

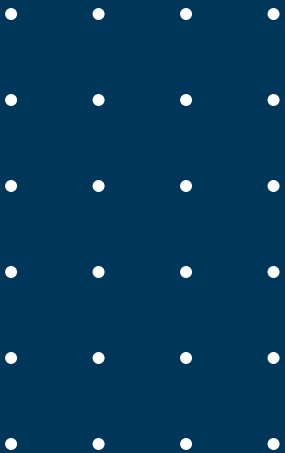


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Social Cohesion: European Case Studies



Social Cohesion: European Case Studies

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1. Introduction

This Report provides cross-case study comparative analysis of twelve European case studies provided to us by Secretariats of seven European National Economic and Social Councils (NESC). Because NESC operate in diverse institutional, political, and socio-economic environments, case studies provide a systematic way to examine how specific processes and structures generate social cohesion in other European countries. This approach captures real world mechanisms, highlights institutional learning, and facilitates some cross-national comparison.

The analysis in this paper seeks to identify structural patterns, divergences, and causal mechanisms that provide some explanation as to how social cohesion may be supported.

The case studies are not evaluations of the measures concerned per se nor are they in any sense representative of social cohesion measures, rather they have been provided by European NESC Secretariats to illustrate policy interventions that support Social Cohesion using the three lenses of Trust and Legitimacy, the Left Behind, and Intergenerational Fairness.

1.1 Methodology and Acknowledgements

In October 2025, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) hosted a webinar for European NESC at which the Irish Secretariat explained the purpose of the project and the case study approach. Following the webinar, a case study template (see Appendix 1), developed for the purpose of consistency by the Irish NESC, was circulated to the European NESC, with offers of online and telephone support, if required.

The case studies were then analysed to determine common patterns across the various NESC and specific cases received; any differences in approaches, and the rationale for such differences; the causal mechanisms underpinning the case studies, and the theoretical implications for social cohesion policy development.

The Irish NESC is extremely grateful to our colleagues in the EESC and European NESC who gave of their time to host and attend the webinar, with particular thanks to those who provided case studies. These are:

- Concelho Económico E Social, Portugal
- Conseil central de l'Économie and Conseil national du Travail, Brussels
- Conseil économique, social et environnemental, France
- CES, Economic and Social Council of Romania
- Consejo Económico y Social de España
- Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria
- Economic and Social Council of Greece

The full case studies are set out in Appendix 2. For clarity and consistency, we refer to each body as a “NESC”, notwithstanding variations in their official titles.

2. Social Cohesion Through Three Lenses

The case studies provided consider social cohesion through one or more of three lenses: the Left Behind (seven case studies from Romania, Spain, Bulgaria, Greece, and France), Intergenerational Fairness (two case studies from Portugal and Bulgaria), and Trust / Legitimacy (three case studies from Belgium, France, and Bulgaria).

2.1 The Left Behind

How initiative was initiated

The seven case studies provided by the NESCs covered a wide range of social policy areas, with a mix of government-led policies and strategies, legislation, EU frameworks, and NESC-led analysis of issues.

In Romania, initiatives were driven by both a Government Ministry and the NESC (the National Housing Strategy and Housing Opinion) and shaped by EU Cohesion Policy priorities translated into national programming by a Government Ministry (Cohesion Policy), showing both domestic and EU-driven starting points. Spain’s left-behind initiatives were driven by Government Ministries, with central government launching both a major income protection reform (Minimum Basic Income) and a multi-year inclusion strategy (Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia, 2023-2027).

The case studies provided by the Bulgarian NESC included a series of initiatives from the NESC itself in research and analysis of social policy issues, as well as Government initiatives on energy reform and income and territorial inequalities. The case study provided by the Greek NESC, also included multiple initiatives, to address sustainable housing.

Finally, the case study provided by France contained explicit references to research and analysis conducted by the French NESC across a range of social policy areas.

Capability promoted or deficit addressed

Housing was a key area of concern in three of the seven case studies provided, with the Romanian and Greek NESCs providing case studies that explicitly centred housing policies, and Bulgaria including reference to housing energy poverty in its analysis of poverty and social exclusion. The Romanian National Housing Strategy and Housing Opinion aimed to support the provision of inclusive, affordable housing, that aligns with the green transition, strengthened administrative capacity. While the initiatives referred to in the case study of the Greek NESC involved opening access to homes by reducing incentives for investors to engage in short-term

lettings, restricting short-term lettings in areas of historical interest, restricting 'golden' visas for high-net worth investors to gain residence, upgrading energy efficiency in homes, and analysis on housing need.

Income poverty was explicitly referenced in two case studies: the introduction of a Minimum Basic Income in Spain, and the integrated analyses of in-work poverty, educational inequality, energy poverty, and social inclusion provided by the Bulgarian ESC.

Deficits in public services were referenced in the case studies provided by the Bulgarian NESC (in the analysis of what was required to address issues of working poverty, educational inequality, energy poverty, and social exclusion), Romanian NESC (as part of the two Programs introduced – the Inclusion and Social Dignity Program and the Sustainable Development Program), and French NESC (in respect of the effectiveness of social rights and the analysis of the funding model for social services).

Discrimination was the focus of the Spanish NESC case study on the Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027), and in the work of the French NESC on tackling hate speech.

Objectives

All seven case studies address inequality, but through different entry points, at an institutional and territorial level.

Both the case studies of the Spanish NESC (the introduction of a Minimum Basic Income), and the Bulgarian NESC (in the in-work poverty analysis), consider **inequality from the perspective of income**. The multi-faceted case studies of the French and Bulgarian NESC seek to **address inequalities in education, health, income and service provision**. Spain's Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027) seeks to address **discrimination and exclusion** through an anti-racism and xenophobia framework. A focus on addressing **territorial inequality** is evident in Romania's Cohesion Policy, and the specific objectives of the Inclusion and Social Dignity Program and the Sustainable Development Program, and in the restrictions to the "golden visas" in the Greek housing measures. While **inequalities in the provision and affordability of housing** were central to the Romanian NESC case study on the National Housing Strategy.

Links to Social Cohesion

The initiatives outlined sought to support social cohesion in various ways across a number of cross-cutting thematic areas.

The Romanian NESC case study on the National Housing Strategy and Housing Opinion, the Spanish NESC case study on the introduction of a Minimum Basic Income, the Bulgarian NESC case study on integrated analyses, and the Greek NESC case study on sustainable housing policies all involve the protection or support of **material wellbeing and basic needs**, focusing on the alleviation of poverty, provision of income security, housing adequacy and affordability, energy poverty or basic living conditions.

Both Spanish case studies (Minimum Basic Income and the Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027)), the Bulgarian integrated analyses, the Romanian Cohesion Policy, and the French research and analyses all engage with issues of **access to services or rights, and basic infrastructure** by improving access to public services, rights, supports, community infrastructure, or safety nets.

Both Spanish case studies and the Bulgarian analyses also seek to **support equality, inclusion and non-discrimination** by reducing structural inequalities; affording equal opportunities across regions, genders, or population groups; and actively supporting anti-racism or discrimination initiatives. In addition, the Bulgarian NESC case study also sought to increase the **visibility of exclusion and systemic framing** by making left-behind groups visible; framing exclusion as cumulative and systemic rather than an individual failure.

Trust, legitimacy and institutional responsiveness were key areas of social cohesion identified in the case studies of the Romanian NESC on the National Housing Strategy and Housing Opinion, the Spanish NESC on Minimum Basic Income, the Bulgarian NESC with its integrated analyses, and the Spanish NESC case study on the Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027), engaging with issues of perceived fairness, trust in public institutions, policy effectiveness, and institutional capacity or responsiveness.

Outcomes

Across the case studies provided, reported outcomes are mixed and often early-stage. Several initiatives are still in development or implementation, so outcomes are not yet available (e.g., Romania's National Housing Strategy and Greece's Sustainable Housing), while others show progress indicators rather than final results (Romania's Cohesion Policy notes positive signs in programmes being approved for funding). Where measurable delivery is reported, the strongest concrete impact is Spain's Minimum Basic Income, which had reached 785,722 households and 2.4 million beneficiaries, helping people rise above the severe poverty threshold. Some initiatives are generating outcomes in the form of evidence and policy architecture, e.g. Bulgaria's integrated analyses are an incremental process of recommendations, and Spain's Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027) cites among its added value as building a robust, shared, evidence-based diagnosis of migration trends.

Learning

Given the stage of many of the initiatives, the lessons reported are largely about implementation, rather than final results.

A consistent message is that **designing a support measure is not enough, coverage and delivery capacity also matter**. Spain's Minimum Basic Income highlights persistent coverage gaps (over half of eligible households are not receiving it) alongside administrative and legal barriers. Bulgaria's integrated poverty analyses stress that employment alone does not guarantee inclusion, that education inequality drives long-term exclusion, and that energy poverty is a core, dignity-related dimension of deprivation, reinforcing the need for integrated,

cross-policy responses to cumulative disadvantage. The Spanish NESC's case study on the Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023-2027) emphasises that sustained progress depends on strong multi-level governance, embedding inclusion across all social policies, better administrative coordination and efficiency, adequate resourcing, and inclusive digitalisation, with civil society playing a complementary role, especially through strategic investment in migrant children and youth.

