wealth of the autonomous community every five years since 2007. Table 2 and Figure 3 show

the data corresponding to the last three samples. Let us have a look on the results and the evolution of the main indicators, grouped in different sections¹.

5.1. Size and characteristics of social networks

As pointed out so far, the concept of social capital refers primarily to the participation of individuals in networks of social relations. Having a minimum base of social network is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the generation of social capital. In fact, as we will see later, the size of social networks is associated with important dimensions of social capital.

On average, Basque citizens have 22.8 people at the broad network, constituted by family and friends with whom regular communication is maintained. The composition of this group is the following: there are 11.3 relatives (1.8 sharing the household and 9.5 living somewhere else) but the relationship is close with 8 of them. The rest of the group is formed by friends (11.5), where only 5 are considered "close". It is also observed that people hardly keep mates who are or have been neighbours (1.1 out of the 10.3) or co-workers (0.8). School or university colleagues represent 2.1, a bit more than the previous. In that line, respondents had not contacted their broad network (excepting those who live with them) very frequently in the last month before the survey (4.74 in a 0-10 scale) and face-to-face relationships are far above relationships through the Internet and other virtual networks (2.22), although this value increases among students (3.33).

The size of the networks appears to be clearly associated with other facets of social capital considered by the survey. The larger the size, the greater the supply and reception of aid (in the closest network), access to different types of aid, reciprocity and cooperation, trust, happiness, participation, etc. Therefore, the size of the networks is really a "capital" that individuals possess and can activate for both their own profit (help, happiness, personal independence) and for the benefit of the community (trust, participation).

Unfortunately, ECS is the only research of this type carried out so far in the Basque Country, and the scarce temporal perspective prevents us from considering social relations in the long run. Other surveys carried out by Eustat in different years, such as Life Conditions Survey (*Encuesta de Condiciones de Vida, ECV*) may allow an indirect approach to some issues

addressed by ECS-17, providing a more longstanding insight into the evolution of family and social relationships in the Basque Country over thirty years (Table 3).

As noted, the importance of family relationships in the Basque Country is high: 95% of the respondents maintain some kind of contact with the closest family in 2019. Interaction with other relatives is also quite significant and the percentage of families with deep relationships has exponentially grown. Even more changes have occurred in relationships with friends: intense relationships have increased 28 points between 1989 and 2019. Finally, as far as relations with neighbours are concerned, it is noteworthy that, after having experienced a strong decline in the 90s, the percentage of families declaring no neighbourhood relationships has more than doubled over the last three decades.

The homogeneity (or heterogeneity) of the network of friends has been also considered in the survey. For the population as a whole, homogeneity takes an average value of 5.93, which means that Basques still tend to have friends that are equal to them in terms of religious beliefs, nationality, social position or political trend. Pensioners (8.07), workers who carry out household tasks (7.68) and people with primary or lower education (7.64) have the most homogenous networks, whereas medium-high class residents (4.39), university students (4.60) and unemployed (4.61) have mainly more heterogeneous friends. Homogeneity is positively associated with dimensions such as reciprocity, cooperation, social cohesion, trust in institutions, security or personal influence, and negatively with the size of networks, aid in their different expressions (both borrowed and received and related to various circumstances), general trust, personal independence, social and political participation, use of the Internet and the feeling of happiness and health.

5.2. Trust and corruption

Trust is an essential element for the creation of social networks that generate social capital. Together, both dimensions, social networks and trust would be considered by many authors as the two key components of social capital (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). From a political economy and community development perspective, trust as a form of social capital is a key contributor to civil society, a factor granting legitimacy to governments and political institutions, and an indicator of social cohesion (Woolcock, 1998).

Measured broadly, general trust expressed by Basque population is 5.96. This figure varies depending on whether it is about institutions (4.81), professions (5.52) or family and friendship networks (7.20). Excepting the latter, the other values are around 5, which indicates that people sometimes trust and other times do not. On average, especially low is trust in institutions (see Table 4), even though it changes considerably, from a minimum of 2.80 points for political parties up to 6.29 points for Ertzaintza (Basque police) or 6.37 points for non-governmental organisations. Regarding the public administration, the greatest trust is for the Basque Government (5.91), and later come the councils (5.57), international institutions (4.90), European institutions (4.55) and the Spanish Government (3.27).

