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# MAKING SENSE OF EUROPE'S COHESION CHALLENGE

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## SUMMARY

- The EU Cohesion Monitor brings together research from all 28 member states to create a picture of the level of cohesion within Europe. Contrary to expectations, it found that overall cohesion increased between 2007 and 2014.
- It measures cohesion on two levels: structural cohesion, which reflects the ties between member states such as trade flows, participation in common policies or geographical proximity, and individual cohesion, which measures the engagement, experiences, and views of EU citizens.
- East-Central European countries such as Poland and Slovakia took big steps forward in terms of structural cohesion, while those hit hardest by the financial crisis – such as Italy and Spain – saw a drop in both individual and structural cohesion.
- Ireland and Hungary have big gaps between structural and individual cohesion. Ireland's population is highly engaged with the EU but lacks deep institutional ties, while Hungary has a high level of structural engagement with the EU but lacks individual cohesion.
- Drivers of national engagement with the EU are dynamic and becoming increasingly varied, indicating that cohesion-building will be more complex in future.

What does it mean to be a European? Apart from using geographical explanations, a good answer might begin with some contextual reference to a particular group of countries that have historically demonstrated a high level of difference – culturally, socially, economically, and physically. Europe's history is shaped by the peculiar proximity of difference, and proximity is more than just a geographical term. Europe's many languages are mostly, but not exclusively, derived from two linguistic sources: the Romance and Germanic languages. Indeed, European ethics too are mostly, but not exclusively, shaped by Judeo-Christian religious norms and beliefs. The proximity of difference has given birth to a high level of pan-national engagement.

Europeans have traditionally interacted across borders, not just commercially, but in the arts and sciences as well. Movements in music, visual arts, literature, and architecture are also deeply interwoven across Europe. To top it all off, despite their interaction with each other on so many developments in the arts and sciences, Europeans have fought endlessly against each other, over territory and people, over resources and trade-routes, over power and religion.

To be European means to share this unique background. And as rich and colourful as it may be, it still does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question we are asking. Over the past 100 years, what it means to be a European has evolved in a rather different direction than at any other time in the continent's history. The Europe of today still suffers most, if not all, of the elements listed above, but with the important development that European states are willing to cooperate more with each other by uniting as

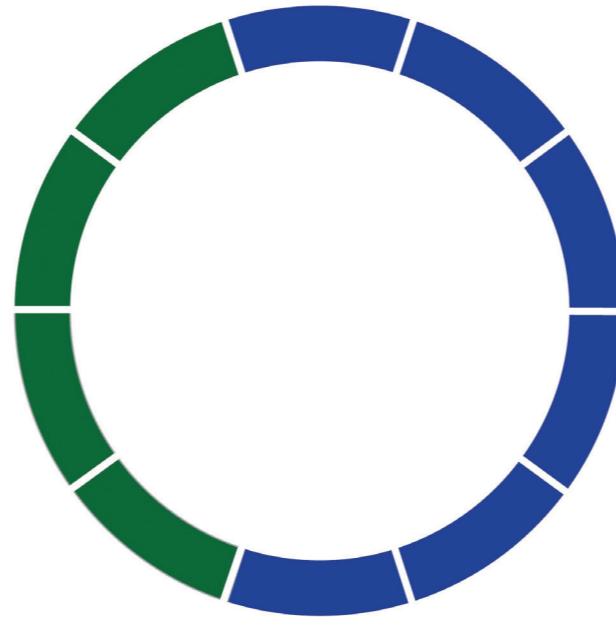
# The structure of the EU Cohesion Monitor

## Individual Cohesion

- Experience**
  - Citizens of other EU countries % of population
  - Visited another EU country
  - Socialised with people from other EU country
  - Foreign language skills
- Engagement**
  - Turnout in EP elections
  - Anti-EU/populist share in EP elections
  - Anti-EU/populist share in national elections
- Attitudes**
  - Trust in EU
  - Positive image of EU
  - National interest well taken into account
  - Perception as European
- Approval**
  - Support for economic and monetary union
  - Support for common foreign policy
  - Support for common defence and security policy
  - Euro among most positive results of EU
  - Free movement among most positive results of EU
  - Peace in Europe among most positive results of EU

## Structural Cohesion

- Resilience**
  - Disposable income
  - Debt to GDP
  - Social Justice Index
- Economic Ties**
  - EU trade to total trade
  - EU trade to GDP ratio
  - EU investments to total investments
  - EU investments to GDP ratio
- Funding**
  - Inflow of EU funds as % of GDP
  - Balance of payments to EU budget
- Neighbourhood**
  - Population (share) living near borders
  - Non-EU neighbours
- Policy Integration**
  - Number of opt outs
- Security**
  - Joint commands and cooperation
  - Joint development and procurement
  - Multinational deployments



part of a union. To be European today means to belong to a bloc of countries that do not to go to war with each other, but instead pool sovereignty in order to foster mutual security and prosperity.

This fundamental change in European history altered the meaning of social cohesion, which gained a transnational dimension in the context of the European Union. In our time, cohesion also means that states and societies are willing to cooperate with each other on issues facing the European community. The old Europe of endless rivalries between nations was built on the idea of inward-looking national cohesion, where individual states required only internal cohesion to be successful. The new Europe of integration between nations requires cohesion within *and* between the societies of the EU member states.

