WHY TRUST IN THE POLICE VARIES BETWEEN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract: Trust in the police varies a lot across European countries. In this paper it is asked, why is that, what are the reasons for those big differences between European countries.

Research literature approaches people's trust in the police mainly from the perspectives of efficiency and fairness of police activities. In other words, variation in trust is analysed in terms of the function of efficiency, justness or fairness in policing. However, the country-level differences cannot be deduced from the individual level findings: societies are different as societies, not just as a composition of different individuals and their experiences. In this presentation, which is based on the data of the European Social Survey and some other sources in 16 European countries, three potential country-level explanations for the country-level variation of the trust in the police are given. Multilevel models are not included. It seems that the high level of trust in the police is in connection with 1) high welfare spending, 2) high quality of governance and 3) high level of social capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, the citizens must be able to trust the police, because the police have been granted extensive authority to control, monitor or even directly punish citizens for undesirable behaviour. Citizens must be able to trust that the police use this authority in accordance with the democratically enacted laws and decrees. On the other hand, citizens simply expect police to provide results: the police must ensure the safety of the citizens by preventing crime, solving suspected crimes, and promoting general safety and order in other ways. In fact, these are the two points of view used in studying the trust of citizens in the police: instrumental and procedural. The instrumental approach studies trust from the point of view of the effectiveness and impact of the activities of the police, and the procedural approach uses the point of view of the methods used by the police. Citizens expect the police to act efficiently, but also equitably and in an ethically acceptable manner (see e.g. Tyler & Huo, 2002).

The trust of the citizens in the police can therefore be considered important for democracy and civil rights. In addition, the trust is thought to improve the cooperation between the citizens and the authorities. Police activity cannot be efficient without the support of the citizens. Trust increases law-abiding behaviour and promotes the exposure of crimes and their resolution (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Jackson & Bradford, 2009).

How much do the citizens trust the police, then? We have data from several international surveys, which we can use to make fairly reliable observations. One of the best European projects is the European Social Survey, which has been conducted since 2002 and is repeated regularly every other year. Almost all countries currently in the EU have participated in the survey, as well as several other European countries. The survey material is mainly collected via interviews during personal visits. From its inception, the survey has also included a question on the trust