Overall, learning from these case studies converges on a consistent theme that the **experience of being "left-behind" is multi-dimensional, and effective responses require joined-up policy, operational capacity, and governance alignment**, rather than standalone measures.

Conclusion

Overall, the "Left Behind" case studies underline that supporting social cohesion requires more than standalone programmes, it depends on sustained institutional capability, coordination across policy domains and delivery systems that can reach those most at risk. While the entry points vary, from housing, income support and access to services, to anti-discrimination and territorial development, the common social cohesion mechanism is strengthening material security and basic rights in ways that are experienced as fair, accessible and responsive. Reported effects are, so far, mixed as the interventions are often at an early stage, but the strongest lessons converge on implementation: simplifying access, closing coverage gaps, adequately resourcing front-line delivery, and aligning multi-level governance so that interventions reduce cumulative disadvantage rather than creating new gaps between places, groups, and generations.

2.2 Intergenerational Fairness

How initiative was initiated

The two case studies on Intergenerational Fairness deal primarily with long-term demographic change. The case study provided by the Portuguese NESC was a cross-border initiative under the Interreg Spain-Portugal 2021-2027 Programme, while the case study provided by the Bulgarian NESC was initiated by national constitutional institutions such as the National Assembly (working poverty and inequality analyses), and the President of the Republic (education inequalities).

Capability promoted or deficit addressed

Both case studies sought to **address the challenges from changing demographics** within the countries concerned. In Portugal, the New Longevity Societies programme seeks to reframe longer lives as a strategic social and economic asset, rather than solely a demographic challenge, while the Bulgarian case study seeks to address intergenerational imbalances arising from "rapid population ageing" through pension system sustainability.

Objectives

The objectives of both case studies converge around a shared agenda of **future-proofing social contracts in the face of demographic change through evidence-led, long-term policymaking**. The primary goal of the case study provided by the Portuguese NESC emphasises **building robust multidisciplinary analysis of ageing societies** (health, economic and social impacts), measuring whether longer lives translate into healthy, autonomous years, and making visible the distributional inequalities that shape life chances in later life (notably by gender, income, education and territory). While the case study provided by the Bulgarian NESC seeks to **support Intergenerational Fairness through fiscal sustainability**, protecting the adequacy of pensions and welfare systems while avoiding disproportionate burdens on younger and future generations, restoring balance between contributions and rights, and resisting short-term measures with long-lasting costs.

Links to Social Cohesion

Both case studies link to social cohesion by reframing the challenges of demographic ageing not as a problem, but as an integral part of safeguarding intergenerational fairness and recognising that longer lives must be matched with investment in fiscal safeguards and equitable distribution. This is not just an issue of older people and pension entitlements, but of solidarity across the generations.

The case study provided by the Bulgarian NESC seeks to ensure that **younger people today can be confident that their contributions will translate into future social rights** and recognise that regional inequalities undermine cohesion not only between social groups but can erode trust between generations and weaken the social contract underpinning democratic societies. This life course approach is also taken in the Portuguese case study which underlines that **“longer lives must be matched by sustained investments in health, care and functional ability to ensure fairness between generations and the long-term sustainability of welfare systems”**. This case study also links to the Left Behind by specifically highlighting disparities in provision for women, low-income groups, individuals with lower educational attainment and residents of disadvantaged regions.

Outcomes

The outcomes from both case studies seek to **turn data on demographic change into actionable, legitimacy-building evidence for long term policy**. In both cases, the work supports a clear and substantive base for policy making, the Portuguese case study produces substantive analytical outputs on the **economic contribution of older populations** and the **gap between life expectancy and healthy life years**, while the Bulgarian case study produces a **“comprehensive diagnosis of intergenerational risks”** embedded in the links between demographic change and pension systems.

A second outcome from both case studies is the importance of moving to **future oriented system sustainability**: the findings from the Portuguese case study feed into debates on the **care economy** and the adequacy of care systems in ageing societies, while the Bulgarian case study identifies **short-term policy choices with long-term costs** (e.g., indexation, contribution rates, ad hoc measures) and proposes reforms to restore fairness and solidarity.

Both case studies seek to strengthen the social contract through **institutional uptake and visibility** – the outputs of the Portuguese case study are feeding into **institutional opinions and public debate**, while the Bulgarian case study increases **transparency and confidence** by clarifying pension rights, improving alignment across policy areas, and reframing **regional demographic decline** as an intergenerational justice issue.

Learning

Both case studies centre demographic change in the context of systemic transformation and intergenerational fairness. The Portuguese case study highlights the simultaneous interconnection between economies, health systems, care arrangements and social relations, while both foreground **the need for investment to keep pace with increased life expectancy or risk deepening inequalities** and undermining social cohesion.

Finally, the Portuguese case study proposes integrating economic, health and care perspectives, and embedding them within social dialogue institutions, to deliver evidence-based and sustainable policy and action.

Conclusion

The Intergenerational Fairness case studies highlight that demographic ageing requires long-term, evidence-led policy rather than short-term adjustments. Social cohesion is strengthened when institutions make intergenerational trade-offs **transparent and credible**, combining fiscal sustainability with sustained investment in health, care and functional ability so that longer lives translate into healthier, more autonomous years. A consistent lesson is that fairness depends on recognising life-course and territorial inequalities, especially those affecting women, low-income groups and disadvantaged regions, and **embedding these insights in social dialogue and policy coordination so that solidarity between generations is maintained**.

2.3 Trust / Legitimacy

How initiative was initiated

The three case studies which come under the lens of Trust / Legitimacy all deal with some form of social dialogue or citizen engagement processes. In Belgium and France, this engagement was initiated through national legislative instrument - legislation (Belgium) and constitutional change (France), while the Bulgarian NESC cited European Accession legislation and NESC initiative as being the driving forces behind its social dialogue and transparency initiatives.

Capability promoted or deficit addressed

Each of the three initiatives aimed to increase participation in democratic processes. In Belgium and Bulgaria, this took the form of institutionalised civic participation and representative social dialogue, while the citizens' engagement initiatives in France directly involved citizens who were randomly selected to participate. The initiatives were available to the specific target groups (that is, organised civil society or citizens), leading the French NESC (who also engages in organised civil society dialogue and representation) to reflect on the need to **"overcome**

the divide between organised civil society, represented by members appointed by their organisations to sit on a dedicated constitutional institution, and civil society represented by citizens chosen at random”.

Objectives

The objectives of the three initiatives were broadly similar. The Belgian NESC cited economic and social objectives linked to the provision of **“a predictable and stable framework for collective labour relations, ensure inclusive socio-economic governance through structured participation, and prevent social conflicts before they escalate”**. In France, the objective was to engage citizens more directly in the development of policies, and indirectly to the development of the research programme of the French NESC. While the promotion and protection of governance, democracy, and public trust in strategic reforms were key objectives in the development of the Bulgarian social dialogue and transparency initiative.

Links to Social Cohesion

Each of the three initiatives seeks to **promote trust in democratic processes and deliver greater equality**: the Belgian and Bulgarian processes through organised civil society, and the French initiative through direct engagement with citizens. The Belgian initiative also sought to prevent social conflicts before they escalate and to embed intergenerational justice. The Bulgarian initiative was also forward-looking, with its emphasis on building resilience against disinformation. While the French initiative connected citizens to the decision-making process.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the three initiatives reflected to some degree their legislative underpinnings. The longstanding Belgian initiative aims to embed long-term social stability, have low levels of social conflict, and to strengthen the legitimacy of socio-economic decisions. It supports resilience in times of crisis and connections to national priorities. The French initiative introduced direct citizen engagement in parallel to its previously established organisational civil society processes. While the Bulgarian initiative seeks to build a coherent framework for institutionalised civic participation in crisis management, build opposition to legislation that may undermine legitimacy, reinforce constitutional safeguards, and improve transparency and trust.

Learning

When asked what learning outcomes may have been achieved through the implementation of these initiatives, the Belgian NESC referred to trust created by stable institutions by enhancing predictability and continuity; how a shared diagnosis of an issue is a powerful lever of legitimacy; and while it is a demanding process, it strengthens legitimacy and promotes inclusion.

The Bulgarian NESC highlighted how process matters, not just outcomes. How civil space is essential for democratic trust and how transparency and communication are governance tools. It also referred to strengthening resilience in times of crisis, and the building of long-term legitimacy through institutionalised participation.

The French NESC referred to the divide between citizen engagement and organised civil society and posed the question of **how that gap might be bridged**.

