Concept Paper on resilient (local) Democracies

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We-ID deliverable D2.2

January 2026

Funded by
the European Union

Thematic Expert Workshop – Concept Paper on resilient (local) Democracies (WP1, WP7)

EU-Programme
HORIZON.2.2 - Culture, creativity and inclusive society Main Programme
HORIZON.2.2.1 - Democracy and Governance

Topic
HORIZON-CL2-2024-DEMOCRACY-01-04 - The interrelation between social, cultural and political identities, as well as the sense of belonging, and democracies
Grant agreement ID: 101177925, DOI 10.3030/101177925

Dissemination Level	Public (PU)
Work Package	WP1 WP7
Milestone	M2.2
Deliverables No	D2.2
Version	V1.0
Submission Date	30.01.2026
Due Date	31.01.2026

Funded by the European Union

Suggested citation:

Muti, Öndercan; Neu, Claudia; Nikolic, Ljubica (2026). Concept Paper on resilient (local) Democracies. We-ID deliverables. University of Göttingen. Available at: www.uni-goettingen.de/We-ID

We-ID Identities - Migration - Democracy is a three-year project (2025-2028) that analyses the transformation of individual and collective identities, social cohesion and democracy in the midst of migration, demographic change and current crises in Europe. The consortium includes eight partners: Georg August University of Göttingen, the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the Bocconi University, the Institute for the Study of Population and Human Studies (Bulgaria), the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Croatia), Max Planck Society (Population Europe), the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and The Civics Innovation Hub.

Website: https://www.uni-goettingen.de/We-ID

The We-ID project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under the grant agreement No. 101177925.

Publication information:

Content

Figures

1. Control Sheet

Version History			
Version	**Date**	**Modified by**	**Summary of Changes**
D2.2 Concept Paper V1	31.01.2026		Initial Version

2. List of Participants

Participant No.	Participant Organisation Name	Country
1 (Coordinator)	University of Goettingen (UGOE)	Germany
2	Bocconi University (UB)	Italy
3	University of St. Andrews (USTAN)	Great Britain
4	Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS)	Bulgaria
5	Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI)	Croatia
6	Max Planck Society (MPG)/Population Europe	Germany
7	Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	IGO, Sweden
8	THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (CIVICS)	Germany

3. Objectives

The European Union's promise of prosperity and security is based on the principle of "unity in diversity" and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, rights and democratic participation of its citizens. The vast majority of EU citizens share these values. At the same time, democracies are in crisis. Populist parties are fuelling fears and spreading the narrative that migration leads to a loss of identity. There is no doubt that migration always raises the question of identity and belonging. How do we organize integration and participation in such a way that cohesion is created despite diverse identities? The project "Identities - Migration - Democracy" (We-ID) is therefore concerned with the transformation of individual and collective identities, social and territorial cohesion and democracy under the conditions of demographic change, particularly with regard to migration and growing population diversity. We-ID follows an innovative research path by a) analysing the impact of migration on identities, belonging, cohesion and democracy, taking into account both the impact on host

communities and the changes in the identities of migrants and their descendants, and b) elaborating the interrelationship between identities, cohesion, resilience and democracy. In addition to quantitative data analysis, we will use qualitative methods at the local level (e.g. pilot study in a border region, content analysis, case studies) to look for factors that strengthen resilient democratic communities. By consistently pursuing a transdisciplinary approach within our Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab (We-PARL) throughout the project, we will create a platform for mutual learning between different stakeholders from the European to the local level, while at the same time contributing to evidence-based and thoroughly discussed policy recommendations. In addition, based on our findings, we will develop materials such as toolboxes that can be used by practitioners and local actors (We-SCOUTS).

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

Objective 1: Revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues concerning identities, belonging and cohesion, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration.

Objective 2: Map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment.

Objective 3: Investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.

Objective 4: Extending objectives 2 and 3 through a regional pilot study in a Bulgarian border region. To analyse, how migration flows affect both the migrant communities themselves and their identities, and the communities exposed to new and large-scale immigration.