If we consider the overall evolution, it is interesting to observe that all measurements improve after important drops in the previous sample in 2012. In fact, the image of some institutions was severely harmed as a result of the economic crisis in 2008 and some corruption scandals uncovered early in the last decade, partly losing people's confidence. It goes without saying that the economic situation has a direct impact on how people perceive institutions and their performance. As for corruption, it is negatively associated with trust in its different expressions, reciprocity, cooperation, social cohesion, security, happiness, personal influence and independence. By sociodemographic characteristics, the average score for corruption is 6.36² but young people aged 25-34 have a worse perception (6.76).

5.3. Aid, reciprocity and cooperation

From the perspective of social capital, an essential function of social networks is to serve as a resource for obtaining help in different adverse circumstances. In general terms, Basques score quite high in items highly associated to well-being (e.g., 7.14 in happiness and health or 8.03 in security) and that may explain the low effort in supporting fellows. When asked about the possibility of having provided or received aid in the six months prior to the survey, the level of assisting others (3.30) is bigger than receiving aid (2.04). Age is shown as the most discriminating variable in both aspects. People aged 15-24 give and receive clearly more help (4.85 and 3.82) than people above 65 (1.72 and 1.38 respectively).

Specifically, ECS distinguishes three areas: economy (financial aid), health (help in case of illness) and emotions (affective support). In 2012, the survey indicates that approximately 30% did not provide any aid or contributed with one or two types of aid, while 10% furnished

assistance for the three types indicated above. On the other hand, 61% did not receive any, 22% received aid of one type, 11% of two and a little less than 5% received all three types. Moreover, it is noticed that it is generally easier to request and receive help in the event of a health problem (6.28) than in the case of needing emotional help (5.90) or financial aid (5.18). As expected, people born abroad have lower access to aid indicators in all cases, as well as retired, widowed, separated and divorced persons, those who live alone and residents who have a lower level of education.

In terms of reciprocity, it reaches an average value of 5.90. There is only a moderate correlation between giving and receiving help, because people perceive that they receive less help than what they give others. Anyway, it is very clear that if you do not help, it is very probable that you will not be repaid; likewise, the more you assist others, the more likely it is that you will receive help. This being the case, in general, Basques have a rather cooperative vision of the society, which strikingly clashes with the so often reported cooperativism of the region. Personal independence (to what extent people can make decisions over daily activities) is significant (7.36), especially amid the staff working in services and entrepreneurs. Finally, social cohesion, combining proximity, conflict and acceptance of differences, reaches only 6.43 points.

5.4. Social and political participation

Basque people are relatively interested in socio-political issues (5.89 on average) and moderately informed about public affairs (5.64 points), despite the variety of information sources of different territorial scope (6.48) and the significant use of the media (6.52). More precisely, people stay up-to-date on issues that are close to them, preferably from their neighbourhood, municipality or autonomous community (more than a third consider their level of information high), while they acknowledge to be less informed about Spain (just 25% declare to have a high level of information) and, above all, in Europe (little more than 15% have a lot of information).

This explicit expression of interest about regional and national topics may explain the high electoral participation, with an average value of 7.51, which would assume that they voted in 3 of the last 4 elections prior to the study. However, beyond this regular electoral participation, the reality is that the feeling of personal influence is low (4.87) and people do not generally

believe that their vote or participation plays a key role to make decisions. Maybe that is the reason why the contribution of the majority is reduced to the “traditional” custom of voting from time to time, because, otherwise, the social and political participation of the Basque population is very low (1.20 points on average). For instance, in 2012, less than 25% had participated in strikes and demonstrations in the previous year, and only 20% collaborated in campaigns to collect signatures. Since 2013, the majority of indicators remain stable or decline, except attendance at protests in favour of women and pensioners (Deustobarómetro, 2020b).

In this line, another point that draws attention is the almost null voluntary participation in associations (0.61). This rating is improved when other less active forms of participation (such as financial contributions or a simple membership) are considered. This way, sport associations exceed 15% and charities approach 10% of the population, while trade unions, cultural groups and development aid associations recruit around 7%. Anyway, these participation rates are very poor and it arises one of the most discussed issues among social capital analysts: is this weak social participation a sign of weakening of social capital in the Basque Country? We can not dwell on this important question since we do not have a time series that allows a diachronic analysis, but the Time Budget Survey (*Encuesta de Presupuestos del Tiempo, ECT*) elaborated by Eustat points in that way. Indeed, in the last twenty-five years the average time spent by the Basque population on “social life” has decreased in 28 minutes, from 1 hour and 10 minutes in 1993 to 42 minutes in 2018 (Table 5). Time invested in visiting acquaintances, going out and chatting has slumped severely, as well as civic and religious participation. Besides, the proportion of the population who perform these activities has also diminished; in 2013, only 42.6% of the people took time to drop by and talk with friends from Monday to Thursday, 46.7% on Fridays, 56.8% on Saturdays and 60.3% on Sundays.