Conclusion

The Trust / Legitimacy case studies show that social cohesion is strengthened when participation is made credible through clear mandates, transparent processes and sustained institutional capacity. Whether delivered through long-standing social dialogue arrangements or newer forms of citizen deliberation, these initiatives build trust by improving the fairness, predictability and openness of decision-making, while also enhancing resilience in times of crisis and against disinformation. A shared lesson is that future progress depends not only on outcomes, but on bridging participation models, connecting organised civil society and randomly selected citizens, so that legitimacy is broadened and inclusion is deepened.

3. Conclusion

This report has used twelve European case studies, provided by seven Economic and Social Councils (NESC), to identify how different policy instruments and governance processes can support social cohesion through three lenses: the Left Behind, Intergenerational Fairness, and Trust / Legitimacy.

Across these varied contexts, a consistent finding is **that social cohesion is built as much through the credibility of institutions and the experience of fairness as through the substantive policy content**. Measures that improve material security, expand effective access to rights and services, and reduce cumulative disadvantage can strengthen belonging and reduce fracture, but only when they are delivered in ways that are transparent, understandable, accessible, and dependable for those most affected.

Taken together, the case studies point to three cross-cutting implications.

- First, addressing “left-behindness” requires joined-up policy and delivery capacity that matches the multi-dimensional nature of exclusion, with particular attention to territorial inequalities and non-take-up.
- Second, intergenerational fairness depends on long-term, evidence-led choices that make trade-offs explicit and invest in health, care and system sustainability, so that solidarity between generations remains credible.
- Third, trust and legitimacy are strengthened when participation is institutionalised, transparent, wide and inclusive, and when pathways exist to connect organised civil society with deliberative citizen engagement.

While the case studies are illustrative rather than evaluative, they provide a practical map of the mechanisms - policy design, implementation capability and participatory governance - through which NESCs and Governments can reinforce social cohesion, and they demonstrate the value of continued review and feedback loops as initiatives mature and create greater evidence of outcomes.

APPENDIX 1: TEMPLATE

Case Study Template

Background

Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2026. During this time, the Irish National Economic and Social Council (NESC) will host the Annual Meeting of the European Economic and Social Committee as part of the official Presidential programme. The theme of this event is Social Cohesion, mirroring a theme of NESC's work in its 2025/26 Work Programme.

The NESC Secretariat is currently working on a Council Paper and series of dialogue events on the theme of Social Cohesion. What is meant by 'social cohesion' can often depend on the academic discipline studying it. It has been found to be a determinant of population mental health, well-being, broadly related to social protection, services, schooling, pensions, and healthcare, and a general sense of increased living standards, and 'a basis for stable democracy' with both social cohesion and democracy forming complementary parts of public decision-making, active citizenship, and resulting in both rights and responsibilities.

Greater social cohesion mitigates economic disparities and can have a greater positive impact on quality of life than income, provided ones necessities are provided for. If social cohesion is defined to include the well-being of citizens, and democracy is the guarantee of fundamental rights and the support of active citizenship, then each is interdependent on the other.

There are many examples of fractures in social cohesion today – inequalities, anti-outsider sentiment (e.g. migrants, LGBTQI+, indigenous ethnicities), nativism, reduced horizontal and vertical trust, the urban/rural divide, the intergenerational divide, and increased conspiracy theory belief to name but a few. These have a damaging impact on society as a whole, felt most acutely at a local level.

The NESC Council Paper focuses on three wide-ranging strands of social cohesion – Legitimacy / Trust, The Left Behind, and Intergenerational Fairness. While this research is iterative and will evolve over time, a broad outline of what each strand may entail is as follows:

- Legitimacy / Trust

Legitimacy is a component of social cohesion. It is based on vertical trust and trustworthiness, and an understanding that the voices of citizens are heard as valuable in a democratic society. A lack of trust in Governments and institutions can lead to feelings of disenfranchisement among citizens, and result in greater polarisation and populism. For citizens to trust, Governments and institutions must prove to be trustworthy. Decisions must be demonstrably made on the basis of sound evidence, with transparency in the decision-making process itself. Mis- and disinformation, and its rapid dissemination on social media, can undermine this evidential basis and erode trust, thereby fracturing social cohesion and contributing to polarisation.

- The Left Behind

There are many ways in which people and places can be left behind. Economic hardship, poverty and deprivation can hinder an individual's capacity to participate in a standard of living experienced by society in general, leaving them isolated and socially excluded. Rural depopulation, particularly of young people, can leave towns and villages without vital services and supports for their remaining inhabitants. Traditionally marginalised groups – indigenous populations, low-income migrants, lone parents, and people with disabilities – continue to experience social exclusion and often do not enjoy the full benefits of a country's economic prosperity, while bearing a disproportionate amount of hardship during an economic downturn. People living in disadvantaged or underpopulated areas are often without adequate access to the services they need. This 'left behindness' may act as a driver of fractures in social cohesion between communities or when integrating new communities.

- Intergenerational Fairness

In the context of social cohesion, it's important to think in terms of the long-term sustainability of positive interventions. Intergenerational fairness must take account of three groups – older people, young people, and those who are not yet born. Generational divides often concentrate on the narrative of the generation of young people who are worse off than their parents, lack of housing affordability, work precarity and youth mental health, but neglect the treatment of older people in society, the prevalence of loneliness, poverty, frailty, and neglect. What we owe to future generations goes beyond climate change, biodiversity loss, and economic and democratic uncertainty, to a sense of values, justice and belonging. A lack of a just ecological and climate transition and social safety nets contribute to fractures in social cohesion.

The Ask

NESC would like to gather a series of case studies on best practice in social cohesion from our European peers. Ideally linked to one of the three strands, or the creation of space for meaningful dialogue. The below template is provided to support our European NESC colleagues in the development of these case studies. We intend to use these case studies not only as part of the Irish NESC Council Paper, but also for the development of an event during Civil Society Week in March 2026. To this end, we would be very grateful to receive completed case studies by **Friday, 6th February 2026**.

Country	
Region / Country	
Name of Initiative	
Description of Initiative	<i>Please provide a description of the initiative – the capability it aimed to promote or deficit it aimed to address, the target groups, the anticipated outcomes, whether it was place-based, target-group based or national.</i>
Objective(s) of Initiative	<i>What were the stated objectives of the initiative?</i>
How do these objectives further social cohesion?	<i>To what aspect of social cohesion do these objectives relate?</i>

APPENDIX 2: CASE STUDIES

The Left Behind

The Romanian National Housing Strategy 2022-2050 and Housing Opinion

Housing is a key determinant of social inclusion, with a direct impact on health, education, labour market participation, and community life. Severe housing deprivation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups (low-income individuals, large families, people with disabilities, the elderly, and young people).

Romania is among the EU countries with the highest levels of severe housing deprivation. 9.6% of the population lives in conditions of severe housing deprivation (overcrowding combined with a lack of essential amenities - bathroom, adequate roof, natural light). Romania is surpassed in this regard by Latvia, where the percentage is 11.5%. However, the trend is downward: from 19.8% (2015) to 14.2% (2020) and 9.6% (2023–2024), indicating a positive impact of certain public policies and investments (Eurostat, various years).

Data from Eurobarometer (2025) on urban challenges indicates that 51% of respondents (urban dwellers) identified the lack of affordable housing as an urgent problem, while the urban housing sector faces insufficient supply, uneven quality, and pressure on prices.

Housing inadequacies not only affect material well-being, but also perceptions of the fairness of the system, the effectiveness of public policies, and the ability of institutions to respond to citizens' needs.

The National Housing Strategy 2022-2050, initiated by the Ministry of Development Public Works, and Administration, has four main pillars and, therefore, four areas of action: inclusive housing, affordable housing, green transition, and strengthening administrative capacity. The 1990s witnessed a phenomenon of migration from urban to rural areas due to massive industrial and economic transformations, with people no longer able to support themselves in urban environments. Currently, however, jobs in small towns and rural areas are insufficient to provide a decent standard of living, with the result that people are moving to large cities or leaving the country. Thus, we have several types of problems specific to different social categories: houses without utility connections in rural areas, overcrowding in urban apartments, and urban overcrowding in large cities.

The ESC study "Housing in Romania", initially proposed by civil society organisations, analyses a number of problematic issues related to housing in Romania and recommends that policymakers adopt ten key indicators relevant at the national level regarding quality housing. The study covers the following aspects: major improvements that should be made to the national data collection system on the housing of marginalised individuals and families; the introduction of obligations and sanctions at the county and local authority level in the field of social housing; the sustainability and energy efficiency of residential buildings, etc.

The National Housing Strategy 2022-2050 aligns its objectives with those of the UN2030 Agenda, namely to secure affordable housing, energy rehabilitation, and sustainable development. The ESC opinion sought to draw the attention of decision-makers to the importance of adopting such changes, taking into account the quality of housing, access to quality housing for vulnerable groups, sustainable urban planning, and the energy efficiency of buildings.

Minimum Basic Income in Spain

The Minimum Basic Income (MBI), introduced in 2020, is a social protection benefit within the Spanish Social Security system designed to act as the final safety net. It provides a minimum, uniform level of protection to individuals or households whose income falls below the annual non-contributory pension, distributed in twelve monthly instalments. The guaranteed amounts are updated annually according to household type.