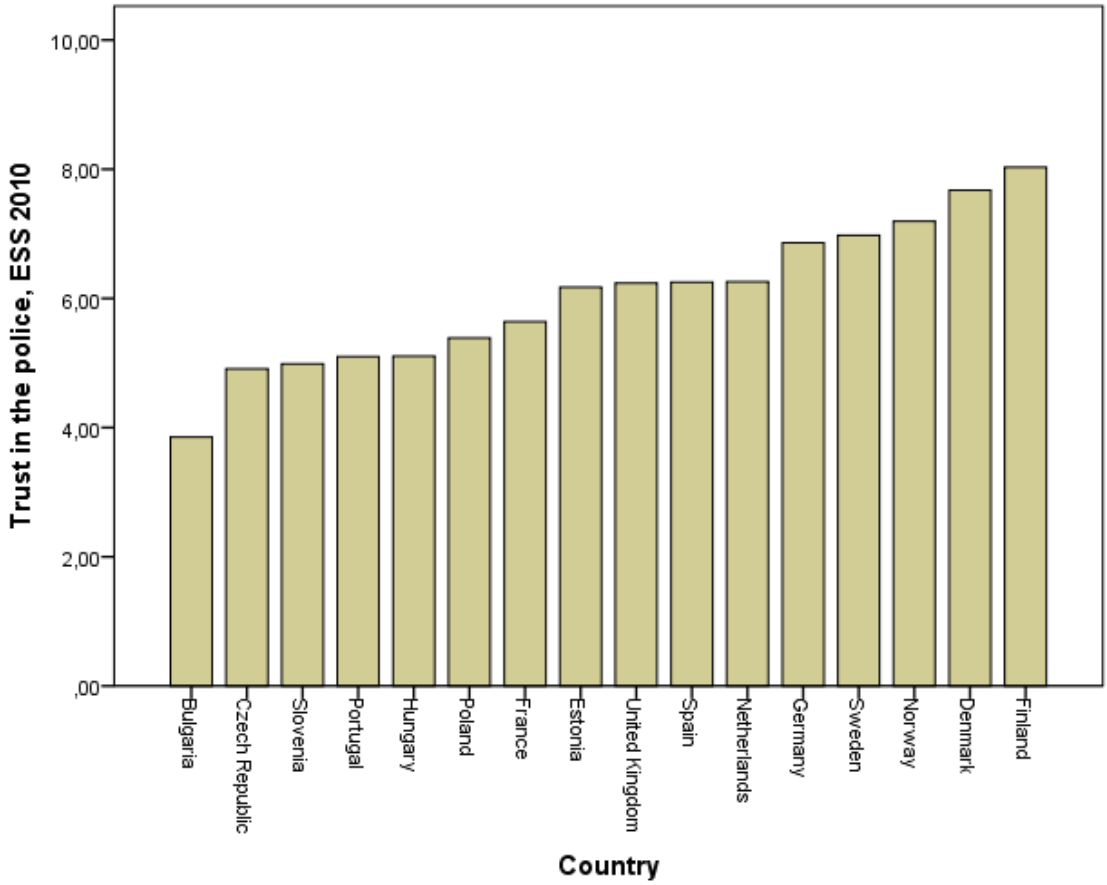

Figure 1. Trust in the police in 16 European countries. Mean scores of the question: 'Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0 b- 10 how much you personally trust each of institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust'. Source: European Social Survey.

placed by the respondents on certain institutions, such as the police. Figure 1 shows the results of the year 2010 for 16 countries.

As we can see, trust in the police varies significantly between the different European countries. The police are clearly trusted the most in the Nordic countries and Germany, and the least in certain Eastern European countries. The indicator used has an integer scale with a range of 1–10. Since the country-specific averages of this kind of an indicator vary from less than four to eight, the differences can truly be considered great. In addition, it seems that these country-specific differences are fairly stable, if we observe the results of previous ESS-studies, for example.

Naturally this presents the question of what really causes these significant country-specific differences in trust. Is the police in Northern Europe both more efficient and treating the citizens better than their colleagues in the Eastern Europe or certain countries in Southern or Central Europe? It is not possible to draw such a simplistic conclusion, for several reasons.

Firstly, the empirical studies that have been conducted so far to bolster instrumental and procedural explanations have been mainly conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g. Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Jackson & Bradford, 2009). However, there are already some published studies from Continental Europe, and the study activities in this field seem to be increasing (see e.g. Hough, Jackson & Bradford, 2013; Van Damme, Pauwels & Svensson, 2013; Kääriäinen, 2008).

Secondly, most of the surveys referred to above measure more the images and expectations of the respondents rather than their real and personal experiences with the activities of the police. Most of those who responded to the questionnaire surveys have no personal experiences with the

activities of the police, or their experiences are only superficial.

Thirdly, we must remember that if we want to explain the differences in trust on a country level, we must include both individual- and country-level explanatory variables in our explanatory model. In other words, if we had European data consisting of individuals with experience with the activities of the police, we could observe on the level of an individual whether the quality of the experiences would explain the differences in trust. If we also wanted to look for reasons for the differences in trust between the countries, we would have to add independent country-specific explanatory variables into our explanatory model. If no such variables could be found, we could conclude that the differences in the country-level trust would be due to individual experiences with the activities of the police or other individual-level courses.

In this paper I bring forward some potential independent country-level explanatory variables for the differences in trust in the police. Multilevel models are not included; instead, there is only a reference to a previously published study by the author, where some of the same factors that are studied now were included in the model (Kääriäinen, 2007). This study is limited to 16 European countries on the basis of data availability.

2. INVESTMENTS IN POLICE OR IN WELFARE?

We should start by examining how much European societies invest in police services on one hand and in welfare services on the other hand, and the relationship between these factors. The attached figures are based on the information published by Eurostat on public expenditures in relation to the gross domestic product (GDP). The statistics use the so-called COFOG classification, where police services and social protection are separate classes (see Eurostat 2013).