6. Understanding the paradox

There is an extended idea that the Basque Country is a community oriented society, well organised and with good social capital ratios. In general, available data at the national level confirm that the Basque Country scores very high in associationism and civic engagement, and economic proxies also emphasise an accumulation of social capital that may lead to greater cooperation experiences. Nevertheless, if we zoom to the regional scale, this perception clashes with another reality. On average, Basque people do not trust very much in institutions, and even though they seem to be interested in socio-political issues and vote regularly, they rarely

participate in associations and perceive that their vote is not very influential. The cooperative spirit is still in the DNA of the people, but in practice there is a low awareness of reciprocity (Basques assist seldom and are corresponded even less frequently) and a remarkable homogeneity of the personal networks. In general, respondents rather rely on bonding relationships and feel happy, safe and independent in a reduced network where virtual relations count for little.

First of all, I acknowledge that, when I contrast studies at the national and regional scale, I am comparing two different sets of data with different units of observation, levels of analysis, time periods and, primarily, items that are measured in varying ways. Nonetheless, I still believe that both pictures should not differ that much and this situation requires a deeper analysis and a more precise interpretation. How can we understand this paradox?

In relative terms, social capital in the Basque Country is high with regard to other regions in Spain, but the viewpoint changes if compared with some European countries. Unfortunately there is no publication concerning social capital that contrasts directly Basque figures with EU data, but some studies point that the Basque Country may be well below the mean in some relevant indicators. The most precise analysis of social capital at the EU level so far was conducted by the European Commission in 2004 (and published in 2005), where Spain stands out for its low associational activity and political disaffection. A more recent study performed by Eurostat in 2015 about social participation (see Table 6) shows that Spain is doing well in getting together with bonding ties and online communication, but is clearly below the EU average in formal and informal participation. Therefore, the Basque Country may be the rat's head but the lion's tail, or to put it another way, a relative good position in Spanish studies should not guide to overestimate the real stock of social capital.

Yet, the particularly low participation of Basque citizens in voluntary associations needs a further explanation and the role of public institutions may give us a clue to understand what is going on. In this line, Herreros (2004: 101) stresses that the state is crucial in the generation and perpetuation of the virtuous circle of social capital generation. In his view, governments have a number of tools at their disposal to nurture the emergence of social trust as by-product of people's participation in associational life. Moreover, he states that differences in social capital are historically rooted in civic attitude as well as in political and institutional traditions. In this sense, Montero and Torcal (1990) observed a decrease in political participation and a

growing perception of mistrust as a consequence of authoritarian politics practiced by Franco under four decades of dictatorship. After his death in 1975, Spain faced extraordinary political changes during the process of democratic consolidation, and despite the observed improvement of social capital since the transition to democracy, research on social capital in Spain demonstrates a scarce development of social capital as compared to other European countries. In fact, the above mentioned authors reveal moderate supportive attitudes towards democratic principles, together with low levels of social trust and limited political participation. And on top of that, there are more and more evidences demonstrating that individualism gains terrain to communitarianism, auzolan or community work is very sporadic and participation in social movements tends today to be less intense and more occasional.

Currently, Basque institutions are perceived with skepticism. Surveys place political parties among the least valued institutions and citizens systematically fail almost all their political leaders³. This democratic disaffection is a two-sided coin. On the one hand, political parties exhibit, in general terms, a strong resistance in relation to citizen participation due to the bidimensional space of political competition in the Basque Country: apart from the single left-right dimension, the existence of the nationalist cleavage acquires much larger dimension in the region as a result of the bitter confrontation between Basque nationalists and non-Basque nationalists, and between moderate Basque nationalists and radical Basque nationalists (Kriesi et al., 2007). The alignment of some citizen associations with interests of specific parties nurtures the fear that citizen participation can be instrumentalised against the power. In other words, politicians are afraid that participation can be used by certain socio-political sectors to undermine government action and discredit its leaders. This environment of confrontation tinges with distrust any initiative that goes beyond the usual management of municipal affairs.