### What is cohesion?

Cohesion is something we all experience – at least, the desire to cohere with others. Cohesion is about how we define ourselves; it is about our feelings of belonging, as well as our shared interests, if not our common destiny – and it can also be about mutual dependence. Cohesion involves trust and the management of expectations, a longstanding commitment that binds actors and people together. In the discipline of sociology, cohesion is defined as the willingness to cooperate, evoking all of the connotations mentioned above. It applies as much to the relationship between individuals as to those among members of a social group, from the smallest of communities to the largest of societies.

The power of societies lies in their ability to engage in collective action – to put the means and abilities of the many to a common purpose. Therefore, the willingness of members

of a society to cooperate is critical. Without cooperation and without cohesion, collective action cannot begin to be effective. Cohesion is the connective tissue of political systems, holding the parts together and allowing the muscles to work in unison. On the national level, cohesion is sustained by factors well beyond the core benefits of statehood: prosperity and security. A shared language, a unified political system with equal participation rights, a common educational system communicating the historical and cultural narratives of a society, a sense of national identity – all of these things also contribute to cohesion in society.

On the EU level, cohesion is also essential, but the resources for ensuring it are scarcer. Some of the same sources can be drawn on to build cohesion between European societies, but the cohesive pull of “Europe” is generally weaker than cohesion factors on a national level. For example, the relevance of the European level for ensuring the prosperity

and security of Europeans is difficult for individual citizens to assess in concrete terms. Counterfactual evidence that proves the pacifying and prosperity-inducing effects of integration is not available, and a political process that can adequately demonstrate to citizens the impact of European policymaking is lacking.

As a still incomplete system, in territorial and political terms, the EU lacks some of the other resources of cohesion that individual states have. For instance, the EU does not have as strong a political identity as its individual member states. Like individual member states, the EU has democratic representation and participation, but to lesser effect, and the articulation of the political will of the people is more diffuse.

Evidently, the absence of a truly shared language and common political socialisation means that the sense of community among Europeans will always be much weaker compared to the national level. And yet, practical experience suggests that the level of interaction between EU member states is significantly higher than is most commonly the case between countries that are actually neighbours. For most EU countries, trade with other EU member states is greater than trade with the rest of the world combined. In many parts of the Union, borders have physically disappeared, where they had been unavoidable decades ago. In some places, it has become quite normal to live in a European country on one side of a border and work in another on the other side.

## Monitoring European cohesion

There are clear grounds for European cohesion – the border-free zone, the economic prosperity derived from being part of the EU, and the security assurance afforded by the Union – and there is a willingness among member states to cooperate. It is for these reasons that European cohesion has gradually strengthened over time. The questions we want to ask now are how strong that cohesion is, and to what extent it is shared among and between European societies.

The political divisions that have opened up over the multiple crisis situations of the past decade raise the question of whether cohesion has been lost or broken. Have countries in crisis lost the cohesion that was built over time through EU membership, and how have calls of solidarity between EU member states impacted how much individual members are willing to give? The crucial period to look at in this respect is the seven years from 2007, the year before the financial crisis ravaged Europe, to 2014, the most recent year for which we have a full set of data and which immediately predates the current refugee crisis.

Opinion research provides some interesting answers to the issues in question, but does not capture all relevant aspects or subtleties regarding the complex tale of cohesion. A number of the linkages between EU countries have to do with macro-level metrics such as trade, finance, patterns of movement, and military cooperation among EU countries. These figures and their implications will shape the views of economic and political elites, but are generally less easily comprehended by a wider public. In fact, the belief systems of many Europeans may not yet reflect the raft of changes that have taken place over the past few decades, and may not mirror the degree to which mutual dependence has grown. After all, European integration has not sought to replace national identities, but rather to cover up the shortfalls in policymaking at the national level.

The EU Cohesion Monitor was designed to gather and structure findings on the present state of cohesion in the EU.<sup>1</sup> The Monitor brings together various sources of information in order to develop a common overall measurement of

cohesion that can facilitate comparison between member states. Given the level of heterogeneity among individual EU member states, we expected that levels of cohesion would differ, but so would the strength of contributing factors. For some countries, the impact of EU trade might be a strong driver towards greater cohesion, while for others, it could be the amount of fiscal solidarity, or the level of cross-border movement.

Rather than directly asking people about their readiness to cooperate with other Europeans, the EU Cohesion Monitor focuses on factors that nourish and sustain the willingness to cooperate, a number of which may not already be adequately reflected in the attitudes and beliefs of many people. These factors can be grouped according to the following three terms:

- 1. Interdependence.** Indicators of interdependence are those that contribute to a growing mutual dependence between European individuals and member states in economic, social, and political terms. Indicators of interdependence would be the levels of mutual trade, financial transfers, security cooperation, and socio-economic resilience.
- 2. Interaction.** An indicator of interaction would be the level of cross-border flows of goods and people, communication skills and patterns, geographical proximity, and political participation at the EU level.
- 3. Identity.** Indicators here would be the general views of the public on the EU and on membership in the EU, attitudes towards integration and on “more Europe” or the proximity of “non-EU”.

In total, 32 different factors drawn from these three clusters were integrated into the ten indicators used by the Cohesion Monitor.

Some of the indicators measured by the EU Cohesion Monitor, such as trade and financial flows, clearly refer to structural conditions or the macro level of society. While they might be perceived by the wider public in the form of the export dependency of jobs, for example, or in the presence of construction signs indicating EU co-financing, these structural indicators will likely be more clearly perceived by elites because they are regularly thinking and working on a macro level. On the other hand, a number of indicators used in the EU Cohesion Monitor explicitly measure the experiences, actions, and beliefs of individuals – in other words, these indicators address the micro level of society. As such, the Cohesion Monitor’s findings have been drawn from both macro and micro dimensions to define the position of EU societies at a high level and at a more granular one.

