Strengthening Civic Cohesion in Europe

Recommendations for an EU policy upgrade

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This paper examines the critical issue of troubled democratic participation in Europe, characterised by the emergence of ‘civic deserts’ and ‘regional development traps’. It introduces ‘civic cohesion’ as a framework to rejuvenate civic engagement, addressing disparities in regional participation and promoting the role of civic infrastructure and literacy. The paper proposes viewing civic cohesion as a fundamental European principle, integral to the European Union’s policies and programmes, notably its Cohesion Policy.

It highlights the political costs of unattended civic challenges, such as increased support for Eurosceptic movements and the decline in democratic participation. The report emphasises the need for place-based policies that prioritise people, focusing on social well-being and civic engagement alongside economic growth.

The concept of civic cohesion is based on three pillars: Civic Infrastructure, Civic Literacy, and Civic Capital. It differentiates civic cohesion from other concepts such as civic space and social cohesion, underscoring its unique role in democratic engagement.

The paper argues for embedding civic cohesion into key EU policies, including the Cohesion Policy, the Enlargement Policy, and the Rule of Law mechanism. It presents strategies to strengthen civic cohesion, such as expanding support for initiatives, incorporating it into discussions on the Beyond GDP and well-being economy agendas, and integrating it into the EU’s Cohesion Policy framework.

Key recommendations:

- **Embed civic cohesion**: Advocate for its inclusion as a core principle in EU policies.
- **Counter democratic erosion**: Integrate civic cohesion to address civic deserts and regional disparities.
- **Pillars of civic cohesion**: Emphasise Civic Infrastructure, Literacy, and Capital in policy design.
- **Enact through EU policies**: Include civic cohesion in the Cohesion Policy and well-being economy discussions.
- **Investment and research**: Enhance backing for initiatives and research on the impact of civic cohesion.
- **Pilot projects**: Implement pilot projects to test and refine approaches for civic cohesion.

**Strengthening Civic Cohesion in Europe**

**Recommendations for an EU policy upgrade**

January 2024
Introduction

This paper examines the critical issue of declining democratic participation in Europe, characterised by the emergence of ‘civic deserts’ and ‘regional development traps’ — areas with limited opportunities for civic engagement and a deep sense of being left behind. These phenomena not only challenge the fabric of democracy but also contribute to the support for populist and Eurosceptic movements, revealing deep-seated issues in the current political, socio-economic and civic landscape.

In response, we explore the concept of ‘civic cohesion’ as an essential framework to rejuvenate civic engagement across Europe. This involves understanding the dynamics of voter behaviour, the disparities in regional civic participation, and the crucial role of civic infrastructure and literacy. Currently in the EU, civic engagement is thought of in the context of civil society support programmes such as Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV), previously under the Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme and the Europe for Citizens programmes. This paper proposes considering civic cohesion as a fundamental European principle, embedded in EU’s Rule of Law and conditionality mechanisms and supported throughout EU’s policies and programmes, notably its Cohesion Policy.

The debate over whether civic engagement is a matter of economic well-being, or a question of civic empowerment is as old as humanity, but this is a misleading dichotomy. While aiming to reduce economic disparities between Europe’s regions, the EU should simultaneously consider ways to do the same about the growing civic disparities, particularly as they transform into anti-EU sentiments.

This paper explains how the foundations of European cohesion are inherently local and civic, along with ideas for further discussion on how to make civic cohesion integral to EU policies. Without strong local support, there is (a risk of) civic erosion at the national level, which ultimately threatens the integrity of the European Union as a whole. It draws on desk research and 14 interviews with representatives of the European Union institutions, political and social science researchers, policy experts, and representatives of national authorities.
The political cost of unattended civic challenges in Europe

Civic engagement plays a crucial role in the democratic health of any society. In recent years, social science researchers focused on areas lacking opportunities for civic participation and political learning - the phenomenon of civic deserts. First identified in the United States in 2017, this concept has become increasingly relevant in examining voter preferences, election results, and the overall health of democracy. The concept has been applied to Europe, where a pilot study revealed the stark differences between urban and rural areas and between national and local civic engagement.