The MBI aligns Spain with most European countries by introducing a benefit comparable to existing minimum income schemes, aiming to standardise social protection nationwide, reduce poverty, and prevent social exclusion.

The MBI includes a Child Support Supplement (Complemento de Ayuda para la Infancia – CAPI) for households with children. It also incorporates automatic administrative channels and coordination with the State Tax Administration Agency and municipal population registers to enhance efficiency and reduce administrative burdens.

The MBI is national, with specific measures targeting low-income households, single-parent families, and women in vulnerable situations.

The initiative has been analysed extensively in publications and reports by the Spanish Economic and Social Council (CES), including the Annual Reports on the Socio-economic and labour situation of Spain 2023 and 2024, enabling assessment of its implementation, evolution, and impact.

Proposed and implemented by the Government of Spain, at the initiative of the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migrations. The MBI emerged from longstanding concerns regarding fragmented regional minimum income schemes, low coverage compared to EU averages, and socio-economic inequalities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for a comprehensive social safety net.

In May 2020, during the COVID-19 crisis, the Government enacted Royal Decree-Law 20/2020 (29 May), establishing the MBI as an emergency social protection measure. This was later formalised as a permanent benefit through Law 19/2021, consolidating its role within Spain's social protection system.

The objectives of the MBI are to:

- Prevent poverty and social exclusion among individuals or households lacking sufficient resources to cover basic needs.
- Promote social and labour inclusion. The law frames the MBI as more than a financial transfer; it is a tool to facilitate the transition from social exclusion to full social and economic participation, supporting access to employment and social integration.
- Address structural weaknesses in Spain's income guarantee system.
- Ensure territorial equality. Prior to the MBI, regional schemes varied widely in access, coverage, and benefit amounts, creating territorial disparities. The MBI establishes a minimum uniform level of protection across Spain.
- Align national policy with EU guidance. Law 19/2021 explicitly references the European Pillar of Social Rights (Principle 14), affirming the right to an adequate minimum income to ensure a dignified life, combined with incentives for labour market participation.

These objectives promote social cohesion by reducing poverty and social exclusion, ensuring equal opportunities across regions and genders, supporting households with children, and helping prevent the intergenerational transmission of poverty. By providing a predictable and uniform safety net, the MBI strengthens trust in public institutions and fosters a more inclusive and equitable society.

Since it was launched, the MBI has reached 785,722 households and 2.4 million beneficiaries as of November 2025, with an average monthly benefit of €470 per household and €155 per individual. Approximately one million children and adolescents live in households receiving the MBI. Around 70% of beneficiaries receive the Child Support Supplement, with 37% receiving only this supplement, reflecting households whose income exceeds the basic MBI threshold but remains below the CAPI threshold (set at 300% of the guaranteed MBI). The level of support provided by the MBI has allowed beneficiaries to rise above the severe poverty threshold, a benchmark that previous regional schemes generally failed to achieve. Overall, more than 3.3 million individuals have been covered since the program began, including 1.4 million children and adolescents.

Despite these achievements, coverage challenges persist. According to AIReF, 73% of households eligible for the CAPI and 56% of households eligible for the basic MBI do not receive it, with key barriers including limited access to information, complex administrative language, and fear of repayment. Administrative and legal challenges remain significant: roughly 10% of applications generate prior claims, and litigation increased by 50% in 2024. Repayment procedures for undue payments also face substantial delays, averaging ten monthly instalments.

The Economic and Social Council of Spain highlight some key outcomes of the MBI, including:

- While the MBI is a milestone in Spain's social protection system, further reinforcement and long-term complementary policies are necessary to correct structural gender biases, improve administrative efficiency, and reduce uncertainty for vulnerable households.
- Minimum income benefits require both national and territorial coordination and administrative simplification.
- Coverage of vulnerable households depends on guidance, counselling, and technological tools.
- Feminisation of poverty is a structural issue requiring complementary policies.
- Automation and use of administrative data can reduce non-take-up, shorten processing times, and prevent undue repayments.
- Employment incentives linked to the MBI must be clear, visible, and aligned with taxation.
- Transition from fragmented regional schemes to a national uniform system can improve efficiency but must avoid coverage gaps.
- AIReF evaluations indicate that after nearly five years, coverage remains below 50%, with an average processing time of 141 days in 2023. AI can enhance efficiency, accuracy, and identification of social exclusion risks.
- In 2025, new management tools were implemented, including the State System for the Management of Social Services Information (SEGISS) and the State Information System for Social Services (SIESS), enabling improved planning, resource allocation, and statistical analysis by social services professionals.

Combatting Structural Social and Economic Exclusion in Bulgaria

Integrated ESC Bulgaria Analyses on Working Poverty, Educational Inequality, Energy Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria collectively examines persistent forms of social and economic exclusion in Bulgarian society, focusing on groups and communities that remain systematically "left behind", despite macroeconomic growth and rising employment. Through this work, ESC Bulgaria identifies several overlapping dimensions of exclusion:

- in-work poverty, where employment fails to secure a dignified standard of living;
- educational inequality, limiting access to quality jobs and lifelong learning;
- energy poverty, restricting access to basic energy services;
- income and territorial inequalities, reinforcing cumulative disadvantage.

Rather than treating these phenomena separately, ESC Bulgaria's analyses demonstrate that "left-behindness" is structural and multidimensional, produced by the interaction of labour market segmentation, unequal access to education, insufficient income protection and weak territorial convergence.

The work is national in scope, but explicitly highlights place-based and group-specific patterns of exclusion, affecting workers, children, low-educated adults, elderly persons, people with disabilities and households in energy poverty.

The initiative was initiated through formal requests by national constitutional institutions, including the National Assembly (working poverty and inequality analyses), and the President of the Republic (education inequalities). Additionally, the opinion on energy poverty was developed on ESC Bulgaria's own initiative, reflecting emerging social risks linked to energy market reforms. Ad hoc and standing committees were also established, involving experts and representatives from employers' organisations, trade unions, civil society representatives, supported by external experts and official statistical data (NSI, EU-SILC, EU-LFS). All acts were debated and adopted in plenary sessions, ensuring consensus-based conclusions.

The objectives of this work are to identify and quantify the groups left behind by current economic and social models, including working poor households, energy-poor households and individuals excluded from quality education and training; to demonstrate that employment, as currently structured, does not guarantee social inclusion; to challenge the assumption that labour market participation alone prevents poverty; to expose the role of educational inequality in reproducing labour market and income disadvantage, particularly for children and young people from vulnerable backgrounds; to assess the cumulative effects of income inequality, energy poverty and weak social services on living standards and dignity; and to formulate integrated policy recommendations aimed at reducing exclusion through income, education, energy and social policy reforms.

These objectives further social cohesion by making visible groups that are economically active yet socially excluded, particularly the working poor; highlighting how unequal access to education translates into long-term labour market exclusion and low-income trajectories; demonstrating that energy poverty deprives households of basic living conditions, undermining health, dignity and participation in society; showing that inequalities accumulate across life domains, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation and injustice; and framing exclusion as a systemic governance challenge, rather than an individual failure.

ESC Bulgaria explicitly warns that the persistence of such exclusion undermines horizontal cohesion between social groups and vertical trust in institutions, increasing the risk of social fragmentation. Other outcomes included the clear identification of the working poor as a structurally entrenched group, with rising in-work poverty despite employment growth; evidence that educational inequalities strongly predict labour market exclusion, low wages and vulnerability to poverty; quantification of energy poverty affecting nearly one-third of the population, with Bulgaria ranking among the most affected EU countries; demonstration that income inequality remains high and persistent, with limited corrective impact from existing policies; and a coherent set of policy recommendations calling for integrated, cross-sectoral action.

The key lessons for ESC Bulgaria in conducting this work are:

- Employment without adequate income does not ensure inclusion – work can coexist with poverty when wages, job quality and social protection are insufficient.
- Education is a decisive factor in preventing long-term exclusion – unequal educational outcomes lock individuals into low-quality employment and poverty cycles.
- Energy poverty is a core dimension of social exclusion – lack of access to affordable energy undermines basic living standards and social participation.
- Left-behindness is cumulative and multidimensional – income, education, energy and territorial inequalities reinforce one another.
- Integrated policy responses are essential – fragmented sectoral policies cannot address structurally embedded exclusion.

Cohesion Policy in Romania

Under the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027, Romania is implementing eight national programs, two of which – the Inclusion and Social Dignity Program and Sustainable Development Program – relate directly to the issues identified in this paper.

The *Inclusion and Social Dignity Program (ISDP)*, with a total budget of €4.15 billion, includes funding for integrated community centres; the development of social services in rural areas; support for vulnerable groups, with an integrated approach (housing, health, education, employment), amounting to approximately €800 million.