<sup>1</sup> The full data and findings from the EU Cohesion Monitor can be accessed in their entirety and free of charge on the ECFR website, at <http://www.ecfr.eu/eucohesionmonitor>.

## The current state of cohesion in the EU

The overall results of the EU Cohesion Monitor convey a mixed message about the willingness of member states across the EU to cooperate.

### *Overall cohesion levels*

The process of integration has been bringing European nations closer together for over 50 years, but the outcome today in terms of cohesion is not overwhelming. The data shows that Luxembourg scored the highest on both macro and micro cohesion levels, with little “cohesion potential” left to explore. In contrast, the cohesion results from the six founding members of the EU – France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg – were quite disparate. In fact, our research revealed that there is quite a spread among them in terms of structural cohesion.

Luxembourg leads the founding members and Italy is last. The two other smaller “founding members” – the Netherlands and Belgium – rank just above the halfway mark, and the three large “founders” – France, Germany, and Italy – below.<sup>2</sup> On individual cohesion, however, all founding members except for Italy are clearly above the halfway mark. So, length of membership seems to have an impact on cohesion, although it is not very visible. The cohesion matrix shows that 75 percent of member states scored above 5 out of 10 on individual cohesion, including a range of both old and young EU members. The even split on structural cohesion seen among the founding members also applies to the EU at large, because 50 percent of its members rank above 5 out of 10 on this metric, and the other half remain below it.

Our findings that the overall level of individual cohesion indicators is higher than the structural indicator total seem at odds with the current European political environment and with many of the debates taking place in national capitals of Europe. That there is an uptick in these indicators between 2007, the last year before Europe was shaken up by the financial crisis, and 2014 also seems to defy expectations. Though not very strong, the increase in cohesion during this period is palpable. The aggregate scores point to one salient trend: that over this seven-year period between 2007 and 2014, the range between lowest and highest scores has also increased, indicating that the differences in the two levels of cohesion measured for each country are growing. The findings indicate that the EU has become more diverse in terms of cohesion over this seven-year period.

<sup>2</sup> Countries in the EU Cohesion Monitor are rated on a scale of 1 to 10, where 5.5 represents the halfway point. For more information on the ranking system and the various indicators and factors making up the Cohesion Monitor, please see our PDF explorer, which is available at <http://www.ecfr.eu/eucohesionmonitor>.

## *Cluster matrix data*

The cluster diagram on the next page show member states scattered widely across the two axes of structural and individual cohesion, explicitly indicating this trend of diversification. In 2007, a group of about 18 member states sit in the range of  $\pm 1$  around the intersection of the structural and individual axes. This means that they are at the mid-level of cohesion in both structural and individual terms. Seven years later, that zone has lost almost half of the countries – the cluster in the middle does not represent two-thirds of EU states any longer. No single trend emerges when charting the trajectories of different states in the seven-year period.

At first sight, they seem to be spreading in all directions. However, there are three directions that are of particular interest. Firstly, Germany and the seven smaller affluent countries rank lower on structural cohesion, but grow in individual cohesion, meaning that citizens of these countries feel more European, but that on a macro level the countries are less cohesive.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the East-Central European countries make a large leap forward in structural cohesion indicators, with some moderate gains in individual cohesion. Thirdly, the matrixes show that the countries hit hardest by the sovereign debt crisis tend to lose on both dimensions, with profound differences among them: Portugal and Greece do not change much in structural terms, but while individual levels in Greece go down, they move up marginally in Portugal. Ireland loses on structural cohesion but not as much as Italy and Spain, while the country’s individual cohesion level increases slightly.<sup>4</sup>

### *Cohesion divergences*

These matrix analyses are useful because they clearly identify outliers, which in this case means the countries that occupy the corner zones of the four sectors of a matrix. In 2007, the monitor’s northeast corner is occupied by Luxembourg, allowing us to see that it is significantly ahead of the other EU countries in both individual and structural cohesion.