Civic deserts are places characterized by a dearth of opportunities for civic and political learning, engagement and life.

Civic deserts, characterised by scarcity of opportunities for and absence of civic and political engagement, not only reflect but also exacerbate problems in democratic participation. They lead to a range of detrimental outcomes including decreased voter turnout, heightened susceptibility to misinformation, and an overall erosion of trust in civic institutions. The erosion of trust, in turn, has paved the way for the rise of Euroscepticism, as disillusioned citizens seek alternatives to traditional political structures.

In such communities, citizens often have limited opportunities to develop their competences to make informed decisions at the ballots, they are more vulnerable to conspiracy theories, and often lack a thorough understanding of the roles and functions of institutions, to name some of the challenges. The profile of these disillusioned citizens is not monolithic. While the core supporters are motivated by ideology and nationalism, the peripheral voters cast their votes based on their dissatisfaction and the extent to which they believe the issues affecting them have been addressed. The core forms a small share, but it is the peripheral voters who are the sizeable group. This is the protest vote Europe has come to experience so much over the last decade in local, national and European elections.

As an illustration, the 2023 Geography of EU Discontent report provides a vivid example of the ramifications of civic deserts, emphasising significant regional disparities in civic participation in Europe. This research underscores a rise in support for Eurosceptic parties, particularly in regions caught in regional development traps or experiencing economic decline. These findings correlate with the presence of civic deserts, at least with those identified in a European mapping study of Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland and Romania.

These disparities are more pronounced between urban and rural areas and at national versus local levels of civic engagement, emphasising the intertwined nature of social, economic, and demographic factors in shaping political landscapes. The study highlights a direct link between such economic stagnation, lack of opportunities for civic engagement and learning and increased Eurosceptic voting, suggesting that regions caught in these development traps show a greater tendency to support parties that oppose the European project.

Such findings point towards the effectiveness of place-based policies in addressing these regional development traps, primarily emphasising economic aspects. However, these policies need to prioritise people-based approaches, as new empirical research on the effectiveness of the EU’s Cohesion Policy shows that the funds have not delivered outcomes equally and equitably. In other words, while they improve the cohesion between regions, they do not have a notable impact on the interregional disparities. Place-based policies aim to enhance specific geographic areas through measures such as infrastructure development, targeted investments, and tax incentives, thus addressing local challenges and promoting economic growth, whereas people-based policies prioritise the well-being, skills, and opportunities of individuals or groups, regardless of their geographic location.

This is particularly important in relation to projections for the new European Parliament in June 2024, where populist and Eurosceptic parties are expected to secure enough elected members to constitute the third largest group.

These movements, challenging the fundamental principles of the European Union, have evolved over the years, shifting from traditional anti-immigration, anti-Euro and anti-EU sentiments to presenting themselves as defenders of individual freedoms and values. While they sometimes appear to align with the EU’s core principles, their actions and policies frequently contradict these ideals, leading to a polarised and divisive political landscape. This trend not only reflects ideological shifts but also highlights the broader issue of civic disengagement, as citizens struggle to discern the true intentions and consequences of these parties’ policies. The rise of these movements, which are skilled at tapping into citizens’ frustrations, signals a growing disillusionment with traditional democratic processes, further emphasising the need for a strengthened European Union that champions people-centred decision-making and upholds core democratic values.
The concept and importance of civic cohesion

The reports on engagement and participation all agree on one thing: the necessity of fostering civic cohesion. The challenges, be it the presence of civic deserts, the rise of populist movements, or the evident regional disparities, all underscore the need for a localised approach to boost civic competences and participation. This approach is pivotal not only in transforming communities into vibrant civic hubs but also in tackling the root causes of civic disengagement. Investing in civic cohesion thus emerges as a fundamental strategy to revitalise democratic participation across Europe.

