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Intolerance in Western Europe

Analysis of trends and associated factors

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Executive summary

Intolerance of others on grounds of race, religion, nationality or ethnicity is an area of high public salience, with significant implications for policy, social outcomes and well-being. Intolerance (defined broadly for the purpose of this study as a lack of acceptance of or hostility towards others specifically on grounds of their minority status) in Western Europe, and in Europe more broadly, is widely perceived as having been on the rise in recent years. At the same time, there has also been a documented increase in support for and visibility of extremist and populist political parties, and an apparent rise in manifestations of intolerant attitudes, both in national policy and more widely in the behaviour of individuals.

This study aimed to situate these observations and perceptions in the context of empirical evidence on high-level trends in intolerant attitudes in Western Europe. Through analysis of European datasets, a review of empirical literature and assessments of trends in selected individual countries, we explored whether intolerance has risen more in some countries than others, whether it has risen more against particular groups, if such attitudes are particularly prevalent among subgroups of the population and if there are clear patterns of association with trends in wider political, social, economic and cultural factors.

Trends in intolerance vary by country

Our analysis of pan-European survey data revealed no uniform trend in expressed intolerance between 1981 and 2008. In this report 'expressed intolerance' refers to responses given in large European studies, such as the European Values Survey, which indicate a lack of acceptance of, or hostility towards others specifically on grounds of their minority status. Trends varied across countries, with attitudes among Western European countries diverging over the time period studied. Both within countries and across the region as a whole, trends in expressed intolerance also differed with respect to different ethnic, national and religious groups.

The differing trends emerging from the data have developed against complex demographic, political, economic and policy backdrops, and our individual country assessments did not reveal any clearly discernible associations between intolerant attitudes and specific contextual trends at the national level. The absence of any apparent consistent trends highlights the importance of taking a more nuanced and targeted approach when discussing intolerance.

Factors associated with intolerance

Through an analysis of empirical literature we assessed the strength of evidence for the association of intolerance with selected economic, demographic, socio-political and cultural factors. This analysis revealed that:

- Evidence of association with intolerance is strong for some economic factors, such as macroeconomic prosperity, and much less so for others, such as unemployment rate.
- There is strong evidence of an association between intolerance and demographic factors such as age, education and socio-economic class, but somewhat less strong evidence for an association between intolerance and personal income.
- All socio-political factors examined in this study – citizenship regime, welfare state regime and political orientation – have been found to be associated with intolerant attitudes.
- Cultural factors such as levels of social trust and contact with minorities are generally found to be associated with reduced levels of intolerance; however, evidence for the role of minority group size is more mixed.

Policy considerations

Building on the findings from our analysis of European survey datasets, literature review and in-depth country assessments, we developed a series of policy considerations intended to stimulate further evidence-based debate and encourage policymakers and funders to make use of the available evidence when developing and implementing policies and programmes.

- Policymakers should not assume that policy and investment in this area would lack public support.
- The tendency to emphasise the financial crisis as a driver of increasing intolerance requires more careful consideration.
- Extremist voting does not appear to be strongly correlated with wider public attitudes – it is important to separate these analytically and empirically in order to understand the many facets of intolerance.
- With some notable exceptions, few evaluations of policy interventions are publicly available, especially at the national level.
- Young people represent a potentially important target for policy interventions as they are broadly the most tolerant, but are also most prone to taking on more radical views and may be particularly impressionable.
- Intergroup contact can serve as an important shaper of tolerance, particularly in conjunction with certain situational factors.
- Roma face the highest levels of expressed intolerance across all Western European countries, and represent a group that may benefit significantly from policy interventions aimed at reducing intolerance.

The rest of this report presents the methodology and detailed findings from which these considerations were developed, alongside some examples of interventions aimed at tackling various forms of intolerance. We end by suggesting areas that would benefit from further research.

Figure 0-1 below captures the relationship between the findings of this report, policy considerations and suggestions for research topics.