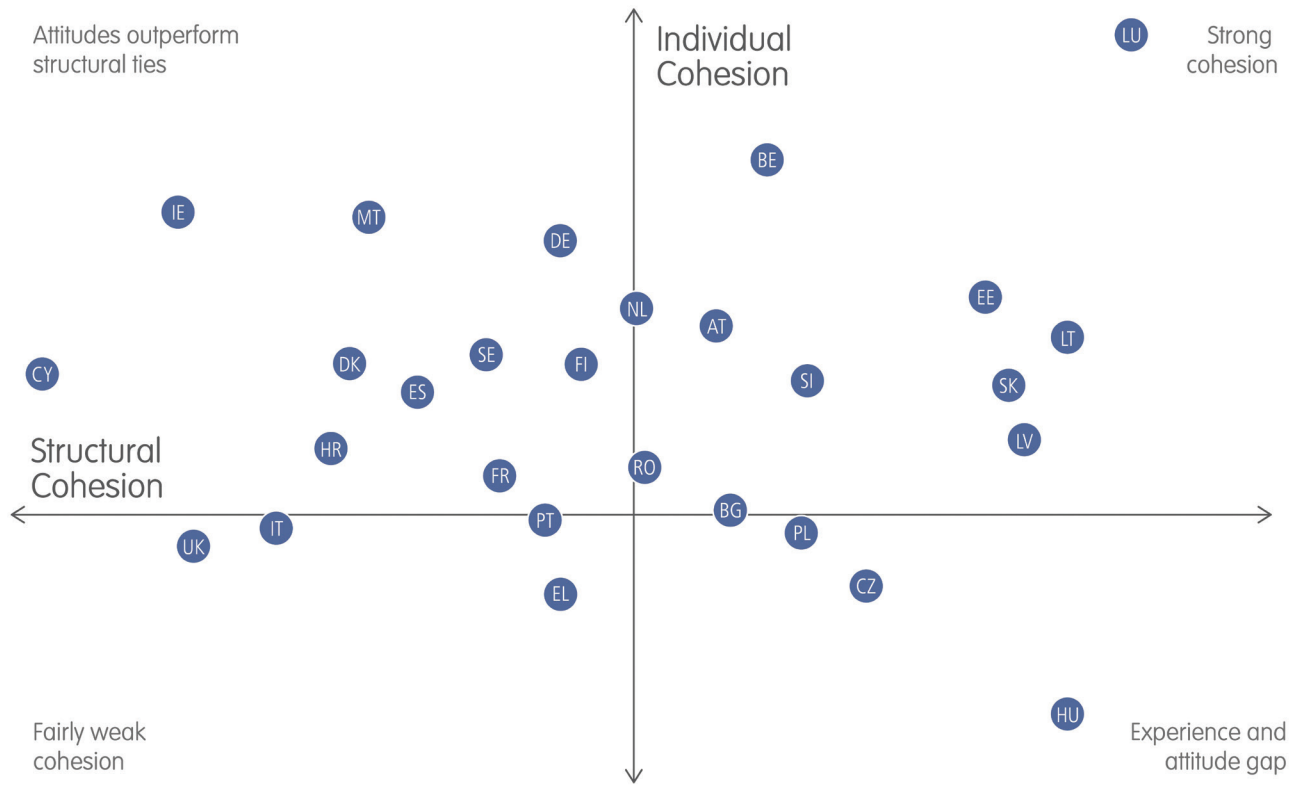
Seven years later, Luxembourg still leads and remains at the edge of the quadrant, but on structural cohesion levels, the three Baltic States and the Slovak Republic have moved closer to it, demonstrating an increase in their own structural and individual cohesion indicators.

In the 2007 matrix, the southwest corner opposite Luxembourg, which indicates low individual and low structural cohesion, is the United Kingdom, joined by Greece, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, and Portugal. Seven years later, in 2014, the matrix shows that Britain’s outlier position has grown. Only Cyprus shows a lower level of cohesion in structural terms, and only Greece, the Czech Republic, and Hungary rank below the UK on individual cohesion.

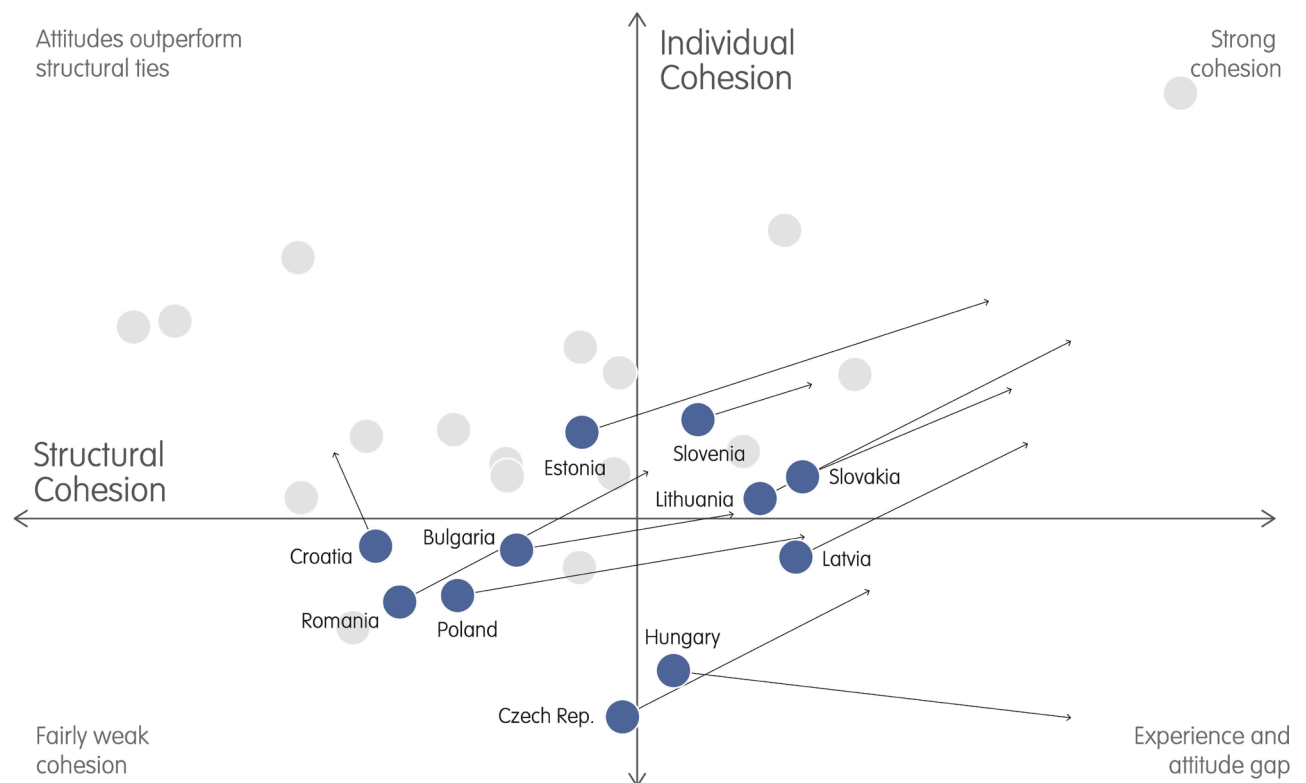
<sup>3</sup> This grouping consists of the three Nordic states, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland; the three Benelux states, Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg; and Austria).