On the other hand, citizens also have motives for distrust. Citizenship, both individual and organised, requires participation, but not any participation. As a result of negative previous experiences, many of the associations and groups most interested in deepening democracy through participatory processes maintain a notable distrust in institutional policy. Frequently, they do not believe that local institutions really want to assume the commitments that derive from citizen participation; they interpret the implementation of mechanisms or experiences of participation as a public marketing operation without an explicit scope and, sometimes, as a means to deactivate or neutralise the ongoing social mobilisation (Ajangiz, 2007).

Consequently, it is necessary to recover the civic virtues of the past, and to do so, both parts ought to contribute. Citizens must be concerned by public affairs and show a clearer social commitment with the society, considering their own interests but also the community's. Meanwhile, institutions should allow a shared management between different public and private actors, more subsidiary, complementary and cooperative than holistic or governing.

7. Conclusion

In recent years, the literature on social capital has evolved into an important academic trend that has revitalised the understanding of current social phenomena. The comprehension that networks are social spaces that allow access to resources for individual and collective benefit has shown its potential to explain divergences in regional economic development. Therefore, knowing the stock of social capital is an operation of enormous interest, both methodologically and substantially. First, it is fundamental to design a multidimensional cross-cutting tool comprising quantitative and qualitative indicators that best fit the territory to be analysed and will give an accurate photography of the past and present networking patterns. Moreover, this process is key for policy making to be able to measure the dynamics of interaction and the shared resources.

Analysis of the data compiled indicates that, generally speaking, the stock of social capital in the Basque Country is high, especially in comparison with other regions in Spain. In the social capital index drawn up by Mota and Subirats (2000), the Basque Country is in first place, leading in all the subcategories: citizen engagement, coordination-cooperation and associative participation. Or if we consider the analysis of IVIE and the BBVA Foundation, the Basque Country has the second best record (just behind the neighbouring region of Navarra) in terms of per capita social capital between 1983 and 2012. In fact, as shown, the region's social capital is estimated to have increased almost 500% over that period. This is due in part to the significant level of resources at regional level (relative to other regions in Spain) as well as strategic choices to fill needed gaps in policies from higher levels of government adapted to the region's industrial structure and innovation system actors.

However, this result must be interpreted in the light of numerous studies that underline the low stock of social capital in Spain as compared to other European countries. Besides, if we mind the most recent data about social capital in the Basque Country, the picture is not as attractive

as previous comparative research among Spanish regions may indicate. Several hypothesis are highlighted to explain this divergence, namely: (i) a more pronounced public intervention since the Civil War; (ii) the nationalist *cleavage* that divides the political arena in two; (iii) the prevalence of representative democracy over other forms of decision and public management; and (iv) recent corruption scandals that have severely damaged the image of institutions.

Inevitably, the result is an undesirable scenario of tense relationships between citizenship and public authorities. Participation is especially low, and so is general trust, notably institutional trust. A deliberative-consultative model of citizen participation dominates the political panorama and this is not the most appropriate version to enhance social capital and really solve the political disaffection that affects the Basque society. In this vein, bridging social capital urges to be promoted with the establishment of plural and integrating participatory spaces which favour the community feeling and discourage the sectorisation that characterises the current Basque society. Additionally, the intervention of public institutions seems necessary, with a clear enabling function and adjusted to the still reasonably good social capital of the country. The objective should be to strengthen the existing capital and lay the foundations so that it can expand and reproduce itself.

Looking ahead, further assessments at the Basque Country level ought to be carried out from time to time so that the research evidence is genuinely dynamic. As pointed out throughout the paper, the stock of social capital varies continuously and RISs require frequent photographs in order to know the real status of the connectivity between regional actors. In that line, forthcoming editions of the Social Capital Survey and other information sources will provide new insights about the social and economic context in the Basque Country.

Notes

¹ I do not split data into sexes because there are no substantial differences between men and women, except in some concrete indicators (see Table 2).

² 0 means there is no corruption and 10 means that corruption is generalised.

³ According to a recent survey, Aitor Esteban (PNV) is the only head politician that passes, with a score of 5.28 out of 10 (Deustobarómetro, 2019). The perception is even worse regarding their behavior during the Coronavirus crisis and nobody gets a pass grade (Deustobarómetro, 2020a).

⁴ No significant differences appeared between men and women in the whole series, save some particular cases. For example, in 2017, the women's network is somewhat more homogeneous

(6.17 compared to 5.68 for men), women trust a bit more in institutions (4.98 against 4.62) and men make a higher use of virtual networks (2.41-2.04).

⁵ Check the meaning of the letters in Table 2.