Figure 2 shows investments in police services and social protection for certain European countries. When examining the figure, we see a fairly strong negative correlation between these variables: it seems like a strong social policy and a strong policy of control do not usually appear in the same societies. Or from the reverse point of view: police resources are the strongest in societies where the investment in social protection is lower than average. However, it should be noted that the connection is not completely linear. For example, a lot of resources are invested in police services in the UK, Spain and Portugal, while the level of social protection is at a good European average. On the other hand, in countries such as Latvia and Lithuania, both police services and

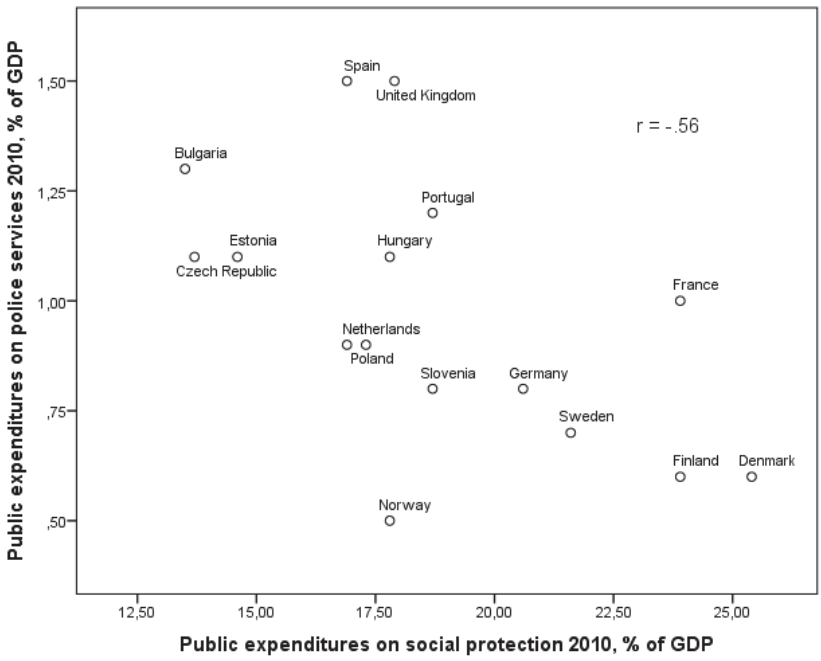

Figure 2. Public expenditures on police services and social protection in 16 European countries 2010. Source: Eurostat.

social protection are clearly under the average level.

In European societies, the role of the state in levelling the differences in the population's welfare has been constructed in different ways throughout history. The most common division between welfare states is the Esping-Andersen (1990) division, where welfare states are divided into three types based on how much they decrease the dependence of welfare from the market (decommodification) and how much they affect the level of stratification.

In liberal welfare states, the greatest trust is placed in the ability of the market, individuals, and families to produce and share welfare, and the state's duties are as minimal as possible: social policy consists mainly of test based poverty policy. The model includes heavy emphasis on work and individual survival and the meaning of family. Typical countries featuring the liberal model are USA and the United Kingdom. As the second type, Esping-Andersen mentions corporatist welfare states, where the role of the state is more extensive than in countries with a liberal regime, but which try to maintain the existing professional and class status, and which are based strongly on a traditional gender system where the man is the provider for the family. A typical country in this group is Germany, as are many other countries in Central Europe. The third type of welfare state in the Esping-Andersen classification is the social democratic regime. In countries of this type, which includes all of the Nordic countries, the effort to decrease the dependence of welfare from the market is the most active. At the same time, there is an attempt to decrease social stratification by promoting the 'equality of opportunity.' The universal social rights of the citizens are a central tool, and their realisation is supported by social transfers for everyone, as well as public services.

The Esping-Andersen model has been developed further later and it has been expanded to also include the Mediterranean countries, for example (e.g. Ferrera, 1996), and post-socialist countries (Manning, 2004; Fenger, 2007). Studies in the effects of regimes on the division of welfare also continue to be active (see e.g. Kammer, Niehues & Peichl, 2012).