This program, initiated by the Ministry of European Investments and Projects, was based on an analysis of Romania's social situation - high levels of poverty, social exclusion, school dropout, and limited access to social services for vulnerable groups. This analysis was then correlated with the European Commission's country-specific recommendations and with national and European statistical data. The program was designed in line with the Cohesion Policy 2021–2027, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the objectives of the European Social Fund Plus (the main funding instrument of the ISDP). The ISDP was approved by the European Commission in 2022, becoming an official programming document for the period 2021–2027.

The objectives of the ISDP include:

- *Increasing access to social services*: Developing social services at the local level, especially in rural areas, to support vulnerable populations.
- *Improving service quality*: Increasing the capacity and quality of social services for vulnerable groups through adequate infrastructure and specialized personnel.
- *Community-led local development*: Integrated multisectoral approach (education, health, employment) for disadvantaged subregional areas.
- *Strengthening administrative capacity*: Improving the capacity of local authorities to identify needs and implement inclusion strategies.

The *Sustainable Development Program (SDP)*, with a total budget of €5.25 billion, supports investments in water and sanitation infrastructure; energy efficiency; improving living conditions, including in disadvantaged communities.

The Romanian authorities also initiated the SDP in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal, the European strategy on reducing pollution, and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030). In November 2022, the European Commission officially approved the Sustainable Development Program 2021-2027, with a total allocation of approximately €5.2 billion for Romania.

The objectives of the SDP include:

- Development of water and wastewater infrastructure and transition to a circular economy.
- Environmental protection through biodiversity conservation, air quality assurance, and remediation of contaminated sites.
- Promotion of climate change adaptation and risk management.
- Promotion of energy efficiency, smart energy systems and networks, and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

These projects are still ongoing so it is therefore not possible to measure their impact, however by June 2025, 91 projects were being financed through the ISDP, projects that included investments in local infrastructure and equipment (in terms of education, sports, culture, counselling) for community support centres for children in vulnerable communities, community services to prevent children from being separated from their families. This would be the first nationwide initiative to bring together infrastructure and social services for children at risk of poverty, social exclusion, or dropping out of school. The existing data only shows that the programs have advanced in the selection and contracting process, and the projects are beginning to be approved for funding and signed with the beneficiaries. We know the expected outcomes: reducing material deprivation and supporting children at risk of poverty; integrated social services for rural communities without access to them; support for older people and people with disabilities. One of the priorities within this Program is "Protecting the right to social dignity", which includes providing social housing for vulnerable people, with a focus on people from informal settlements. However, this is still at the call for applications stage, and no projects have yet been approved or funded here. Through this call, local authorities are invited to submit projects that include: construction and/or financing of social housing, regulation and improvement of the housing situation of people in informal settlements, social integration measures through housing. This is the first call clearly focused on social housing within ISDP, specifically for: vulnerable people, people living in informal settlements, supporting local authorities in inclusive housing policies. The budget for this priority is 293 million euros

In terms of the SDP, although the quality of housing itself is not the main objective of the Program, there are already approved and funded projects that are expected to have indirect effects on housing through the modernization and expansion of water and sewerage infrastructure, so that homes have access to essential services and pollution is reduced in urban and rural areas, improving the health and quality of the environment for residents. For example, such projects are ongoing in two counties of Romania, Ilfov and Galați, connecting thousands

of homes to drinking water and sewerage systems. These investments improve the quality of housing: less water loss, reduced risk of urban flooding, and proper sanitation. The program includes projects dedicated to energy efficiency, particularly in public buildings. However, there are no direct calls for the renovation of private homes (thermal insulation, more efficient heating systems).

Sustainable Housing in Greece

Housing is a major social problem in Greece, accounting for almost 35% of households and young people's income. To support sustainable and affordable housing, the Greek government has put in place a series of laws and regulations.

Law 5073/2023, introduced major changes regarding the taxation of Airbnb rentals. These regulations also imposed restrictions on the duration of short-term leases, introduced a new levy, and established stricter penalties for property owners who fail to comply. It was further stipulated that owners of short-term rental properties are subject to differentiated tax treatment depending on the number of properties they own.

Short-term lettings were also the subject of Law 5162/2024 ("Measures to strengthen income, tax incentives for innovation and business transformations, and other provisions"), which introduced a ban on short-term rentals for properties located within the historical centre of Athens. The application of this provision is foreseen for other heavily burdened areas of the country, as significant tax disincentives were introduced.

Restrictions were also introduced on so-called "Golden Visas", which provide a permanent residence permit to investors from third-country nations who meet certain conditions. The new regulations provided for higher minimum investment thresholds in real estate, as well as other specific regulations concerning investments.

Making housing affordable, also relates to energy affordability. In addition to the financing actions provided through the Recovery and Resilience Facility for housing policy, which vary across Member States, the European Union's emphasis on energy efficiency has in recent years been translated into multiple interventions aimed at the upgrading of buildings, dwellings, and related infrastructure, based on specific criteria and targeted at particular groups (whether defined by age, income, or geographical location). The main objective of these programmes has been the reduction of the energy footprint, in line with the standards set by the European RePowerEU initiative for reducing dependence on fossil fuels and on energy imports from third countries (in response to the war in Ukraine).

The most important and most recent energy efficiency programmes targeting households are outlined below.

The programme "Exoikonomo – Renovate for Youth", with a total budget of €300 million. The "Exoikonomo" component provides incentives for energy-saving interventions in the residential building sector, while the "Renovate" component provides incentives for aesthetic, functional renovation and upgrading of dwellings, as complementary to energy efficiency interventions.

During 2025, two special energy upgrading programmes for residential buildings have been launched, targeting households, with particular emphasis on the most energy-vulnerable regions of Central Macedonia and Epirus.

The creation of a new programme entitled “Upgrade My Home”, with the main objective of improving the energy performance of older dwellings. The programme provides for the granting of loans of up to €25,000 at zero interest, with a total budget of €400 million, of which €300 million is financed through the loan component of the Recovery and Resilience Facility and €100 million through commercial banks.

More specifically for households, two new programmes were announced by the Ministry of Environment and Energy, aiming at energy savings and the energy upgrading of building infrastructure and equipment.

The projects, with a total budget of €910 million, are implemented under the action “Energy efficiency and promotion of renewable energy sources for self-consumption” of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan “Greece 2.0”, financed by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

Under the “Exoikonomo 2025” programme, the objective is to improve the energy class of households—through an upgrade of at least three energy categories—so as to achieve primary energy savings of more than 30% for each beneficiary residential building.

In 2026, Minister of Social Cohesion and Family announced the introduction of 6 new public housing policies:

- A large-scale scheme for the renovation of vacant dwellings – Subsidy of up to 90% of the cost, with a maximum amount of €36,000.
- Reimbursement of two months’ rent for approximately 50,000 public servants working outside major urban centres.
- Upgrading of municipal and state-owned properties for the housing of public employees, financed through Regional Programmes, mainly in mountainous and island areas.
- New restrictions on short-term rentals (Airbnb), including in the centre of Thessaloniki, in order for properties to return to the long-term rental market.
- Tax incentives for the construction or conversion of properties that are leased exclusively on a long-term basis for at least 10 years, with a maximum rent ceiling.
- Fast-track conversion of inactive or former industrial properties, in order to rapidly increase the housing stock within the urban fabric.

The Economic and Social Council of Greece outlined a framework of proposals in seven key areas of economic and social policy, aimed at addressing current housing needs in a sustainable and socially inclusive way:

- Establishment of an Institution for Social Housing
- Utilisation of Vacant Properties
- Quality Controls / Structural Capacity / Building Upgrading
- Investments in New Housing / Renovations
- Regulatory Framework for Short-Term Rentals and Golden Visa
- Property Taxation alignments
- Private Sector Housing Finance / Management of Non-Performing Loans

While it is very soon to evaluate the extent and effectiveness of the Bills since it is only one year after the implementation, real estate prices and housing rents are still increasing (gradually at a decreasing rate) and other factors also affect the affordability of households (inflation, increase in construction costs etc).

The Greek ESC claims no direct link between the opinions of ESC Greece and the legislation procedures - social dialogue is a political procedure with various dimensions- it is obvious that many of the implemented actions that have been adopted, are originated back to the ESC proposals. Some of them have been technically parameterized, others have been adopted as such (for instance the proposal for social housing organization and golden VISA constraints).

Citizenship and Inclusion Against Racism in Spain

The Strategic Framework for Citizenship and Inclusion against Racism and Xenophobia (2023–2027) is Spain’s main national policy instrument for addressing social exclusion, racism, xenophobia, and the structural inequalities affecting migrants and people of migrant origin. It serves as the state-level roadmap for promoting social integration and preventing racism and xenophobia, which constitute one of the four core pillars of Spanish immigration and foreigner policy. While immigration is often perceived as the second most important problem in Spain, it has in fact been a key driver of demographic and economic growth in recent years. The framework builds upon and unifies previous national strategies, including the II Plan of Citizenship and Integration (2011–2014) and the comprehensive strategy against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related forms of intolerance.