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Table 1: Social capital index in Spanish regions

REGION	Interest in regional politics	Daily press reading population over 14 (%)	Degree of political information about the Regional Government	INDEX OF CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT (factor score)	Economic and professional associations	Philanthropic and assistance associations	CONTINUUM COORDINATION-COOPERATION (factor score)	INDEX OF ASSOCIATIVE PARTICIPATION (factor score)	SOCIAL CAPITAL INDEX
The Basque Country	47	57	36	2.0110	2.2	3.6	2.234	1.4858	2.258
Navarre	42	61	34	1.7136	2.2	3.1	1.601	1.1650	1.793
La Rioja	46	49	27	1.0480	2.7	2.4	0.256	1.4299	1.232
Valencian Community	36	36	26	0.1684	2.2	1.7	-0.113	0.6547	0.354
Madrid	42	34	27	0.4934	4.3	2.2	-1.466	1.0048	0.294
Aragon	38	39	22	0.0224	3.4	2.0	-0.935	0.9619	0.201
Balearic Islands	38	47	20	0.1100	2.6	2.2	0.592	0.1398	0.133
Catalonia	40	44	30	0.8386	3.8	2.0	-1.228	0.0190	0.073
Andalusia	33	29	23	-0.3758	1.8	2.0	0.620	-0.4112	-0.196
Galicia	39	36	22	0.0147	2.1	1.6	-0.169	-0.6169	-0.329
Castile-La Mancha	24	22	18	-1.3966	1.8	2.1	0.699	0.0074	-0.455
Asturias	17	49	23	-0.3758	2.2	1.3	-0.644	-0.0652	-0.456
Castile and Leon	17	57	13	-1.1121	3.4	2.2	-0.716	-0.6718	-0.611
Murcia	23	29	17	-1.3350	2.3	2.4	0.647	-0.8771	-0.855
Canary Islands	37	38	22	-0.0399	3.1	1.6	-1.186	-1.0856	-0.857
Extremadura	27	31	17	-1.0650	1.8	1.8	0.404	-1.3225	-1.005
Cantabria	17	57	13	-1.1121	3.4	2.2	-0.716	-1.8180	-1.572

Source: self-elaboration, based on Mota and Subirats (2000).

Table 2. Social Capital indicators (mean values, 0-10)⁴

	2007	2012	2017
Social networks			
A. Personal relationships in the broad network	4.21	4.27	4.74
B. Use of Internet and virtual networks	1.60	1.91	2.22
C. Homogeneity of friends' network	6.04	6.34	5.93
Trust and corruption			
D. General trust	5.83	5.83	5.96
E. Trust in networks	6.86	7.07	7.20
F. Trust in institutions	4.66	4.46	4.81
G. Trust in professionals	5.11	5.20	5.52
H. Corruption	5.90	6.33	6.36
Aid, reciprocity and cooperation			
I. Happiness and health	7.07	7.16	7.14
J. Security	7.84	8.12	8.03
K. Provided aid	4.60	3.32	3.30
L. Received aid	2.83	1.96	2.04
M. Access to health assistance	6.70	6.11	6.28
N. Access to emotional aid	6.31	5.85	5.90
Ñ. Access to financial aid	5.49	4.99	5.18
O. Reciprocity	6.16	6.12	5.90
P. Cooperation	6.81	6.76	6.76
Q. Personal independence	7.35	7.75	7.36
R. Social cohesion	6.10	6.30	6.43
Social and political participation			
S. Interest in socio-political issues	5.75	5.45	5.89
T. Information on socio-political issues	5.17	5.30	5.64
U. Variety of information sources	7.54	7.15	6.48
V. Access to Mass Media	6.69	6.69	6.52
W. Personal influence	4.41	4.08	4.87
X. Electoral participation	7.55	7.19	7.51
Y. Participation in associations	0.80	0.39	0.61
Z. Social and political participation	1.22	1.22	1.20

Source: self-elaboration, based on ECS (2007, 2012, 2017).