Civic cohesion is defined by citizens having plentiful opportunities, the ability, and the motivation to actively participate in the civic life of a democratic community. It is enabled by strong civic infrastructure and civic literacy, just as a ‘civic desert’ is impacted by their absence.11

Three pillars of civic cohesion

The concept of civic cohesion rests upon three building blocks:

- **Civic Infrastructure:** Includes both the physical and organisational structures necessary for civic participation. Examples include public spaces, community organisations, and resources that enable civil society organisations and individual citizens to engage actively in civic life.

- **Civic Literacy:** The knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that empower citizens to participate effectively in society and understand their civic roles. This encompasses a range of educational opportunities, from formal education to lifelong learning in civic education.

- **Civic Capital:** Refers to the collective civic capacities of communities to make decisions and solve problems. It includes engaged citizens, collaborative institutions, and a culture of participation and shared values.
These three pillars are informed by the literature on civic engagement and education. Civic infrastructure speaks to the places, programmes, structures and practices that operationalise civic life, while civic literacy refers to the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in civic life as well as the ability to engage with the civic infrastructure. Civic capital is about the utilisation of the civic infrastructure and civic literacy in ways that facilitate community development.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic Infrastructure</th>
<th>Civic Literacy</th>
<th>Civic Capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition</strong></td>
<td>The knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes, that enable citizens to actively participate in society and understand their role as civic actors.</td>
<td>The collective civic capacities of communities to make decisions and solve problems in order to build a better future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>Informal and non-formal civic education learning; Lifelong Learning civic education opportunities.</td>
<td>Engaged citizens, collaborative institutions, culture of engagement and participation, shared vision, and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurement</strong></td>
<td>National or international surveys and studies, providing local and regional data (e.g., NUTS 2 and 3 levels) for civic education and civic literacy, such as the ICCS.</td>
<td>Direct and indirect measures of civic values and beliefs through surveys and experiments.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hard (physical) and soft (organisational, structural, and other resource-related) infrastructure and supports necessary for civic participation.

**Hard**: public spaces, community organisations, meeting spaces, libraries, and institutions that support civic engagement and participation.

**Soft**: the human, financial and other resources that enable both civic society organisations and individual citizens to take an active role in the civic life of their community.

**Hard**: assessing the presence, state, and accessibility of the civic infrastructure of a community; the number and level of activity of CSOs in a region.

**Soft**: measuring the human, financial and other resources for civil society (CSOs and informal).
Differentiating civic cohesion from other concepts

The notion of civic cohesion shares core aspects with the concept of civic space, defined as “the environment that enables civil society to play a role in political, economic, and social life of our societies. Civic space allows individuals and groups to contribute to policy-making that affects their lives.”

“Shrinking civic spaces”, often influenced by deliberate policies that hamper the work of civil society, whether by obstructing access to funding schemes for CSOs, restrictive legislation or negative discourses and labelling, requires investing in and prioritising civic engagement as a robust counterbalance. Similarly, civic cohesion envisages citizen participation as one of the desired outcomes of a civically cohesive community.

It is important to distinguish civic cohesion from citizen engagement or participation, as conceptualised in the EU’s Cohesion Policy, or citizen engagement undertakings such as the Conference on the Future of Europe or the European Citizens’ Initiative.

These endeavours primarily focus on including citizens in decision-making processes and ensuring their voices are heard in a more narrowly defined and structured context. While these are important initiatives, they represent specific instruments and mechanisms of engagement in decision-making or project implementation. In contrast, civic cohesion is broader and more foundational. The elements of civic cohesion create an environment where citizen engagement can be more organic, and sustainable. Effective, efficient, and successful enactment of initiatives such as the EU’s Cohesion Policy, Rule of Law Mechanism, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) rely on the foundational strength provided by these pillars of civic cohesion.