The initiative aims to promote equal access to social rights, public services, and civic participation, while strengthening social coexistence in an increasingly diverse society. It targets the general population through an intercultural approach, while also identifying specific groups at higher risk of being left behind. These include migrant women, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, unaccompanied minors, people of Latin American, African, Asian, and Roma origin, as well as individuals experiencing discrimination based on their religious beliefs or practices.

The framework is structured around six policy areas: victim support and redress, legal and regulatory action, reception, active inclusion policies, coexistence, and prevention of racism and xenophobia. These are implemented through twenty-three lines of action, each associated with specific tactical objectives and proposals for action at the national, regional, and local levels, highlighting the multi-level dimension of the policy.

One of the framework's main added values is the development of a robust, participatory, and consensus-based diagnosis of recent migration trends in Spain. This assessment, carried out with the participation of key experts and organizations, identifies the strengths and weaknesses of existing policies and sets the priorities and areas for action. To support implementation, the framework establishes a dedicated monitoring and evaluation system, including a follow-up committee, a panel of indicators to measure progress, annual reporting, mid-term and final evaluations, thematic studies, and recognition of good practices.

Overall, the MECIRX 2023–2027 provides a comprehensive, evidence-based, and participatory foundation to guide coordinated action across all levels of government, ensuring that social inclusion, anti-discrimination, and intercultural coexistence policies are coherent, targeted, and capable of addressing the needs of Spain's increasingly diverse population.

Promoted by the Government of Spain, specifically by the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration through the Secretariat of State for Migration, the MECIRX was developed in response to recognized structural gaps in the network of immigration offices, with contributions from regional and local administrations, social partners and civil society organisations, and responds to commitments arising from EU and international human rights and anti-racism instruments.

The objectives of the MECIRX are:

- Promote full social, economic and civic inclusion of migrants and people of migrant origin.
- Prevent social exclusion, segregation and discrimination.
- Strengthen coexistence, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.
- Reduce administrative delays in immigration and nationality procedures.
- Ensure that by 2027 all autonomous communities and at least 40% of municipalities have integration and/or anti-racism and anti-xenophobia action plans in place.

These objectives contribute to social cohesion by reducing structural inequalities between population groups, improving access to rights and public services, and strengthening trust between institutions and citizens. By addressing discrimination and administrative barriers, the initiative seeks to prevent marginalisation and foster a shared sense of belonging within the Spanish society.

The objectives relate primarily to inclusion, equality of opportunity, social justice, and coexistence in diversity. They also support institutional trust and civic participation, which are key dimensions of long-term social cohesion.

As the framework is still under implementation, outcomes remain preliminary.

According to monitoring evidence, including the First Monitoring Report (February 2025) and assessments by the Economic and Social Council of Spain, the main added value of the MECIRX 2023–2027 has been the development of a robust, shared and evidence-based diagnosis of recent migration trends in Spain. This diagnosis was built through a participatory process involving key experts and organisations and provides a clear assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of existing migration, inclusion and anti-discrimination policies, as well as of the priority objectives and areas for action.

At the same time, monitoring evidence points to improved coordination at national level and the establishment of indicators and evaluation tools. However, significant challenges persist. Structural inequalities in education, employment, housing and access to basic public services remain widespread, and implementation has been uneven across territories. Engagement by autonomous communities and local authorities—central actors in citizenship and integration policies—has been limited, constraining the framework's operational impact.

Administrative fragmentation, insufficient coordination between immigration authorities, digital barriers and continued delays in immigration and residence procedures further constrain its effectiveness, despite targeted reinforcement measures.

The Economic and Social Council of Spain conducted an in-depth study of migration in Spain, Report 01/2025: The Migratory Reality in Spain. Priorities for Public Policy, including an analysis of the implementation of MECIRX 2023–2027. Based on this study and broader policy experience, several key lessons can be drawn:

- Strong multi-level governance is essential: National migration and inclusion strategies require sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and operational capacity at regional and local levels to avoid territorial inequalities.
- Inclusion must be embedded across social policies: Anti-discrimination measures are effective only when combined with equal access to housing, employment, education, healthcare, and social services.
- Administrative coordination and efficiency matter: Better coordination between immigration authorities, common administrative standards, simplified procedures, and faster, more homogeneous response times are crucial to ensure access to rights and meet labour market needs.
- A broad institutional consensus is needed: As highlighted by the Economic and Social Council of Spain, progress towards a State Pact on migration and inclusion could strengthen cooperation, coordination, and institutional loyalty among public administrations, political and social actors, and the media, supporting a balanced, comprehensive, and nationally adapted migration policy within the European framework.
- Adequate resources and forward-looking planning are critical: Social policies and public resource allocation must incorporate demographic change and evolving needs linked to migration to prevent perceptions of unfairness and protect social cohesion.

- Digitalisation must be inclusive: Technological modernisation should reduce administrative burdens without creating new barriers linked to the digital divide or territorial disparities.
- Shared responsibility strengthens outcomes: Durable integration policies require broad institutional consensus, active involvement of regional and local authorities, and a complementary but well-supported role for civil society.
- The role of civil society must be complementary and supported: The third sector plays an important role in implementation and outreach, but structural organisational and funding constraints limit its effectiveness, and public administrations must retain primary responsibility for guaranteeing rights and policy coherence.
- Investing in migrant children and youth is strategic: Their social inclusion is central to long-term social cohesion and must be addressed through coordinated, cross-sectoral policies.

Promoting a shared vision is essential: According to the Economic and Social Council of Spain, it is necessary to promote a balanced and realistic shared vision that recognises and normalises immigration as a structural feature of our societies and highlights the value of coexistence in a diversity of origins. This requires addressing its challenges through dialogue and consensus-building, which are essential to ensure the long-term sustainability of social integration and coexistence policies.

Civil Society Research and Recommendations to Support Marginalised Communities in France

In its opinions, the ESEC has worked on and issued concrete recommendations that directly affect the lives of organisations, the methods of financing public policies and the indicators used to steer them in order to address social divisions, particularly in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Examples of these recommendations were provided as follows:

- In its opinion on social rights: access and effectiveness (2024), the ESEC emphasises the effectiveness of social rights, which guarantee human dignity, social inclusion and the exercise of citizenship, and which are a major challenge for democracy and social cohesion. Guaranteeing access to these rights depends largely on the mediation work of social workers and all professions that come into contact with beneficiaries. This is why it is imperative to remedy the crisis in social work, care, youth work and education, which is resulting in a loss of attractiveness in these sectors. In its opinion on social cohesion professions (2022), the ESEC analysed the reasons for the decline in interest in these professions, which are nevertheless chosen for their meaning and usefulness. In addition to low pay, the deterioration in working conditions and excessive administrative burdens have emerged as major obstacles. The ESEC recommends strengthening management dialogue with professionals and user representatives, and reducing reporting tasks in favour of service activities. The crisis in vocations in the care sector is particularly worrying for people at risk of mental health problems, which became a major national cause in France in 2025-2026. The opinion Mental Health And Well-Being Of Children And Young People: A Societal Challenge (2025) recommends, in particular, a massive training and recruitment plan for child psychiatrists in order to meet growing demand, especially in the most vulnerable areas.

- The opinion *Supporting autonomy: needs and funding (2024)* emphasises that demographic change will result in a sharp increase in the number of people losing their autonomy, leaving certain social groups without the resources to meet the funding needs identified in an ageing society where poverty has increased. It identified possible financing scenarios, recommending that stable resources be provided to cover the benefits provided under a new branch of social security (after illness, accidents at work and occupational diseases, old age and family).
- The opinion *Success at school, success for schools (2024)* made a series of recommendations to reduce inequalities, whose multifaceted and cumulative nature explains a feeling that social and territorial divisions are worsening. Among these recommendations, for example, the implementation of a multi-year plan to establish genuine social diversity between and within schools, with the aim of reducing the social position index gaps calculated by the Ministry of National Education by 30%.
- The opinion *'From the trivialisation of verbal violence to hate speech aimed to combat new factors that undermine social cohesion. Understanding the issue to take more effective action to restore social cohesion' (2025)* focused on combating the spread of verbal abuse and hate speech in a society where social media has given rise to a new form of (cyber) bullying. In addition to strengthening support for parenting to accompany and inform parents in their educational roles, as well as training policies for actors in a position to act and prevent such violence, the ESEC recommended the creation of an independent body dedicated to combating online hate, under the aegis of Arcom, the independent French administrative authority responsible for regulating audiovisual and digital communication.
- Finally, the ESEC highlighted the profound transformation of the model for financing associations over the last two decades, marked by the rise of competitive logic, the commodification of activities and the imposition of profitability requirements to the detriment of freedom of action for associations, under the influence of European competition rules in particular. Associations offer citizens spaces for engagement, meeting and action in the public interest. Thus, after addressing the issue of volunteering, a factor of social cohesion and active citizenship (opinion on *Volunteering, social cohesion and citizenship, 2022*), The opinion *Strengthening the funding of associations: a democratic emergency (2024)* recommends rebuilding a European framework that is favourable to non-profit organisations, recognising non-profit association activities as being in the general interest in the European sense. Finally, it should be noted that many of these activities are carried out in the field of culture, which cannot continue to be considered solely as a commodity: it is the foundation of societies and their cohesion.