<sup>4</sup> Detailed illustrations of the 2007-2014 changes and country positions can be found on the ECFR website at <http://www.ecfr.eu/eucohesionmonitor>.

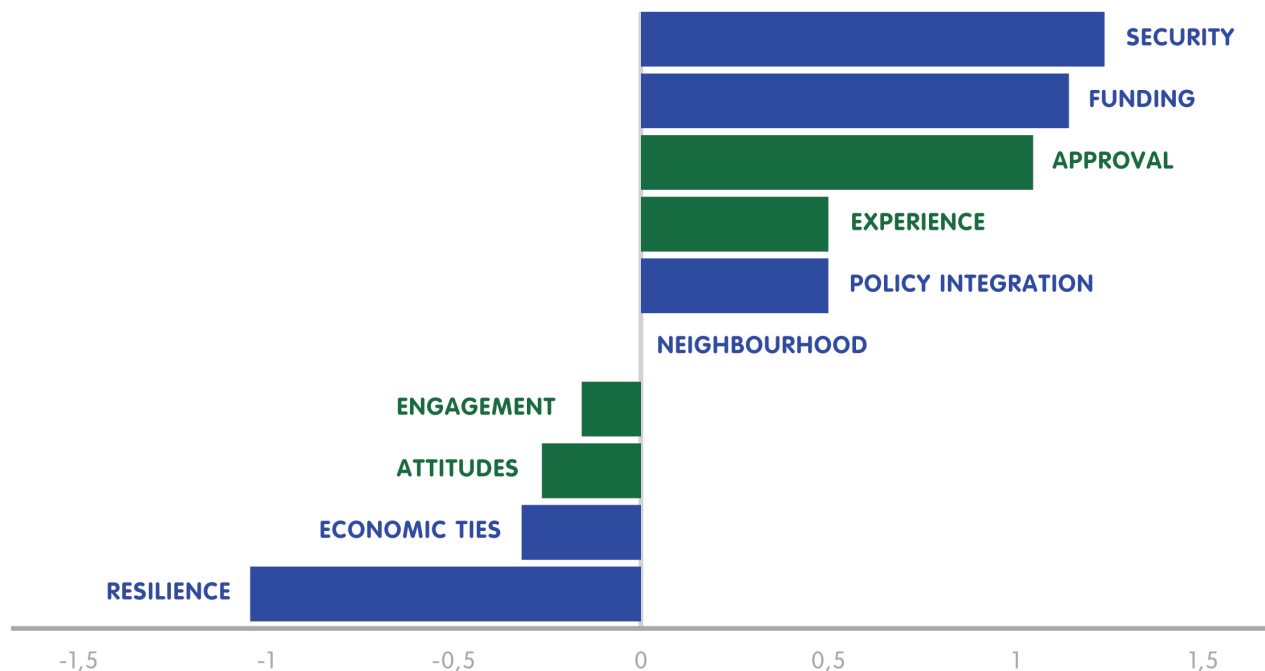
# EU cohesion levels in 2014



## Shift in cohesion for East-Central European countries, 2007-2014



# Overall gains and losses by indicator across the EU, 2007-2014



The remaining two corners are shaped by divergent cohesion profiles. In 2007, the northwest corner, indicating high individual cohesion but low structural cohesion, is occupied by Ireland. No other member state is higher on individual cohesion while ranking as low in structural terms. With both trends growing during the years of the financial crisis, Ireland's outlier position becomes even more visible in 2014. In the southeast corner, indicating high structural cohesion but low individual cohesion, and directly opposite to Ireland, is Hungary.

Since 2007, Hungary has overtaken the Czech Republic as the least individually engaged member state. Hungary's position in 2014 is very peculiar indeed, because it has a high level of structural cohesion matched by the Baltic States, and closing in on Luxembourg, but is at the lowest level of individual cohesion. The two countries could not be more different: the Irish people have held individual EU-mindedness high over the years of a severe economic and financial crisis, whereas the Hungarian people show a somewhat weaker level of cohesion while their country's structural connectedness with the EU rapidly progressed over the same period.