Similarly, civic cohesion differs from civic engagement as understood in traditional civil society support programmes. Civic engagement is “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” Efforts to increase civic engagement, therefore, are about encouraging and supporting citizens’ agency and their playing an active role in the civic life of their community, which is an outcome of civic cohesion.

Thus, while civic cohesion and different forms of citizen engagement share common goals, the operationalisation and scope of civic cohesion are distinct and more comprehensive. It lays the groundwork for a thriving civic environment where engagement is not just possible but enriched and empowered by the community’s overall civic health.

Civic cohesion vs. social cohesion

While civic cohesion shares constructs, pillars, and aspirations with social cohesion, they are distinct yet complementary concepts. Social cohesion, as social scientists understand it, encompasses a broad range of societal attributes including trust, mutual understanding, and shared values among community members. Although there is no single, universally accepted definition of social cohesion, its various interpretations often emphasise different aspects – some aligning with civic elements, and others focusing more on broader social relationships.

In contrast, civic cohesion specifically addresses the democratic engagement of citizens within their community and the democratic process. While a civically cohesive society naturally contributes to social cohesion, the reverse is not always the case. A socially cohesive society might be characterised by strong positive ties among individuals that promote trust and a sense of belonging but may not necessarily exhibit the active civic participation and robust civic infrastructure that define civic cohesion. Therefore, while similar and mutually reinforcing, civic cohesion and social cohesion are not identical.

Recognising this distinction is essential. For communities to thrive as hubs of democratic and engaged citizenship, the pillars of civic cohesion need to be explicitly acknowledged and supported. It is not just about nurturing social bonds but also about ensuring that civic aspects of community life are adequately developed and maintained.

Civic cohesion in the context of European policy

In the past cohesion has been discussed in more traditional terms that regard maximising GDP growth as the key aim of economic and social policies. There is increasing discussion of people’s well-being, health, quality of life, and overall harmony and an emerging shift towards a ‘well-being economy’ approach. Such a policy outlook is characterised by the development and application of tools aimed at optimising the resilience of a community’s fabric to socio-economic challenges and thus its well-being on local, national, and global scales. A well-being economy policy approach aims to transform economies around the world to deliver shared well-being for people and the planet. This means moving beyond GDP indicators as the best measure of societal progress, and instead reframing economic policy to deliver quality of life and flourishing for all people in harmony with the environment. Embedding civic cohesion in this conversation will be essential in any attempt to shift
as discussed above, elements of civic cohesion, albeit unsystematically, are present in elements of different European policies – either as civil society support, as territorial and regional support or as mechanisms of civic engagement in policy implementation. Civil society and exchange programmes, for instance Erasmus+, Creative Europe, New European Bauhaus, the European Solidarity Corps and others are important tools for civic cohesion in Europe. As of 2021 the CERV programme is pivotal in supporting civil society organisations, especially where civic spaces are shrinking. However, the challenges in peripheral areas suggest a need for more extensive support to sustain civic life.

The doubling of allocations to the CERV programme in the 2022, 2023 and 2024 calls from the 2021 budget demonstrates the EU’s commitment to supporting civic actors and revitalising civic spaces, and yet, as practitioners on the ground would testify, this funding can only do so much. The needs and challenges faced by CSOs and citizens, particularly in the peripheral areas and regions away from the urban centres, suggest that significantly larger funding pots are needed to provide a lifeline to civic life in places far away from the major urban centres.

While evaluations and good practice examples from CERV funded initiatives are forthcoming, it is evident that the programme is becoming an important source of funding, capacity development opportunities and other support to civil society organisations. The CERV programme was created as a scheme to facilitate access to EU financial support to the civil society sector as for a long time such schemes were not easily accessible. A promising step towards creating fair, equal and simplified access to EU funding instruments for CSOs, CERV needs to become one of a variety of instruments and levers available to support and nurture civil society and civic spaces in the EU.