Intergenerational Fairness

New Longevity Societies in Portugal

The *New Longevity Societies* initiative is a multiannual, cross-border project developed under the Interreg Spain-Portugal (POCTEP) 2021-2027 Programme in response to one of the most profound transformations affecting the Iberian Peninsula: population ageing. Rising life expectancy, persistently low fertility rates and growing territorial imbalances are reshaping societies on both sides of the border, creating new opportunities while also exposing structural risks related to inequality, dependency and social fragmentation.

The initiative is implemented within the institutional framework of the Interreg Spain-Portugal (POCTEP) 2021-2027 Programme, with the participation of the Economic and Social Council of Portugal (CES), the Fundación General de la Universidad de Salamanca (FGUSAL) and the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança (IPB). Within the Portuguese component, the CES plays a central role by commissioning academic studies through public procurement and integrating their findings into social dialogue processes, including specialised committees and plenary deliberations. Scientific coordination is ensured by an independent academic expert, guaranteeing methodological robustness and coherence across the different analytical strands.

Rather than treating longevity solely as a demographic challenge, the project seeks to reframe longer lives as a strategic social and economic asset. Coordinated through a partnership between Spanish and Portuguese academic and institutional actors, the initiative aims to build a robust, evidence-based understanding of how ageing populations affect economies, health systems, care arrangements and social cohesion. At the same time, it addresses the conditions under which increased longevity can translate into healthier, more autonomous and socially inclusive life years.

At the core of the project are three complementary analytical pillars, developed through academic studies commissioned by the Portuguese Economic and Social Council (CES). The first pillar focuses on the *longevity economy*, analysing the contribution of the population aged 50 and over to consumption, GDP, employment, labour income and public finances. This analysis challenges dominant narratives that portray ageing primarily as a fiscal burden, demonstrating instead the central role older age groups play in economic value creation.

The second pillar examines the relationship between *life expectancy and healthy life years*. While people are living longer, the studies reveal a persistent gap between years lived and years lived in good health. Particular attention is paid to inequalities by gender, socioeconomic status and territory, using both conventional and multidimensional health indicators. This approach highlights how physical, mental, cognitive and social health jointly shape ageing outcomes.

The third pillar, currently under development, explores the *care economy*. It analyses the organisation, sustainability and future challenges of care systems in ageing societies, including the balance between formal and informal care, workforce availability, and the adequacy of social infrastructure. Together, these three strands provide an integrated evidence base on the systemic nature of longevity and its implications for social cohesion.

The objectives of the initiative are closely aligned with this holistic approach. The project seeks to generate robust, multidisciplinary evidence on the social, economic and health implications of population ageing; to assess whether longer lives are being converted into healthy and autonomous years; to quantify the economic contribution of older populations; and to identify structural inequalities related to gender, income, education and territory. By doing so, it aims to inform public policies on ageing, health, care and social protection at both national and cross-border levels, while supporting strategic dialogue among policymakers, social partners and civil society.

In terms of social cohesion, the *New Longevity Societies* project contributes most directly through the lenses of intergenerational fairness and the prevention of exclusion. From an intergenerational perspective, it underlines that longer lives must be matched by sustained investments in health, care and functional ability to ensure fairness between generations and the long-term sustainability of welfare systems. The project promotes a life-course approach, recognising that inequalities accumulated earlier in life strongly influence outcomes in older age.

From the perspective of those at risk of being left behind, the studies reveal significant disparities within ageing populations. Women, low-income groups, individuals with lower educational attainment and residents of less advantaged regions are disproportionately affected by poorer health outcomes and reduced autonomy in later life. By identifying modifiable determinants such as physical inactivity, income insecurity, unequal access to care and gaps in care provision, the project supports more inclusive, preventive and territorially sensitive policy responses.

To date, the project has already delivered two major analytical outputs and is advancing a third. The findings demonstrate the substantial economic contribution of the population aged 50 and over, identify a pronounced gap between life expectancy and healthy life years - particularly affecting women and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups - and confirm the multidimensional nature of healthy ageing. Ongoing work on the care economy is expected to further inform debates on the sustainability and adequacy of care systems in long-lived societies. These results are feeding directly into institutional opinions, public debates and dissemination activities foreseen under the project.

Several key lessons emerge from the initiative. Longevity must be understood as a systemic transformation affecting economies, health systems, care arrangements and social relations simultaneously. Increased life expectancy without corresponding investments in health and care risks deepening inequalities and undermining social cohesion. Gender and socioeconomic disparities accumulated over the life course play a decisive role in shaping outcomes in older age.

Finally, integrating economic, health and care perspectives - and embedding them within social dialogue institutions - is essential for translating academic evidence into inclusive policy debates and sustainable public action in emerging longevity societies.

Integrated Analysis of Demographic Change and Pension System Sustainability as a Foundation for Intergenerational Fairness in Bulgaria

Between 2022-2024, the Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria (ESC Bulgaria) has conducted work focusing on the long-term sustainability of the pension system and the demographic foundations of social policy. This work seeks to address structural intergenerational imbalance arising from rapid population ageing, sustained population decline, shrinking cohorts of working-age contributors, increasing dependency ratios, and growing pressure on solidarity-based social systems.

ESC Bulgaria's analyses frame these developments not as isolated sectoral problems, but as systemic risks to intergenerational fairness, understood as the equitable distribution of rights, responsibilities, and life chances between older generations, the current working-age population, and future generations.

The work, which was initiated through formal requests from national constitutional institutions, including the National Assembly (for the pension system analysis), and the President of the Republic (for the demographic and regional development analyses). ESC Bulgaria established Ad hoc Committees, bringing together experts and representatives of employers, workers and trade unions, and civil society. These committees conducted in-depth analytical work, combining official statistical data, long-term demographic projections, socio-economic analysis, and comparative European perspectives. The analyses were debated and adopted through plenary sessions of ESC Bulgaria, ensuring consensus-oriented conclusions. It is national in scope, evidence-based, and rooted in demographic, economic and social data, while explicitly recognising strong territorial disparities in demographic ageing, labour market participation and access to services.

The objectives of the work were to safeguard the long-term adequacy and financial sustainability of the pension system without transferring disproportionate burdens to younger and future generations; restore balance between contributions and rights across generations, reinforcing the fairness of the solidarity principle in public pension schemes; mitigate the negative social and fiscal effects of demographic ageing and depopulation, particularly in regions experiencing demographic exhaustion; promote long-term, predictable and socially legitimate policy solutions, avoiding short-term decisions with long-lasting intergenerational consequences; and integrate demographic considerations across social, labour market, education and regional policies, recognising their cumulative impact on future generations.

These objectives further social cohesion by seeking to prevent intergenerational conflict by addressing the growing mismatch between the number of contributors and beneficiaries in social systems; reinforcing solidarity across age groups, ensuring that today's younger generations retain confidence that their contributions will translate into future social rights; and promoting social sustainability, recognising that persistent demographic decline and regional inequalities undermine cohesion not only between social groups. ESC Bulgaria explicitly warns that failure to address demographic ageing and pension sustainability risks eroding trust between generations, weakening the social contract underpinning democratic societies.

All of this work resulted in a comprehensive diagnosis of intergenerational risks embedded in Bulgaria's current demographic and pension trajectories; clear identification of policy decisions with short-term horizons but long-term intergenerational costs, particularly in pension indexation, contribution rates and ad hoc compensatory measures; a coherent set of recommendations aimed at restoring intergenerational balance, including strengthening the contributory principle, improving financial literacy and transparency of pension rights, better synchronisation between labour market, education and social policies, and adopting long-term demographic governance approaches; and increased visibility of regional demographic decline as an intergenerational justice issue, not merely a territorial one.

The key learnings for ESC Bulgaria are:

- Intergenerational fairness is inseparable from demographic governance – ESC Bulgaria demonstrates that social cohesion across generations cannot be achieved without explicit, long-term demographic strategies.
- Short-term social compensation can undermine long-term fairness – policy measures aimed at immediate relief may shift disproportionate costs onto younger and future generations if not carefully designed.
- Pension systems are intergenerational contracts – their legitimacy depends on a credible balance between solidarity and individual contribution over time.
- Territorial and intergenerational inequalities reinforce each other – regions experiencing demographic decline today face compounded risks for future generations. Evidence-based social dialogue is essential for intergenerational cohesion – broad societal consensus is necessary to sustain reforms whose benefits accrue over decades.

Trust and Legitimacy

Consultation and Social Dialogue in Belgium

Belgium's system of consultation and social dialogue is built on a deeply institutionalised and structured framework that has evolved over decades into one of the country's core pillars of social cohesion. Known as the Belgian model of consultation and social dialogue, this system is organised around three complementary and interconnected levels: the interprofessional, the sectoral, and the company level.