Objective 5: Development of an inclusive concept for resilient democratic communities (ReDeCos), through the identification (five case studies) of local factors that hinder or strengthen belonging.

Objective 6: In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.

Objective 7: Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.

Objective 8: To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.

Objective 9: The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.

4. Purpose of the Deliverable

Work package 2 lays the conceptual groundwork for policies aimed at strengthening democracy and societal resilience. It examines how policy-making can effectively prevent and address social and territorial marginalisation as well as discrimination, while fostering a sense of belonging and social cohesion among all EU citizens and migrants. This work package will be closely linked with the Policy Advocacy and Research Lab (WP7) and will provide key inputs for other scientific components focusing on drivers, migration patterns and identities. In addition, it tackles the current democratic crisis, as evidenced by declining public trust in institutions across the EU and the growing support for populist and far-right parties. In direct cooperation with policy makers and in co-production with stakeholders, this task of making (local) democracies resilient will be discussed. As part of a multi-stakeholder approach, we invited (with WP7, Thematic Expert Workshops) policy makers and stakeholders to a workshop to gather input on the idea of democracy and resilience-enhancing policies. We already began this process with our stakeholder dialogue prior to submission and the agenda-setting workshop. The results of these consultations will be summarized in a concept paper. These results will inform the scenario development processes of WP6 and WP7. Furthermore, the concept paper contains recommendations for policy-making to promote resilient democracies.

5. State of Research on resilient (local) Communities

5.1 Resilient Communities

Resilient communities are understood as the strength of socio-spatial systems to withstand exceptionally stressful events. These can include socio-interactive, communal structures and processes, as well as technical, institutional, municipal, and societal factors. Furthermore, the understanding differs with regard to the potential risks against which resilience is analyzed and which should be strengthened as much as possible (Beerlage 2023).

Interdisciplinary discussions focus on resilience in the context of a potential or already occurring damaging influence that could destroy the community under consideration, disrupt everyday processes, or temporarily make them completely impossible (ibid.). All disciplines explore resilience, recovery capacity, and potentially also learning from crises. However, just as these approaches differ, so too do the resulting questions about how to promote resilience (ibid.).

One dimension concerns the phase in which resilience is to be built up: for example, to prevent damage (prevention) – to build protective factors and coping capacities (preparedness) – to protect in the impact phase of the event (mitigation) – or as a resource in the acute handling phase (response) – as a characteristic of a more successful recovery phase (recovery) – or finally as a coping outcome and (sustainable) learning from the crisis (evaluation) (ibid.).

Furthermore, there is the goal dimension: Is the aim to restore the original state (bounce back) – to achieve (post-traumatic) growth (bounce forward) – to achieve sustainable development (sustainability or “build back better”) – or a combination of all of these (ibid.).

In a recent JRC paper, resilient communities are understood as communities that possess the social, institutional, economic, and environmental capacities to absorb shocks, adapt to structural change, and transform, when necessary, while maintaining or improving wellbeing over time (Boskovic et al, 2026). Resilience is not defined as a return to the status quo, but as the ability to sustain inclusive wellbeing through collective resources, strong institutions, social trust, and participatory governance

in the face of demographic, economic, and environmental pressures (ibid.). Despite or even because of its vague use, the (community) resilience concept is accepted as a cross-disciplinary integration concept (Beerlage 2023, quoted from Lovell, Bahadur, Tanner & Morsi 2016) or as a hopeful metaphor in the overall societal dialogue about crises and threats (ibid., quoted from Norris et al. 2008).

In his doctoral thesis, Hernandez interweaves the 7 principles of the "Stockholm Resilience Centre" with the perspective of community development, which are also of interest for our consideration of resilient local communities within the framework of the We-ID project (Hernandez 2021):

1) Maintain and manage diversity and redundancy within the system

Social diversity should be recognised as a strategic resource that enhances community resilience. Cultural and ethnic diversity, in particular, represent both a significant challenge and a key opportunity. Continuous and targeted integration measures are therefore a central success factor in realising this potential. In addition, decision-making bodies and participatory processes should be designed to reflect the social diversity of the community as comprehensively as possible, in order to ensure representativeness, inclusiveness, and multi-perspective policy outcomes.