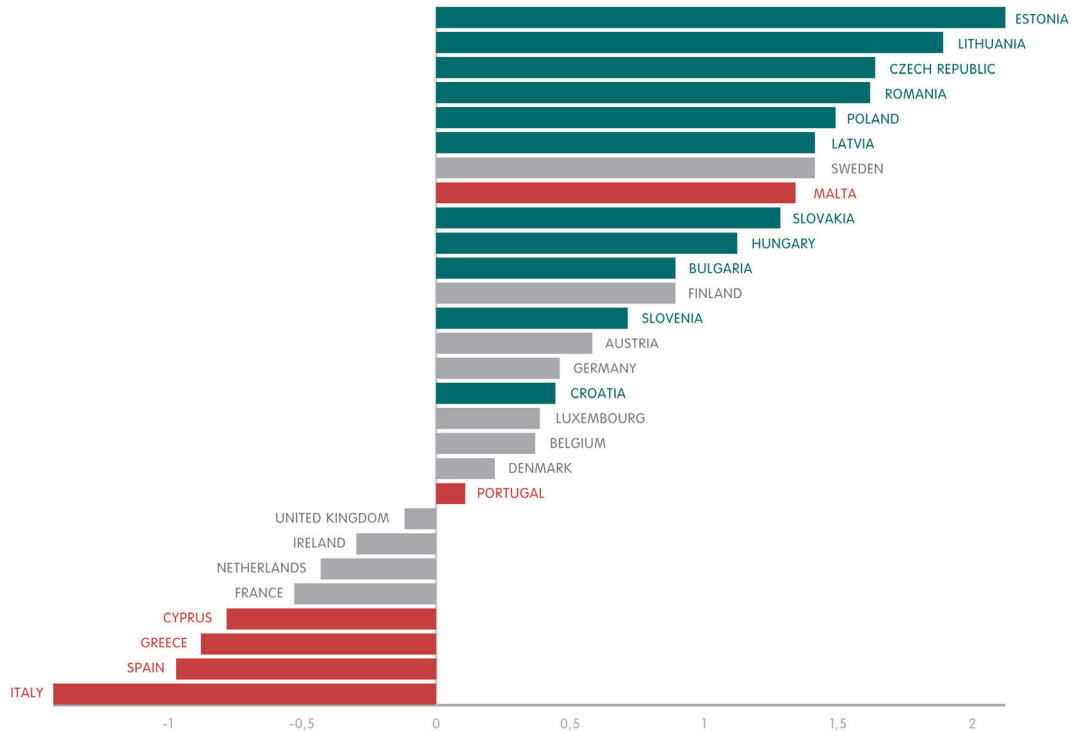
## Cohesion convergences

The EU Cohesion Monitor's results do not just reveal divergences and outliers: there are some notable convergences and similarities between EU countries too. Evidently, the outliers discussed above look very different in the radar view of the monitor's ten indicators.<sup>5</sup>

The Benelux countries, for example, show a relatively similar pattern to each other. To be sure, there are visible structural differences among them, on resilience and economic ties, and when it comes to individual cohesion, on experience and engagement. However, the overall picture is one of convergence rather than divergence. The same can be said of the Baltic States. Though their profiles differ significantly from that of the Benelux countries, the pattern among the three countries is very similar. Even closer are the three Nordic countries. Differences show up on approval, economic ties, and the level of policy integration (with Denmark and Sweden not participating in all levels of integration), but otherwise the pattern is strikingly similar. We can therefore see a series of mini-blocs emerging in certain corners of the EU.

<sup>5</sup> Radar data can be viewed on the EU Cohesion Monitor website at <http://www.ecfr.eu/eucohesionmonitor>.

# Overall cohesion gains and losses by EU member state, 2007-2014



There is no similar convergence among most of the larger EU member states, but the radar images of France and Germany are quite similar, especially when compared with the radars for Poland or the UK. After all, France and Germany differ rather strongly on socio-economic structure and policy. Spain and Portugal look quite close on the radar, as do Spain and Italy. Romania and Bulgaria also have some interesting similarities. Each of the views also shows two to three indicators with greater deviations, but convergences prevail. It follows that similar socio-economic conditions, levels of development, and neighbourhoods tend to result in similar patterns emerging on the cohesion radar.

### *The East-South divide*

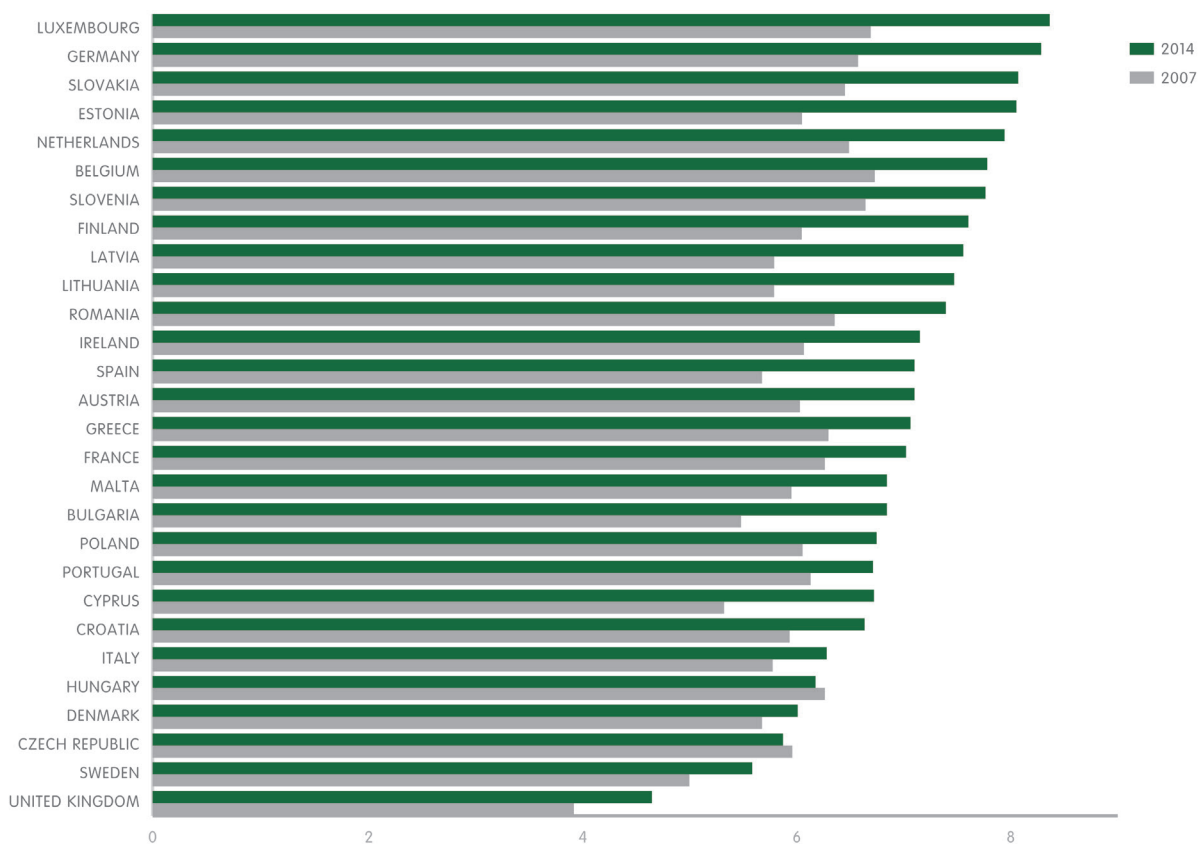
The EU Cohesion Monitor data reveals a significant split among EU member states between 2007 and 2014. When ranking countries according to their change in cohesion levels over the period, the dichotomy is striking. All of the East-Central European countries have gained over the seven-year period, and nine of the top 12 belong to this region. On the other hand, cohesion among almost all of the countries in the south of Europe has declined, with only Malta and Portugal improving over the period.