Proposing civic cohesion as a core tenet within the EU aligns it with established rights and values, becoming a vital consideration for member states and candidate EU member countries. The following examples illustrate why embedding the concept of civic cohesion across the EU’s Cohesion Policy, Enlargement Policy, and Rule of Law mechanism is the optimal strategic approach to improve democratic participation.

Current EU support for elements of civic cohesion

As discussed above, elements of civic cohesion, albeit unsystematically, are present in elements of different European policies – either as civil society support, as territorial and regional support or as mechanisms of civic engagement in policy implementation. Civil society and exchange programmes, for instance Erasmus+, Creative Europe, New European Bauhaus, the European Solidarity Corps and others are important tools for civic cohesion in Europe. As of 2021 the CERV programme is pivotal in supporting civil society organisations, especially where civic spaces are shrinking. However, the challenges in peripheral areas suggest a need for more extensive support to sustain civic life.

The EU’s Cohesion Policy, deeply rooted in the principles of solidarity, equality, and equity, stands as one of obvious frameworks for embedding civic cohesion. Cohesion encompasses various policies and programmes aimed at enhancing the EU’s economic, social, and territorial solidarity. Under the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the current EU Cohesion Policy will undergo review ahead of the next MFF cycle beginning 2028.

Civic cohesion & EU Cohesion Policy

The EU’s Cohesion Policy, deeply rooted in the principles of solidarity, equality, and equity, stands as one of obvious frameworks for embedding civic cohesion. Cohesion encompasses various policies and programmes aimed at enhancing the EU’s economic, social, and territorial solidarity. Under the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the current EU Cohesion Policy will undergo review ahead of the next MFF cycle beginning 2028.
A policy expert interviewed for this project asserts that civic cohesion is already present in the Cohesion Policy and is practised in different ways on the member-state level. This holds true in so far as measures and initiatives to promote greater citizen participation exist. The current Cohesion Policy cycle (2021-2027) aspires to achieve “a Europe closer to citizens” which fosters investment on the territorial scale (e.g. cities, rural areas, metropolitan areas, and functional areas) where people work, live and commute daily. The goal of territorial cohesion is to eliminate differences in development levels among different regions, with a focus on least developed regions. Rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition and regions that suffer from severe natural or demographic handicaps (e.g. northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions) receive special focus. Therefore, an important objective of the Cohesion Policy is to bridge the gap between citizens and their national institutions.

The EU, under its Cohesion Policy, has implemented various programmes and policies supporting civic aspects and community development across its member states. While the ESF+ is the main funding instrument in this regard, several other programmes also aim to foster civic participation, social cohesion and inclusion, such as the ERDF. The EU Commission and governing bodies have introduced different initiatives to bring Cohesion Policy closer to people, for example by involving them in decision-making or monitoring of project implementation. While these are promising steps towards people-based polices, these are not initiatives that aim to enhance the ecosystem for engagement holistically i.e. civic cohesion.

The European Commission through DG REGIO has...
Looking beyond the borders of the EU, especially in the context of renewed discussions about EU enlargement and the accession of new member states from the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, attention has been drawn to the importance of revitalising and supporting democratisation. These considerations highlight the need for democratic reforms in the two regions. The EU published Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region (2021-2027) to support participatory democracy and the EU approximation and integration process. However, the challenges that EU candidate states experience, while similar to those faced by the EU member states, are more acute.

The start of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 has only magnified the scale of the challenge and the centrality of civil society and civic resistance in the East, notably in the cases of Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the Western Balkans whose candidate journey is long-running and the end not yet in site. These examples also illustrate implications for the security of Europe and its immediate neighbourhood, with civil society organisations and citizens with the capacity and resources to be a key line of defence in the wars of propaganda, disinformation and different forms of malign foreign interference. This calls for explicit attention to civic infrastructure, civic literacy and civic capital as a prerequisite towards the desired outcomes of a conducive environment for civil society, strengthened cooperation with the public sector and reinforced capacity and resilience of CSOs.