2) Manage connectivity within the system

Frameworks should actively promote communication, knowledge exchange, and cooperation among individuals, organisations, and institutions. At the same time, external networking should be strengthened to facilitate access to expertise, innovation, and learning beyond the local context.

3) Analyse social capital and social networks within the system

The systematic assessment of social capital and existing networks is essential for resilience-oriented policy design. Supporting shared responsibility, collective action, and collaboration across networks, teams, and organisational forms is a key lever for enabling social change and strengthening community resilience.

4) Stimulate learning within the system

The definition, review, and adaptation of community goals, visions, and strategies should be embedded in continuous learning and self-reflection processes.

5) Manage collective participation and decision-making (governance) within the system

Resilient communities require inclusive and dialogical forms of citizen participation in goal-setting and decision-making processes. Balanced, transparent, and cooperative governance structures are crucial to ensure legitimacy, effectiveness, and long-term sustainability.

6) Cultivate key actors and leadership capacities

Targeted support for key individuals and leadership capacities is necessary to enable coordination, motivation, and strategic direction within communities. Leadership should be understood as a collective and relational competence rather than a purely hierarchical function.

7) Analyse values, attitudes, and beliefs

Values, attitudes, and shared beliefs constitute an important dimension of community resilience. A positive orientation towards the future, openness to change, persistence in

pursuing collective goals, mutual empathy, and solidarity among community members are closely linked to a community's capacity to cope with and adapt to challenges.

8) Promote systemic thinking

A systemic, resource-oriented, and development-focused approach to addressing current and future challenges enhances the adaptive capacity of communities.

9) Strengthen the local economy in and through the community

A resilient local economy contributes to social stability, employment, and the long-term sustainability of community development.

In We-ID, we are guided by a concept primarily derived from social psychology, sociology, and community psychology: Community and societal resilience arises from coordinated social interactions. Social connections and achievements strengthen the community's capacity to function (capacity building). The cohesion and resilience of a community, its social capital, therefore results from the sum, density, and strength of the bonds between its members (Beerlage 2023).

5.2 Social Cohesion

What is meant by this bond? What is social cohesion? The OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – defines a cohesive society as follows: It strives for the well-being of all its members, combats exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, fosters trust, and offers its members the opportunity for upward social mobility. Social cohesion is thus both a desirable goal and a path to inclusive development. The OECD Development Centre proposes considering the state of social cohesion, which it equates with social cohesion, through three aspects: social inclusion, social mobility, and social capital (OECD).

Social cohesion can be influenced at three levels of action (Jaschke 2009, p. 8):

Levels of Action	Jaschke (2009)	Bottoni (2018)
Micro Level	family, kinship, neighbors, circle of friends, peer group, immediate social environment	interpersonal trust, density of social relationships, social support.
Meso Level	working world, educational institutions, media, clubs, associations, churches, NGOs, volunteer work	openness and participation
Macro Level	political system, democracy itself, political institutions	institutional trust and the perceived legitimacy of institutions

Figure 1. Levels of Social Cohesion
Source: Own Illustration

The project We-ID (as described in Deliverable 5.1) draws on the social cohesion model developed by Bottoni (2018). The model integrates three analytical levels — micro, meso, and macro — with two cross-cutting dimensions, namely subjective and objective components. At the macro level, the model situates institutional trust and the perceived legitimacy of institutions. The meso level captures openness and participation, while the micro level encompasses interpersonal trust, the density of social relationships, and social support. This subdivision is particularly memorable when one combines the categories of Jaschke and Bottoni, as shown in Figure 1.

