



REPORT

Seven National Economic and Social Councils (NESC) from Bulgaria, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Portugal, Romania and Spain took part in the session *'What holds us together; the power of social cohesion'* to explore how to rebuild appeased and thriving societies across the EU. This event took place against a backdrop of rising inequalities, the dual transition, anti-democratic forces and geopolitical instability that are straining the foundations of the European project.

The session aligned well with the three pillars of EESC President Séamus Boland's mandate: a *Union of opportunities*, a *Union of security* and a *Union of resilience*. Using a World Café format, participants exchanged views and drafted recommendations on rebuilding trust in democratic systems, ensuring no one is left behind, and strengthening intergenerational fairness at national and European level.

After a warm welcome from EESC Secretary-General Isabelle Le Galo Flores, who reaffirmed the collective strength of citizens in shaping Europe's future, Colette Bennett, Policy Analyst at the Irish NESC, introduced the topic of social cohesion within the framework of an ongoing Irish report on this question.

Asked by the moderator Conrad Toft to define social cohesion, participants provided interesting answers referring to dignity, inclusiveness, participatory decision-making, equal opportunities, trust and shared values. Ratings of social cohesion at national level were quite low, with 46% assessing it as poor or very poor, 50% as average and only 4% as good or excellent. Results at EU level were slightly better, with 30% choosing poor or very poor, 54% average and 16% good or excellent.

After three discussion rounds, participants identified interventions to strengthen trust in democratic systems, combat poverty and discrimination, and improve intergenerational fairness. In the subsequent sense-making workshop, five NESC representatives highlighted the main conclusions.

Daniela Dimitrova, Chief Economist at the ESC of Bulgaria, underlined the strong link between trust and social cohesion, acknowledging that perceptions differ across countries and social groups. She noted that vulnerable groups such as older people, migrants, people with disabilities or residents in disadvantaged rural areas feel more excluded and distrustful of democratic institutions. She also mentioned the sometimes-damaging effects of social media and disinformation, deepening divisions exploited by populist parties.

Adelina Dabu, Member of the EESC and of the ESC of Romania, added that trust, respect and care are prerequisites for social cohesion, yet current trends show increasing polarisation. She stressed supporting education as a long-term tool to counter fake news. Both highlighted recommendations such as supporting traditional and independent media, promoting quality content, building media and digital literacy, empowering young people and women, strengthening democratic participation, transparency and protecting vulnerable groups. They also noted proposals to empower cities, redistribute power and promote more open governance and civic participation.

Colette Bennett summarised recommendations to tackle poverty and discrimination, identifying the groups most affected - persons with disabilities, migrants, people in isolated rural areas or disadvantaged urban areas - and the forms these issues take, such as discrimination based on race, age, religion or disability, which undermine trust in our social and political systems. She also pointed to risks linked to AI, including threats to job security, mis- and disinformation, and challenges related to climate change, demographic shifts and access to water.

Dimitris Bimpas, Scientific Advisor at the ESC of Greece, emphasised common shared values as the backbone of social cohesion and noted how poverty has evolved with the emergence of new challenges such as climate change, AI and decarbonisation policies, creating new groups struggling to keep pace with these developments. Key recommendations included increasing investment in public services such as childcare, education and health, supporting new forms of leadership and governance, promoting democratic tools like Citizens' assemblies and the European Citizens' Initiative at national and EU level, and creating safe spaces to understand society's needs.

Finally, Luís Pais Antunes, President of the ESC of Portugal, presented the outcomes on intergenerational fairness. He noted unresolved intra-generational inequalities and stressed that promoting fairness requires strong human and social rights and clear labour rights and responsibilities. He highlighted pension and social security issues, the impact of longevity and the need to rethink working times and patterns. Migration was recognised as essential for economic development, although integration policies remain insufficient. Recommendations included fostering knowledge transfer between generations, empowering young people, encouraging digital skills exchange, reforming social security schemes, improving communication and opening the ERASMUS programme to businesses.

The insights gathered during the NESC session contributed to the Civil Society Week Conclusions: '*Next steps for a democratic and resilient future*' – delivering together a Union of opportunities, security and resilience.



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