Table 3: Degree of relations with relatives, friends and neighbours (%) 1989-2019

	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
With the closest family	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Intense	69.1	75.0	82.1	88.0	87.7	85.5	91.4
Frequent	19.9	18.5	12.6	6.3	6.2	7.8	3.3
Sporadic	6.6	3.8	1.9	1.1	1.7	1.7	0.7
None	4.4	2.6	3.4	4.7	4.4	5.0	4.7
With other relatives	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Intense	14.6	17.3	21.8	26.6	28.4	27.3	36.0
Frequent	28.7	29.1	33.8	33.7	31.9	28.9	26.7
Sporadic	38.3	35.5	32.1	25.2	22.2	25.3	15.0
None	18.4	18.1	12.4	14.4	17.5	18.6	22.4
With friends	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Intense	51.5	51.7	68.5	64.1	71.8	69.9	80.1
Frequent	26.8	25.3	21.0	18.9	15.7	14.4	8.2
Sporadic	10.5	12.0	7.1	6.7	4.1	6.5	2.1
None	11.2	11.0	3.4	10.3	8.4	9.1	9.7
With neighbours	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Intense	80.8	84.9	85.7	85.0	79.7	75.5	72.2
Frequent	4.9	4.3	6.6	5.1	3.7	4.5	2.6
Sporadic	1.7	0.8	1.5	1.1	1.2	1.3	0.4
None	12.6	10.0	6.2	8.8	15.5	18.7	24.8

Source: Eustat, ECV-2019.

Table 4: Trust in institutions

	2007	2012	2017
Political parties	3.11	2.63	2.80
Spanish Government	4.16	3.22	3.27
Banks	4.01	3.02	3.34
Catholic Church	4.19	3.91	4.00
Army	3.39	3.64	4.19
Trade unions	4.55	4.01	4.31
European institutions	4.69	4.07	4.55
International institutions	4.83	4.75	4.90
National Police and Civil Guards	4.31	4.54	4.99
Mass Media	4.75	4.98	5.08
Courts	4.72	4.55	5.11
Council	5.07	5.14	5.57
Basque Government	5.42	4.99	5.91
Charity organisations like Cáritas	5.52	6.09	6.10
Basque Police (Ertzaintza)	5.64	5.60	6.29
NGOs like Greenpeace, Médicos Sin Fronteras, etc.	6.10	6.20	6.37
TOTAL	4.66	4.46	4.81

Source: Eustat, ECS-2017.

Table 5: Average social time 1993-2018 (hours, minutes)

	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018
Physiological needs	11:25	11:34	11:50	11:41	11:56	12:17
Work and training	3:09	3:21	3:23	3:23	2:48	3:11
Domestic work	2:40	2:25	2:23	2:24	2:24	2:05
Home Care	0:19	0:20	0:21	0:28	0:29	0:36
Social life	1:10	1:03	0:58	0:38	0:44	0:42
Active leisure and sports	1:10	1:12	1:17	1:21	1:28	1:34
Passive leisure	3:06	2:54	2:39	2:58	2:58	2:35
Journeys	0:58	1:10	1:08	1:06	1:13	1:01
TOTAL	23:57	23:59	23:59	23:59	24:00	24:01

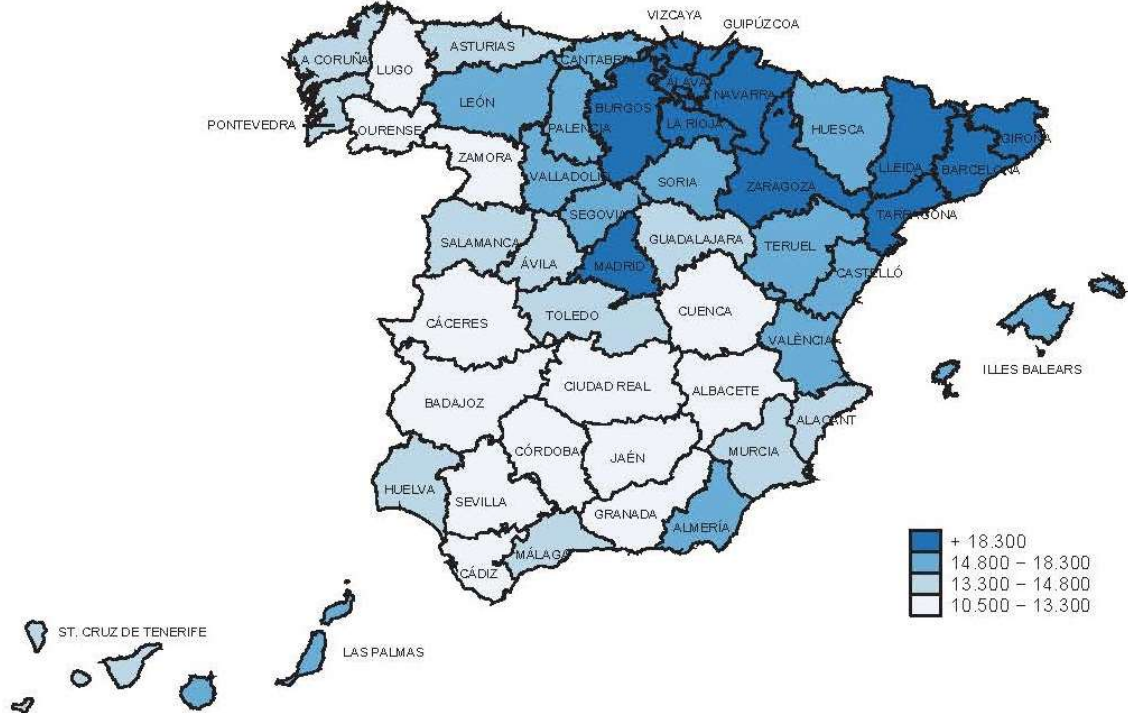
Source: Eustat, EPT-2018.