Social cohesion in We-ID project (see D 5.1) is defined as a shared sense of purpose and trust among members of a given group and/or locality, which underpins their readiness to cooperate and engage in collective efforts that support mutual resilience and prosperity. This definition is designed to be clear and operational, aligning with the most commonly used conceptual approaches in the literature while reflecting the six dimensions most frequently applied in empirical policy analysis. These dimensions comprise trust, norms of collective action, sense of belonging, identity, attitudes toward out-groups, and civic engagement.

Bottoni reconciles two dominant perspectives in the literature, framing social cohesion as a systemic property that can be assessed through aggregate-level data, while simultaneously acknowledging that, from a methodological individualism perspective, social cohesion ultimately emerges from individual attitudes and behaviours. Crucially for policy design, the model conceptualises social cohesion as a second-order, multidimensional construct: rather than exerting a direct effect on individual attitudes and behaviours, social cohesion operates through its constituent dimensions, which in turn shape individual-level outcomes (Bottoni, 2018).

This understanding aligns closely with the concept of community resilience, which emphasises collective adaptive capacity based on shared resources, social networks, and coordinated action. Community resilience is underpinned by economic resources, skills and competencies, access to information, social capital, and shared values and beliefs (Olcese et al., 2024).

5.3 Social Capital

Looking more closely at social capital, it promises a cost-effective source of prosperity and stability—but also draws its sustenance from it—mobilizing more resource-efficient investments in the future and promoting the further development and constitution of democratic society. The focus here is on network resources, their value, the required network density and complexity, and their functionality (Brauer 2015, pp. 58–59). But not only that, social capital is also intended to increase life satisfaction and be a driving force for positive economic development (Dehne 2018: 90-91). According to Putnam (2000), three forms of social capital can be distinguished. First, "bonding social capital": the networking of actors in the immediate vicinity, at the local level, often pioneers, who share common values and trust each other (Dehne 2018: 90-91). The engagement of these citizens, administrative staff, and tradespeople can only grow sustainably if it receives input—knowledge, inspiration, or even immigration—from external actors (“bridging social capital”) (ibid.). “Linking social capital,” finally, describes the vertical networking of local actors with political and economic decision-makers (ibid.). Therefore, the initiation and promotion of local stakeholder networks, external input, and connection to regional policy are conducive to the sustainable stabilization or increase of social capital (ibid.).

5.4 Social Places Concept

The social places concept (Kersten/Neu/Vogel 2017, 2022; Nikolic 2022; Georg-August-Universität Göttingen 2020) represents a policy-relevant approach to strengthening social cohesion, primarily at the micro and meso levels, while also addressing macro-level objectives such as the promotion of equivalent living conditions. It is intended to contribute to territorial cohesion by focusing on social rather than purely functional or infrastructural criteria.

The concept is based on the assumption that processes of infrastructural decline and weakening social cohesion do not inevitably lead to irreversible deterioration. Instead, under appropriate enabling conditions, these developments can foster the emergence of new, innovative, and resilient forms of community and social networks. Such developments, however, do not occur automatically and therefore require targeted policy support.

Unlike conventional planning and regional development approaches that assess communities primarily on the basis of demographic, economic, financial, employment, or infrastructure indicators, the social places concept prioritises social cohesion as a central analytical and policy dimension. This shift enables a differentiated assessment of spatial development dynamics. Rather than reproducing established narratives of decline and growth or focusing solely on migration and demographic change, the approach facilitates the identification of existing resources and development potentials.

As a result, resilient villages with strong community structures and innovative problem-solving capacities can be identified even in shrinking regions, while socio-spatial vulnerabilities and risks may also be detected in urban districts and locations within growth regions. The overarching policy objective of the social places concept is to support municipalities facing precarious socio-spatial cohesion but still possessing key connective assets—such as remaining infrastructure, engaged local actors, and a willingness to initiate change—in strengthening their resilience and long-term social cohesion through targeted, place-based interventions.

Social places constitute a key component of a socially oriented infrastructure by addressing the social needs of the population and stabilising local networks and relationships. From a policy perspective, they can sustainably contribute to securing convivial infrastructure, provided that appropriate enabling conditions and targeted support measures are in place. Evidence suggests that social places promote social cohesion across the micro, meso, and macro levels.