It seems that there is an interesting link with the penal policy practised and what has been described above: the most punitive penal policies have been practised in the post-socialist countries, the Mediterranean countries, and the countries with a liberal regime, and the least punitive in the social democratic Nordic countries and Japan (Sato & Hough, 2013; Lappi-Seppälä, 2011; Cavadino & Dignan, 2006). This is likely due to the fact that the methods used to solve social issues or problems depend on the welfare policy practised. If social problems are considered to be linked primarily with crime and disturbances, the police and other security authorities have plenty of resources. On the other hand, if the goal is to actively prevent social problems with an active welfare policy, fewer resources are needed by the police, the judicial system, and prisons, and there are fewer expectations placed on these institutions by the people. This is also indicated by the attitudes of the people in countries with strong welfare being generally less punitive than elsewhere (see e.g. Van Kesteren, 2009)

The global economy and neoliberal economic policy have severely questioned the principles of the welfare state in the last few years in Europe, as well as the whole world. On the other hand, studies still show that a welfare state continues to be able to even out the differences in the welfare of people effectively (see e.g. Kammer, Niehues & Peichl, 2013).

3. THE POLICE'S RESOURCES AND TRUST

How do the public investments in the welfare of the people then affect the citizens' trust in the police?

Based on Figure 3, we can observe that the connection between investments in welfare and trust seems fairly strong: the more public expenses the societies invest in social protection, the more the citizens trust the police. The country-level correlation between these factors is .66. On the other hand, from Figure 4 we see that the more of their GDP the societies invest in police resources, the less the citizens trust the police! The country-level correlation with the data for 2010 is -.59. An even stronger negative correlation can be found, if we measure the police resources simply based on the number of police officers per citizen; in

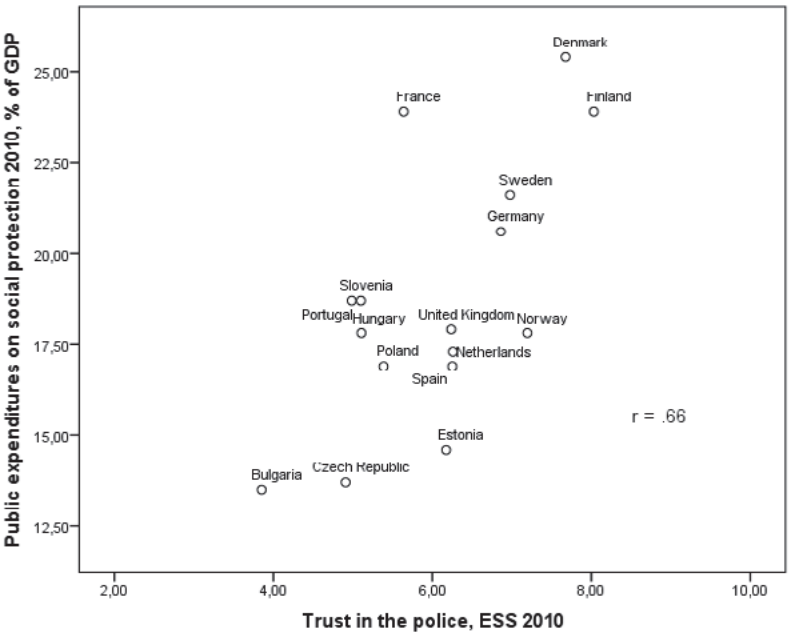

Figure 3. Public expenditures on social protection and trust in the police in 16 European countries 2010.
Sources: Eurostat and European Social Survey.