Table 6: Social capital indicators in EU-28 and some other countries (%)

COUNTRY	Participation in formal voluntary activities	Participation in informal voluntary activities	Active citizenship	Getting together with family and relatives every day	Communicating via social media every day
Austria	28.3	28.3	11.9	7.4	32.8
Belgium	20.4	20.8	4.9	18.6	35.2
Bulgaria	5.2	6.3	3.7	21.9	30.7
Croatia	9.7	17.2	5.7	29.7	24.8
Cyprus	7.2	2.6	2.1	45.4	40.6
Czech Republic	12.2	16.6	4.2	14.3	22.8
Denmark	38.7	41.8	9.5	3.1	40.7
Estonia	16.4	25.5	8.7	4.3	27.4
Finland	34.1	74.2	24.2	10.0	35.5
France	23.0	23.3	24.8	13.7	20.2
Germany	28.6	11.4	13.9	14.3	23.2
Greece	11.7	14.4	8.4	35.7	28.8
Hungary	6.9	7.8	4.7	16.5	24.0
Ireland	29.0	37.6	13.0	19.2	41.8
Italy	12.0	11.2	6.3	22.4	23.8
Latvia	7.3	28.3	5.6	4.3	19.5
Lithuania	16.3	16.3	6.3	3.1	18.6
Luxembourg	36.7	30.3	17.2	14.7	36.9
Malta	8.8	0.9	9.7	34.7	42.6
Netherlands	40.3	82.5	25.3	5.9	39.2
Poland	13.8	50.6	7.3	6.3	17.6
Portugal	9.0	20.5	9.9	32.6	24.8
Romania	3.2	3.2	3.6	25.3	17.3
Slovakia	8.3	18.8	2.8	36.3	31.5
Slovenia	30.4	54.6	9.8	10.6	21.5
Spain	10.7	10.6	7.9	22.3	30.9
Sweden	35.5	70.4	31.3	5.5	41.2
United Kingdom	23.3	19.2	20.2	15.5	35.1
European Union (28 countries)	19.3	22.2	12.8	16.7	26.2
Iceland	32.8	64.8	24.9	6.5	34.6
Macedonia	11.2	21.9	9.8	85.8	37.7
Norway	48.0	74.5	16.2	11.8	45.5
Serbia	5.2	12.4	4.0	25.0	21.5
Switzerland	36.5	48.2	26.9	9.3	24.0