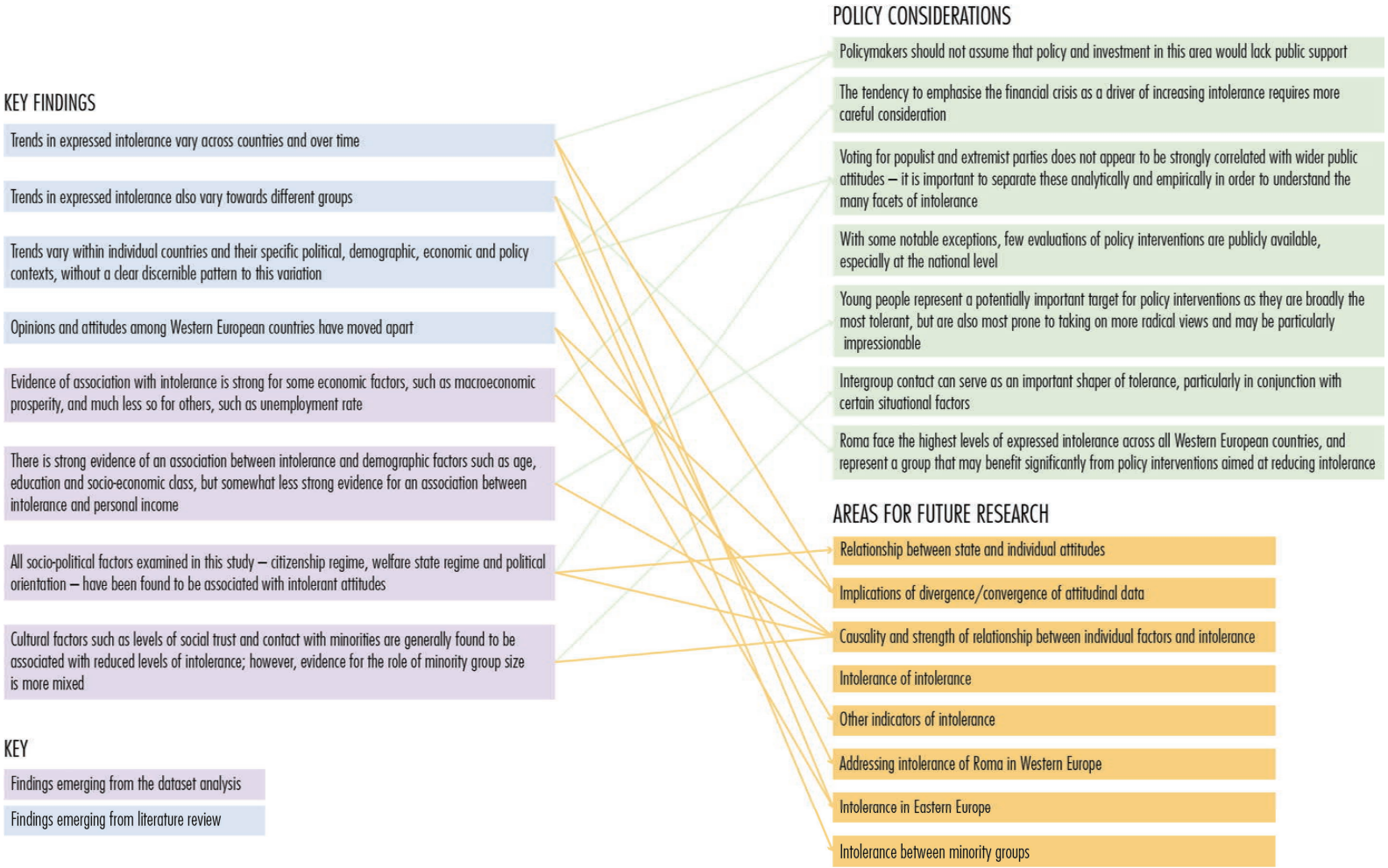

Figure 0-1. Relationship between the findings of this report, policy considerations and suggestions for research topics