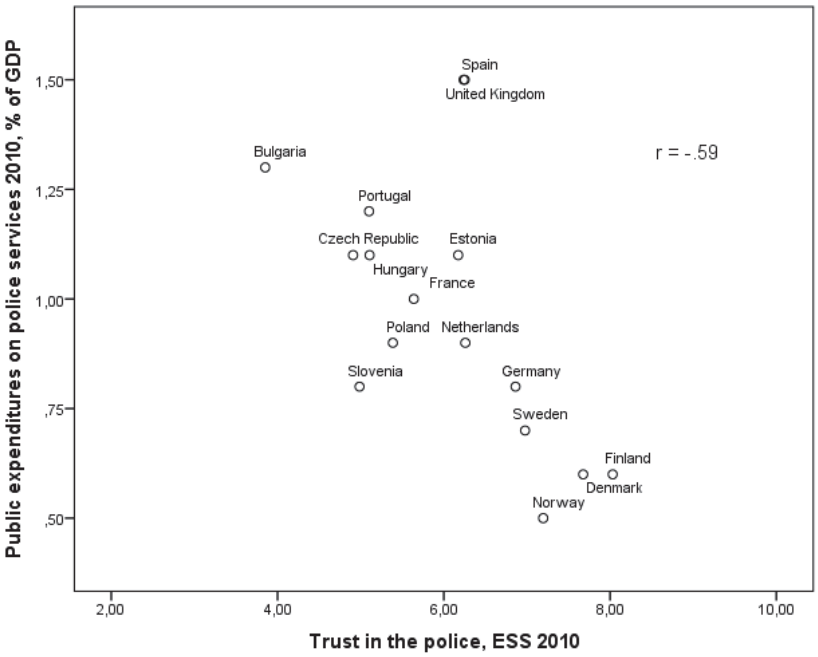

Figure 4. Public expenditures on police services and trust in the police in 16 European countries 2010.
Sources: Eurostat and European Social Survey.

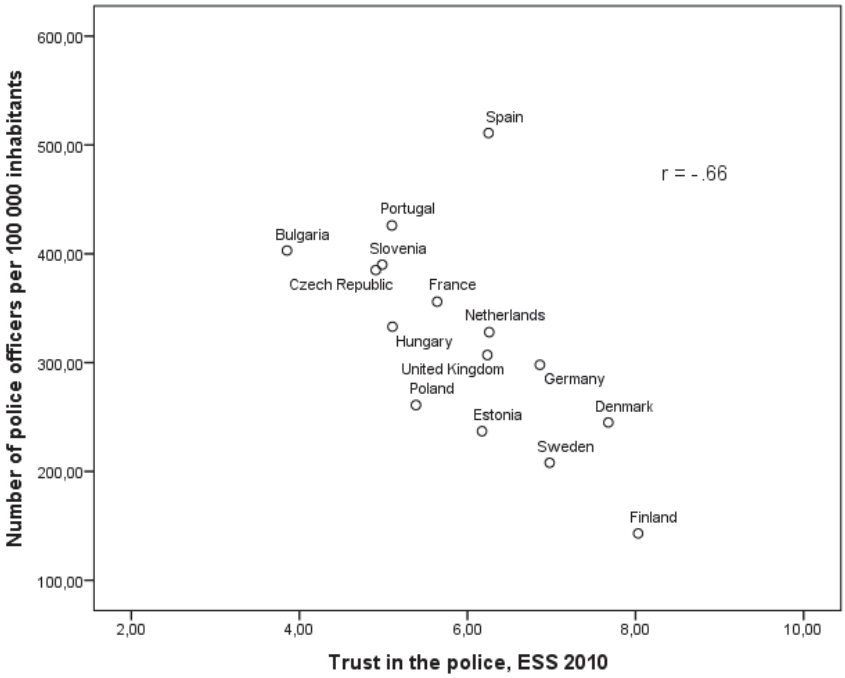

Figure 5. Number of police officers per capita and trust in the police in 16 European countries 2010.
Sources: European Sourcebook of Criminal Justice and European Social Survey.

that case, the country-level correlation is -.66 (Figure 5). Therefore, the more police officers per inhabitant, the less the citizens trust them.

4. QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE

A central factor generating trust in public administration is its ability to treat citizens fairly and justly. This means equal treatment of citizens regardless of their social status, ethnic background, age, gender or any other background factor (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

Corruption can be considered a sign of the administration's inability to treat citizens equally and impartially, and it can be seen as an important indicator of the general quality of administration (Holmberg *et al.*, 2009). As we can see from Figure 6, the corruption of the administration seems to have a fairly strong connection with the trust in police on a country level; the correlation coefficient is as high as .91. Here the Corruption Perception Index 2010 of Transparency International is used as an indicator for corruption. The scale of the indicator is constructed so that a high value indicates a low level of corruption.

5. SOCIAL CAPITAL

Trust in police means that we trust in the formal aspects of social control. On the other hand, we must keep in mind that the aspects of informal social control are at least equally important.