### *EU-wide correlations*

Another way of looking at the overall results is to focus on patterns of change for specific indicators. While there is no EU-wide correlation on most indicators, but instead gains and losses in different areas for different member states, two indicators stand out precisely because they show a general EU-wide correlation.

More than anything else, the resilience indicator of the structural dimension has suffered across the EU. This indicator seeks to measure the willingness of member states to extend solidarity across borders. It assumes that affluent societies are more willing to share with others, because they can afford to, which will have the knock-on effect of pacifying the neighbourhood by easing social cleavages. As a constraining factor, the indicator factors in the level of social justice within the giving society, assuming that significant social cleavages within a society would reduce the willingness of that society to share beyond its borders. Resilience, as measured here, has fallen in almost all EU member states, and has only gained in four states (Poland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Bulgaria). Resilience has not only declined in the countries of Europe's South and Ireland, which suffered most from the economic crisis, but also in the UK, the Netherlands, and France.

# Support for the EU across member states, 2007-2014



On the other end of the scale, almost all countries show significant improvement in the approval indicator, which is part of the individual dimension. Data used here is based on representative polling undertaken by Eurobarometer. For this indicator, six questions were evaluated, which address principal outcomes of integration and issues of, or areas for, deeper integration. In all member states except for Hungary and the Czech Republic, the state of policy support in 2014 is visibly more positive than for 2007. The reasons for this become much clearer when looking at the attitudes indicator, which gathers more general opinions on membership in the EU. Visible gains in some countries, particularly in Sweden, Finland, the UK, and Lithuania, contrast with sizeable losses in others, such as Greece, Cyprus, Spain, and Slovenia.

While the financial crisis brings about more critical views on being part of the EU, citizens express higher support for “more Europe”. This paradox could be reflecting a growing divide within European societies. On the one hand, there are those who feel that the policy responses to the crisis are insufficient and therefore support deeper integration. On the other, there are those who are dissatisfied with the state of the EU, and who conclude that integration itself is the problem rather than the solution. The latter view is prevalent among most of the populist nationalist movements and parties in Europe.

## Resolving EU asymmetry

It is also interesting to study the closing of asymmetries between member states. Monitoring cooperation in the area of military security provides interesting evidence in this regard. Gaps between the EU 12 members belonging to NATO and the rest were quite large in 2007, but by 2014, most of the new members and also the non-NATO EU members had significantly increased their levels of military cooperation, levelling the former asymmetries in this area. This change may not necessarily have much impact on the broader public’s view, but it will certainly be influencing the perception of cohesion among political elites.

The level of economic development is another area of great asymmetry in cohesion between EU countries. It is a long-standing EU policy to reduce such asymmetry through financial flows from the richer to the poorer regions, as a form of fiscal solidarity. To measure this effect, the EU Cohesion Monitor looks at the financial transfers through the EU’s structural funds as a share of national GDP. With a multiannual average of financial inflows above 4 percent of national GDP, Lithuania leads the board on this indicator.



In real life, this means that in many towns and regions of the country, investments into infrastructure, socio-economic conditions, and education will bear the label of being co-funded by the EU. The same holds true for other East-Central European member states. Each year, financial transfers from Brussels have ranged between 1 and 5 percent of national GDP. The Monitor's data on fiscal solidarity demonstrates that East-Central Europe has benefited greatly from EU structural funds, triggering a "catching-up effect". Between 2007 and 2014, the levels of structural cohesion have gone up sharply across East-Central Europe.

## Conclusions

In sum, the EU Cohesion Monitor findings for 2007 and 2014 tell a number of different stories – some predictable, but others surprising and counterintuitive. The overall picture signals a rather surprising continuity given the disruptive nature of the crises the EU has faced over the period. However, below the surface a lot of change is taking place, as regionally or sectorially, the level of cohesion is dynamic and ever-changing.

There are two recurring narratives that articulate the extent to which European cohesion has changed in the period. One is the prevailing story of the financial crisis, triggering the sovereign debt crisis, and leading to political cleavages over "austerity" vs. bad governance. Cohesion was tested in the crisis response strategies of many member states, but largely prevailed.