Civic cohesion & enlargement

The ongoing discussions surrounding the Rule of Law mechanism present a strategic juncture to explicitly incorporate civic cohesion. Integrating it into the EU’s agenda could enhance cohesion across member states and link it explicitly to other policy objectives, including the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Human Rights.

A 2021 report by the Committee of the Regions underscores the strong links between the “Cohesion Spirit” of EU policies and objectives found in key EU policies. The “weak points [of Cohesion Policy] highlight the need to strengthen multi-level governance and citizen involvement in EU policymaking beyond talking about cohesion to also delivering it”. The report is also advocating for “fundamentally rethinking cohesion and its purpose” to bring it closer to citizens.
Recommendations on how to advance civic cohesion in the EU

Civic cohesion stands as a crucial yet overlooked element in the pursuit of a united and thriving European Union. Building upon the insights from the analysis, this section offers targeted recommendations to infuse civic cohesion into key EU policies, positioning it as a foundational principle integral to the ethos and spirit of the EU.

PRINCIPLES OF CIVIC COHESION

1 Position civic cohesion as fundamental

Embrace and articulate civic cohesion as a cornerstone embedded in the conditionality and funding mechanisms of EU policies. It should be positioned not just as a by-product of civil society initiatives but as a fundamental European principle.

2 Counter democratic erosion

Recognise the political, social, and economic cost of unattended civic challenges, evidenced by declining democratic participation and the rise of populist movements. Break the silos and explore synergies within EU policies to counteract civic erosion, particularly in regions prone to civic deserts and regional development traps.

3 Three pillars guiding policy design

Emphasise and institutionalise the three pillars of civic cohesion—Civic Infrastructure, Civic Literacy, and Civic Capital—as guiding elements in policy design and implementation. Ensure these pillars are integrated into the core objectives of EU policies.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

1 Strengthening civic cohesion in key policies

- Civic cohesion in the Beyond GDP agenda
  Incorporate civic cohesion into discussions of the Beyond GDP agenda and the concept of the well-being economy. Recognise its role in enhancing citizen well-being and quality of life, aligning with the EU’s 2030 Territorial Agenda. Prioritise civic cohesion alongside traditional economic metrics.

- Civic cohesion and Cohesion Policy
  Integrate civic cohesion into the framework of the EU’s Cohesion Policy. The upcoming review of the MFF and the debate concerning the future of the EU Cohesion Policy should reflect the need to ensure that policies explicitly address civic aspects, including infrastructure, literacy, and capital, alongside traditional economic and territorial goals, and along with appropriate conditionality mechanisms in the use of Cohesion funds.

- Civic cohesion and EU enlargement
  Extend the focus on civic cohesion beyond current EU borders, supporting democratic reforms and civic engagement in aspiring nations. Develop strategies addressing civic infrastructure, literacy, and capital as prerequisites for accession.

- Rule of Law Mechanism as a safeguard for civic cohesion
  Integrate civic cohesion into discussions surrounding the Rule of Law mechanism. Strengthen the conditionality principle by positioning civic cohesion as integral to upholding core EU principles.
Expanding support for civic cohesion initiatives
While recognising existing initiatives such as CERV, advocate for larger funding allocations to sustain civic life. Ensure that support for civic cohesion becomes a multifaceted approach, nurturing civil society and civic spaces.

2 Support further research

Distinguishing between civic and social cohesion, it is noted that while closely related, they represent distinct concepts. Questions have arisen about the necessity of civic cohesion when social cohesion, a primary goal of the EU’s Cohesion Policy, appears to encompass civic elements. A review of literature and insights from interviews indicate that both social and civic cohesion are indispensable, each contributing to and empowering different aspects of community fabric.