If we have social capital, this means that we are members of several social networks, and that we have learned to trust the people around us. We trust not only those whom we know personally, we trust people in general. This is referred to as generalised trust (see Nannestad 2008; Paxton 2007). Social capital can therefore be seen as a resource for an individual, offering both unofficial social support and unofficial social control for the members of the community. Trust promotes interaction, which in turn increases trust. (See e.g. Putnam 2001 and Field 2004) Studies have also shown that the official social support offered by the society and the unofficial support from the immediate community do not exclude each other; on the contrary, they complement and support each other. Social capital has been found to be the strongest in countries with the most support for the welfare of the people thanks to the public welfare policy (Oorschot and Van Arts, 2005; Kääriäinen & Lehtonen 2006)

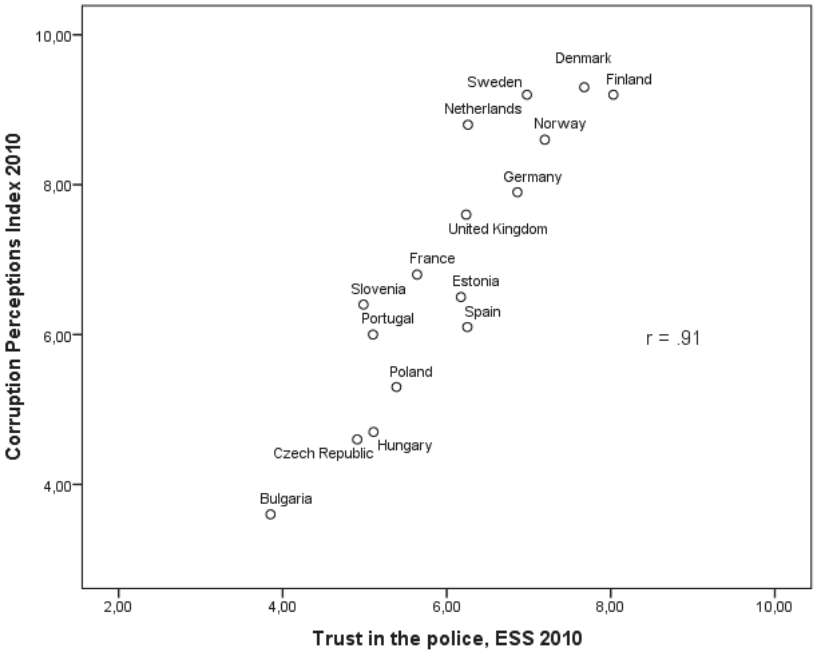

Figure 6. Corruption and trust in the police in 16 European countries 2010.
Sources: Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index and European Social Survey.

This means that we can assume that there is less need for formal support and control in societies with a lot of social capital than in countries with little social capital. In countries with strong social capital, the people probably expect less from the police than in countries with weaker social capital, and they also resort to unofficial support and control. On the other hand, in societies with less social interaction and trust people are forced to use the formal aspects of control and there are greater expectations on issues such as the police's ability to act.

As we see in Figure 7, the country-specific correlation between social capital (measured as generalised trust) and trust in the police

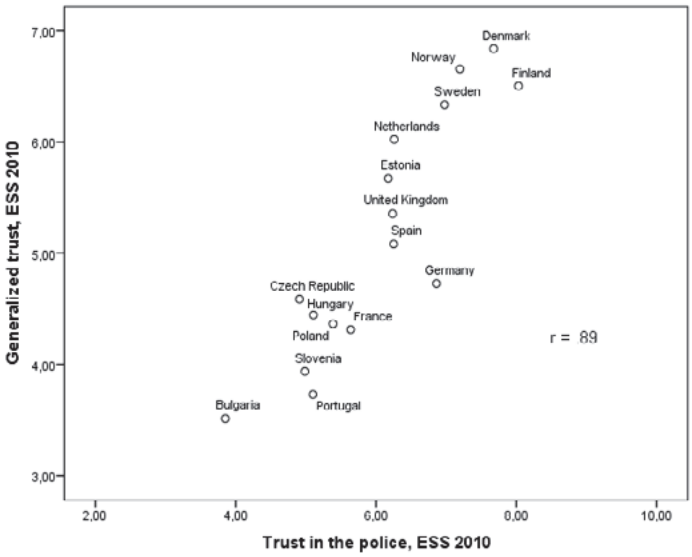

Figure 7. Generalised trust and trust in the police in 16 European countries 2010.
Source: European Social Survey.

is significantly high at .89. People trust the police particularly in countries where they also trust their fellow citizens, and where they have opportunities for receiving unofficial support and control from their immediate community. It clearly seems that it is easy to trust the police if you can trust your fellow citizens.