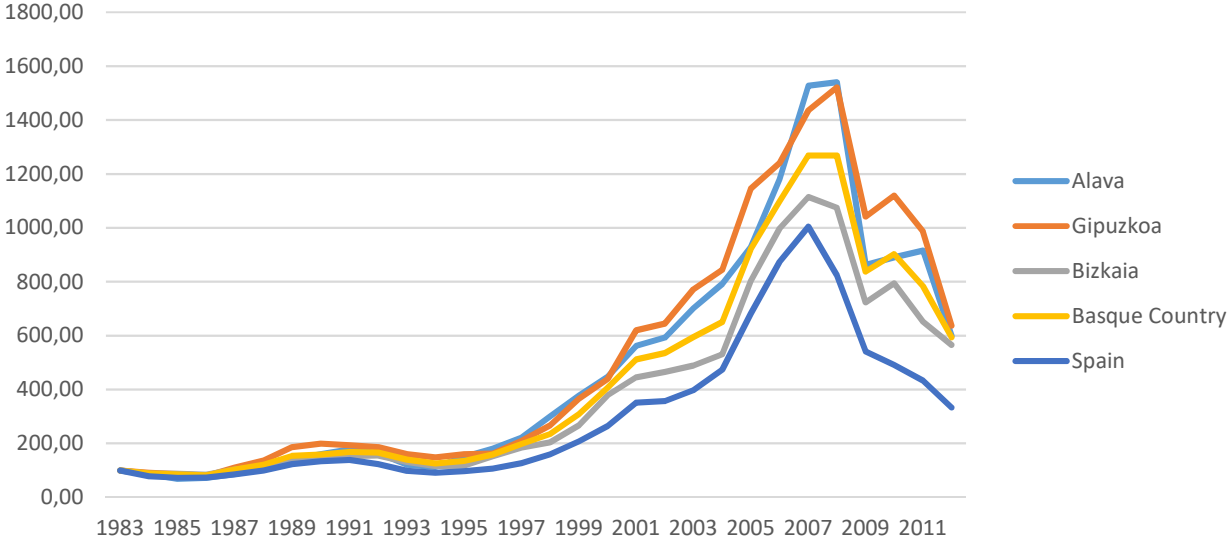
Source: self-elaboration, based on Eurostat 2015.

Figure 1: Social capital per capita in Spanish provinces (2005)



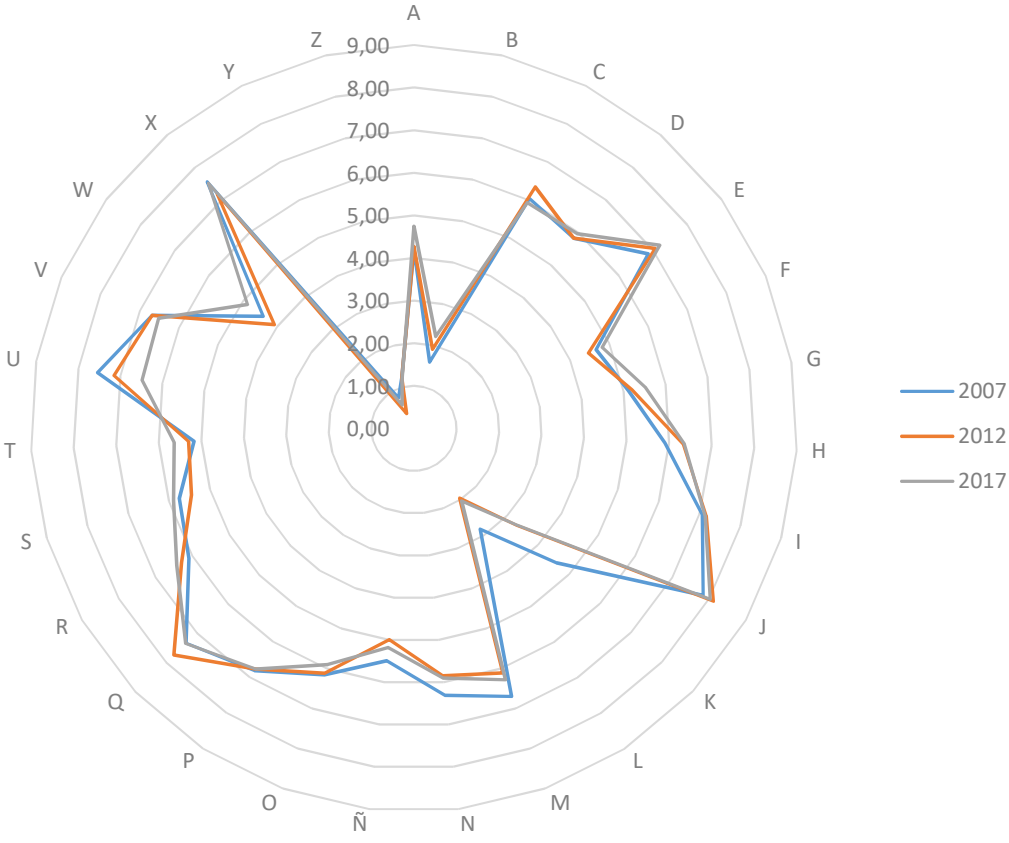
Source: Peiró and Tortosa (2012).

Figure 2: Social capital volume index per capita (year 1983 = 100)



Source: Fernández de Guevara et al. (2015).

Figure 3: Social capital indicators (mean values, 0-10)⁵



Source: self-elaboration, based on ECS (2007, 2012, 2017).