At the interprofessional level, the Central Economic Council (CCE) and the National Labour Council (CNT) provide a national forum where employers' organisations and trade unions jointly analyse economic developments and negotiate overarching social and labour frameworks. This level sets the strategic direction for socio-economic governance, grounding decision-making in shared analyses and long-term perspectives. The sectoral level, through joint committees and specialised advisory bodies, translates these general frameworks into rules adapted to the realities of specific industries. Finally, at company level, works councils, committees for prevention and protection at work, and trade union delegations ensure direct participation by workers in matters affecting their daily working conditions.

Together, these three levels form a permanent, organised and inclusive mechanism that allows social partners to participate meaningfully in the development of economic and social policies. Far beyond the regulation of labour relations, the system promotes mutual trust, a culture of compromise and strong institutional stability. It applies across the entire country and covers all employers and workers, making it the primary framework for wage formation, working conditions, work organisation, occupational health and well-being, training rights, career transitions, and the prevention of social conflict.

The legal backbone of this model is the Act of 5 December 1968 on collective agreements and joint committees. This legislation guarantees the representativeness of social partners, gives collective agreements binding force, and allows for their mandatory extension across sectors. By doing so, it ensures that negotiated outcomes are applied consistently throughout the economy and that social dialogue produces concrete, enforceable results.

The objectives of the Belgian model are both economic and social. It seeks to provide a predictable and stable framework for collective labour relations, ensure inclusive socio-economic governance through structured participation, and prevent social conflicts before they escalate. By relying on the economic analyses produced by the CCE, the model guides wage formation in a way that balances fairness with economic sustainability. It also addresses long-term challenges such as intergenerational justice, pensions, lifelong learning and sustainable working conditions, while strengthening trust between public institutions, employers and workers through a coherent, multi-level negotiation architecture.

These objectives contribute directly to social cohesion. First, the model strengthens legitimacy and trust by fostering transparency and predictability. Decisions at the interprofessional level are based on shared economic diagnoses, which helps limit tensions and reinforces confidence in outcomes. Agreements adopted by the CNT are traditionally unanimous, further enhancing their legitimacy and acceptance across society.

Second, the system ensures that no groups are left behind. Sectoral and company-level consultation mechanisms provide comprehensive protection even in more vulnerable sectors, guaranteeing minimum working conditions, access to training and development, and opportunities for direct participation at workplace level. By reducing disparities between sectors and companies, the model helps prevent socio-professional exclusion.

Third, intergenerational justice is embedded in the system. Interprofessional agreements address structural issues that affect multiple generations, including the sustainability of pension systems, work-life balance through thematic leave, continuing education, career transitions, and working conditions that allow people to remain active throughout their working lives.

The outcomes of this approach are widely recognised as positive. Belgium has enjoyed long-term social stability and relatively low levels of social conflict, alongside very broad collective agreement coverage that includes virtually all workers. The economic analyses of the CCE have strengthened the legitimacy of socio-economic decisions, while company-level bodies such as works councils and prevention committees have reinforced trust on the ground. The model has also shown a high degree of resilience in times of crisis, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and periods of high inflation, enabling coordinated and balanced responses. Its ability to connect national priorities with sectoral and local realities enhances both the relevance and effectiveness of decisions.

Several key lessons emerge from this experience. Stable institutions create trust by enhancing predictability and continuity, as illustrated by the long-standing roles of the CCE and the CNT. Shared diagnosis is a powerful lever of legitimacy: common analytical tools, such as the CCE's Technical Report guiding wage standard negotiations, provide a neutral basis for compromise. A

multi-level approach promotes inclusion by allowing adaptation to sector-specific realities while preserving national coherence and minimum protections. Although demanding, consensus-based decision-making strengthens cohesion by ensuring lasting commitment from all parties. A robust legal framework is essential to guarantee enforceability and uniform implementation. Finally, dialogue must be continuous rather than occasional: it is the permanence of consultation, analysis and negotiation that builds enduring trust and underpins stable and legitimate socio-economic governance in Belgium.

Citizen Engagement in France

The 2021 constitutional reform gives the French ESEC public consultation tasks that systematise the use of citizen participation tools. It has organised two citizens' conventions, the first on end-of-life care (2023) and the second on children's time (2025) and was involved in the one on climate (2020). It also involves citizens in its deliberations when seeking their opinions. During the 2021-2026 term of office, 60,000 citizens took part in the institution's work.

The Citizens' Convention on Children's Time, which concluded on 23 November 2025, put the issue of school timetables back on the political agenda, along with other time devoted to rest, leisure and family. Over a period of six months, during seven working sessions, 133 citizens selected at random, representing the diversity of French society, identified solutions to better organise children's time according to their biological needs. One of the cross-cutting issues that was considered was that of social inequalities, which are likely to increase without a diverse and rich range of educational activities designed within the framework of a public service. The subject of children's access to social networks was also addressed. The citizens drew up a report containing 20 proposals for public decision-makers, supplemented by a report written by 20 young people aged 12 to 17, selected at random on a voluntary basis and brought together during two dedicated sessions.

The Citizens' Convention on End-of-Life Care is another example of success. It brought together 184 randomly selected citizens who responded to the question posed by the Prime Minister: "Is the end-of-life care framework appropriate for the different situations encountered, or should it be modified?" Many of the measures recommended by the Citizens' Convention were included in a draft bill: the creation of end-of-life care homes; conditional assistance in dying for terminally ill patients; the inclusion in the bill of advance directives and the role of the trusted person; and the establishment of training programmes for healthcare professionals. The French Parliament will resume discussions in April 2026 to adopt the law on this subject.

These citizens' conventions have fuelled extensive exchanges with ESEC members, who have simultaneously issued opinions on each of these topics: End of life: should the law be changed? (2023) and Meeting children's basic needs and guaranteeing their rights in all aspects of their daily lives (2025).

The French ESEC is thus experimenting with new ways of consulting civil society, enhanced by the contribution of citizen deliberations. The challenge is to overcome the divide between organised civil society, represented by members appointed by their organisations to sit on a dedicated constitutional institution, and civil society represented by citizens chosen at random.

Social Dialogue and Transparency in Bulgaria

The Economic and Social Council of Bulgaria have adopted a series of measures to promote transparency and institutionalise social dialogue which aim to build trust between citizens, civil society and public institutions in the context of political polarisation, crisis governance and major strategic reforms. They focus on legitimacy as a process, emphasising meaningful participation of organised civil society in decision-making, transparency and predictability of public policies, open communication to counter disinformation, and protection of democratic freedoms as prerequisites for public trust. This focus seeks to address three interconnected legitimacy challenges:

- i. Crisis governance, where ad hoc institutional responses risk excluding civic actors;
- ii. Democratic backsliding risks, exemplified by legislative initiatives restricting civil society;
- iii. Low public trust in strategic reforms, particularly Bulgaria's accession to the Euro Area.

The initiative was initiated through a combination of ESC Bulgaria's own-initiative analyses and resolutions, covering areas such as civil society interaction, the Foreign Agents Act, and Euro Area accession, alongside requests from national institutions, including the National Assembly and the Council of Ministers, as well as mandated communication responsibilities related to Euro Area accession. Ad hoc and standing committees were established and supported by external experts and evidence-based research, bringing together employers' organisations, trade unions, and civil society organisations. All acts were adopted through plenary sessions, ensuring consensus-oriented positions.

These dialogue and transparency processes contribute to social cohesion by reinforcing vertical trust between citizens and institutions through inclusive, consultative policymaking; reducing polarisation by ensuring that diverse social interests are represented and heard; protecting civic space, which underpins citizens' confidence in democratic systems; enhancing procedural fairness by demonstrating that decisions are negotiated rather than imposed; and building resilience against disinformation, which erodes trust and social cohesion. In this context, ESC Bulgaria explicitly identifies trust, openness, and dialogue as essential prerequisites for effective crisis response and long-term democratic stability.

They resulted in the development of a coherent framework for institutionalised civic participation in crisis management, clear normative opposition to legislation undermining democratic legitimacy, reinforcing constitutional safeguard, a unified social partner position supporting Euro Area accession, enhancing policy credibility, expanded public communication tools (digital platforms, podcasts, interactive services) improving transparency and accessibility, and increased recognition of organised civil society as a trust-building intermediary between institutions and citizens.

The key learnings for the Bulgarian ESC are:

- Legitimacy depends on process, not only outcomes – inclusive decision-making enhances acceptance even in contested reforms.
- Civic space is essential for democratic trust – restrictive legislation undermines legitimacy and social cohesion.
- Transparency and communication are governance tools – proactive information reduces uncertainty and misinformation.
- Social dialogue strengthens crisis resilience – trust-based cooperation improves response effectiveness.
- Institutionalised participation builds long-term legitimacy – stable mechanisms outperform ad hoc consultations.



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