There is already a fair amount of research-based information on the trust of the citizens in the police. But only rarely has anyone looked at the other side of the coin: do the police trust the citizens? A large portion of the literature on the so-called police culture includes observations of the police having a cynical attitude towards the citizens. Cynicism would seem to be connected to the police as a profession, and to the special characteristics of the police organisation as an institution generating social control (Skolnick 1966). However, the few empirical studies have been conducted as local studies, mainly in large cities in North America or Britain (see Van Maanen 2005 and Loftus 2009). It is difficult to find comparative studies from elsewhere in Europe.

In our own study (Kääriäinen & Siren, 2012), where we used cumulative ESS data, we observed that the trust of people working as police officers in their fellow citizens depended strongly on the overall trust capital in the society (see Figure 8). The country-specific correlation on the generalised trust of those working as police officers and the rest of the respondents was .90. In societies with strong trust, people doing police work also trust their fellow citizens. Respectively, cynicism among the police is found particularly in areas where people have a suspicious attitude towards their fellow citizens in general. Therefore, it seems that social capital generates trust between the authorities and the citizens and vice versa.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion is that we must explain country-specific variations in the trust in police by society-level factors. European societies remain quite different, and the role and status of the police in the societies is also different. Here, the main object of study was police resources in relation to the GDP and how those resources are related to the welfare policy practised. Based on even a short study such as this, there is a suspicion that the welfare policy practised may be significant for the expectations placed on the police by the people, and how important they see the role of the police as a guarantee for safety in their lives.

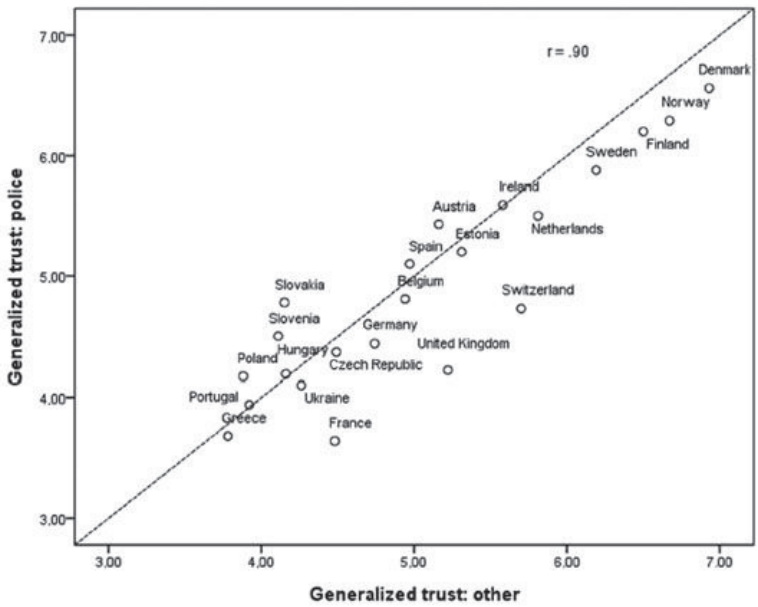

Figure 8. Generalised trust score for police officers vs. other respondents in 22 European countries. Estimated marginal means from LM by country.
Source: Kääriäinen & Siren 2012.

Perhaps it is easy to trust the police if you hardly ever need the police services and if you live in a safe society, where social conflicts are solved long before the police are needed. Or if you can trust your fellow citizens and if you are surrounded by communities that provide unofficial support and control. Or, if you are generally used to trusting in public services, their equality and ability to serve.

In other words, when we ask why citizens trust the police, a reference to the police's own activities may not be a sufficient answer. As far as I can tell, we do not have strong evidence for the police being the most effective or the most professionally skilled where it gains the most trust. The observations I have presented above rather indicate that way how the society as a whole operates to guarantee a life with safety and human dignity for its citizens is very significant.

Of course, we must remember how difficult it is to draw conclusions based on simple correlations on the aggregate level. This means that more comparative and national research is absolutely necessary for solving these issues. In any case, I hope that the examples on country-level variation in the trust in police I have presented are useful for further study.

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