The other narrative is the untold success story of deepening European connectivity across the former Iron Curtain. It took 25 years from the fall of the Berlin wall for many East European countries to join the EU, but the following seven years really anchored the "new members" in the EU – in structural terms, on the macro level. In many places, however, the individual level of cohesion has not kept pace. The resulting gap is weakening Europe. Among other reasons, the unwillingness of East-Central European countries to engage in EU solutions to the refugee crisis is a reflection of low levels of cohesion on the individual level. Among the elites, the quid pro quo of the huge benefits of EU membership is understood, but the public and populists fail to see them.

## Europe's cohesion challenge

The EU Cohesion Monitor illustrates how cohesion is affected by changing attitudes and political and economic events over a given period of time – in this case, the seven years between 2007 and 2014. The data shows that the glue between European societies consistently helps to deal with disruption and conflict, and apparently acts as a buffer to political frustrations.

The results of the Monitor help us to understand that cohesion is still a work in progress: even decades after taking the initial steps towards it, there is significant unused potential. The comparison of data from 2007 and 2014 indicates the enduring willingness of Europeans to cooperate. Over these years, cohesion does not shrink or fall apart across the EU

in the face of major crises. Rather, in many places, including some of those hit hardest by crises, cohesion levels have proven to be less volatile than expected.

Surprisingly, the readiness of Europeans to support "more Europe" did not diminish significantly across the period, even though the EU in general was seen more critically in 2014. Interestingly, the sources of cohesion in different member states were also more diverse after seven years of crisis and crisis response. A greater divergence among cohesion drivers in different member states seems to indicate that cohesion-building will be more complex in future.

What do these findings mean for Europe today? The EU of 2016 is already different to the EU of 2014, even though the sovereign debt crisis is not fully resolved. In the meantime, the refugee crisis has come as an additional challenge to the political cohesion of the EU, exposing deeply rooted divisions and new political cleavages between member states. Unlike the financial crisis, the refugee crisis addresses the internal cohesion of EU societies much more directly and profoundly. This time, the conflict is over people and society, rather than money and national budgets.

Today, it seems that cohesion is even more precious for Europe than before – but it also looks as if more "cohesion capital" has been lost over the last few months as a result of this crisis and Europe's weak response to it. When data for 2015 and 2016 is available, the true effect of the refugee crisis on EU cohesion will become apparent. It may well be that the resilience of cohesion will surprise analysts again. After all, some of the indicators deal with economic interdependence, proximity, and interaction – things that will continue to be important even if the crisis is not resolved on the European level. But cohesion in these areas could decline over time.

The crisis of the Schengen system, leading, among other things, to the reintroduction of border controls between Denmark and Sweden, Germany and Denmark, and Austria and Germany, has served as an early warning of how daily life could change if the system guaranteeing free movement in Europe were to fall apart. In this sense, the refugee crisis has, in fact, raised awareness of the density of interaction in Europe, on both macro and micro levels.

There seem to be contradicting trends at work in Europe today. While interdependence and interaction on economic issues and among citizens deepens, constraints to cohesion also seem to be growing, mostly driven by anti-EU political rhetoric. In most EU countries a political discourse has developed rejecting the notion of integration in response to interdependence. Furthermore, perceived social imbalances in one's own country can stand in the way of European solidarity. The British debate about "in-work benefits" is a case in point. The phenomenon of social imbalance restricting EU cohesion is wider, though.

Many EU countries have engaged in considerable political ring-fencing to defend the national status quo against an

intrusive Europe. The reason behind this reflex stems from the effects of deep integration: the single currency and the single space of mobility have eliminated the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. Now, political narratives and political organisations from individual member states impact others, and are impacted by others. The benchmarking exercise of the Lisbon Agenda launched at the beginning of the millennium appears outdated today, as fiscal conditionality, the European Semester (the EU review of draft national budgets), and new rules for the role of Frontex constrain national sovereignty.<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, political populists all over Europe have sensed this change. Their political claims indicate a rejection of further economic, social, and political cohesion between Europeans. As diverse as they otherwise may be, the new populist nationalists in Europe have one common view: that the pooling of sovereignty is a key problem for Europe's nation states. The thing that was once the essence of integration to its founding generation has now become the arch-nemesis of many Eurosceptic politicians. To return sovereignty to the nation state and to national parliaments is the principal goal for all of these new political parties and movements.

This newfound unwillingness to cooperate would destroy European cohesion, should it prevail. The connectivity among Europeans would be weakened in favour of a national identity that has been set up in opposition to European integration. For now, the populist vote remains a minority in most places within the EU, even though these minorities have won substantial influence in some cases. The influence of sovereigntist movements has shaped current decisions on refugee policy in countries as diverse as Hungary, Poland, Denmark, and France. Meanwhile, the rise of populist forces means that decisions are taken on the EU level but not implemented by member state governments, undermining European cohesion.

On the other hand, the rationale of working together still holds true. Europe's shared interest in security and prosperity calls for close cooperation. Its benefits have distinctively shaped the way the EU looks and acts today. The EU's form of cooperation extends well beyond the strictly voluntary and issue-specific cooperation that sovereigntists would like to see. These are the options, and it is up to Europe's political players and publics to decide which route to take.

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<sup>6</sup> The Lisbon Agenda, also known as the Lisbon Strategy or Lisbon Process, was an action and development plan for the European Union, adopted by the European Council in Lisbon in March 2000. Its goal was to make Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" by 2010. Its main instrument was a benchmarking process identifying best practices in member states and suggesting their implementation in other parts of the EU.

## About the author

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