Despite increasing research on the impact of the EU’s Cohesion Policy on economic, social, and territorial cohesion, there is a notable gap in understanding the causal mechanisms for achieving civic cohesion goals. Valuable insights can be distilled from past regional development programming cycles and the effects of cohesion funds on civic and social cohesion.

3 Establish common indicators

A deeper understanding of these causal mechanisms and the identification and compilation of available data sources will enable the design of targeted initiatives and the development of indicators for progress measurement. These indicators should utilise existing regularly collected data, avoiding the introduction of new and complex measurements. Horizon Europe project calls are well-suited to advance our understanding of the causal mechanisms of impact, helping identify suitable indicators and associated data sources for consistent progress measurement.

4 Multisectoral collaboration

Integrating civic cohesion into the EU’s Cohesion Policy and key policies requires a unique approach that transcends conventional methods. This involves more than mere consultations; it necessitates breaking down existing barriers and adopting new decision-making and collaboration methods across EU institutions and national governance, with a strong emphasis on involving civil society and citizens.

While promising practices are emerging, a notable challenge lies in engaging actors at regional and local levels, including local authorities, citizens, and organised civil society. Placing citizens and communities at the core of initiatives demands enhanced engagement, management, and monitoring capacities, which are recognised as challenging areas.

Such a multisectoral approach can and should involve the private sector. Beyond supporting the demand for civic cohesion initiatives, businesses can contribute by advocating for attention and support for civic aspects. In countries where national governments are indifferent, private donors and the private sector can become crucial supporters of organised civil society and citizen initiatives, acting as a counterweight, especially in areas where civic spaces are shrinking.

Regional development policy and funds, managed jointly, pose challenges to advocacy and collaboration efforts compared to areas under direct management. Despite these complexities, the momentum generated by citizen engagement initiatives during the 2019-2024 mandate of the European Commission, coupled with various initiatives on the future of the EU’s Cohesion Policy, provides a potential opening for continued work and calls for multisectoral collaboration. Recognising this requires it to be elevated to a political priority.

As part of the EU’s Cohesion Policy and other related programmes, civil society plays a key role in promoting a more democratic Europe. It can involve private donors and institutions alike to support the pillars of civic cohesion with their voice, financial contributions, and resources.
5 Bringing civic cohesion to life

Finally, propose launching pilot projects at the regional level in partnership with local and regional authorities. Engaging with key decision-makers, such as mayors who are involved in allocating Cohesion funds, is crucial. Through close collaboration with these stakeholders and local civil society, design impactful projects to illustrate the potential of strategic and systematic support for civic cohesion. Civil society organisations and local/regional authorities can jointly initiate such projects, evaluate outcomes, and develop recommendations and an action plan for potential scaling up. The projects detailed on page 8 of the Civic cohesion & EU Cohesion Policy section of this paper offer a template for the design and implementation of pilot initiatives aimed at strengthening civic cohesion at the grassroots level. These blueprints could be adopted by interested national authorities and civil society organisations, with technical assistance and support from relevant Directorate-Generals and external partners.
Footnotes


6. Interview with a political scientist studying party politics and voting preferences with a focus on the far-right, nationalism and populism in Europe.


12. Ibid.


14. The European Union has established a common classification of territorial units for statistics, known as ‘NUTS’, in order to facilitate the collection, development and publication of harmonised regional statistics in the EU. This hierarchical system is also used for socioeconomic analyses of the regions and the framing of interventions in the context of EU Cohesion Policy.


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In the absence of official data from the European Commission on the number of received applications, we draw preliminary insights from the number of applications to re-granting calls published by organizations currently implementing CERV-funded projects in Bulgaria.

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Interview with an independent EU policy expert and researcher.


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Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Norwegian Helsinki Committee, and Hungarian Helsinki Committee (2022) An EU funded projects in Bulgaria. Published by organizations currently implementing CERV-funded projects in Bulgaria.


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Ibid., New Cohesion Policy.

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The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.