This contribution is based on their capacity to connect and integrate different spatial and governance levels. Social places typically emerge at the micro level of everyday life—within circles of friends, neighbourhoods, and peer groups—where trust, shared experiences, and similar value orientations prevail, corresponding to what is commonly described as bonding social capital. Through deliberate expansion, exchange, and networking, these initiatives can evolve towards meso-level cooperation and generate bridging social capital by linking diverse groups and local contexts.

With the systematic adoption and institutional anchoring of the social places concept, social places can also reach the macro level of the political system and democratic governance, thereby fostering linking social capital. In doing so, they have the potential to reduce regional disparities and mitigate structural disadvantages in particularly affected areas. Overall, the policy objective is to promote more equivalent living conditions—irrespective of place of residence and across diverse socio-spatial contexts—thereby contributing to the long-term stabilisation of social cohesion throughout Germany.

At the core of the social places concept are so-called social places, understood as a distinct category of public infrastructure. Building on Ray Oldenburg's notion of "third places" (Oldenburg 1999), social places are conceived as spaces that are independent of the private sphere of the home ("first place") and the workplace ("second place"). They are publicly accessible, inclusive, and open spaces that provide opportunities for repeated social interaction and thus contribute to social redundancy. By facilitating regular encounters—both intentional and incidental—between people of different age groups, social backgrounds, and professional contexts, social places support everyday social integration. In an increasingly digitalised society, they function as essential analogue anchors for personal interaction.

Beyond their spatial dimension, social places serve as communication and interaction platforms that sustain social relationships. They enable the exchange of ideas, mutual support, and cooperation, thereby fostering the formation of social networks and social capital (Nikolic 2019). Within the framework of the social places concept, these spaces are further understood as productive and

adaptive infrastructures that respond to the specific and context-dependent needs of local communities.

Social places often take the form of innovative and hybrid institutional arrangements in which a wide range of actors can engage and collaborate. They create new and inclusive opportunities for participation, strengthen civic engagement, and make such engagement publicly visible. By rendering community activities and collective action tangible, social places enhance the transparency and comprehensibility of social cohesion. In doing so, they contribute to strengthening local democracy and reinforcing social cohesion as a key policy objective.

5.5 (Local) Communities

Cities and municipalities constitute the primary sites where integration outcomes are realised - whether it's in the neighborhood, at the workplace, in the club or at the social place. As concrete destinations of migration movements, European municipalities possess significant discretionary powers within migration and integration policy. These are increasingly being used in a strategic and self-conscious manner, in some cases diverging from national policy positions, for example proactive municipal strategies for the international recruitment of skilled labour. Taken together, these developments underscore the central role of municipalities in shaping effective, context-sensitive migration and integration policies (Schammann 2020).

In the context of strengthening democratic resilience, cities and municipalities play a pivotal role as arenas of political action and governance. They can be understood as key sites of democratic learning, political education, and civic socialisation. This role is substantiated by the increasing institutionalisation of citizen participation at the local level over recent decades, including instruments such as participatory budgeting, real-world laboratories, and participatory planning processes. In parallel, civic engagement remains deeply embedded in local structures, notably through associations, volunteer organisations, and municipal initiatives (Frick 2025).

To date, migration-related responsibilities within municipalities are frequently fragmented across multiple administrative departments and are seldom addressed within an overarching strategic framework that links migration management with integration policy. This institutional fragmentation leads to overlapping competencies, inconsistent measures, and limited policy coherence (ibid.).

Well before 2015, many municipalities had already recognised the need for a strategic consolidation and coordination of migration-related tasks at the local level. This includes, in particular, the alignment of the work of immigration authorities, asylum seeker social services, community development initiatives, and cooperation with job centres. There is increasing acknowledgement that effective local governance requires an integrated policy approach that systematically aligns migration management with integration strategies in order to enhance coherence, efficiency, and long-term outcomes (ibid.).

Beyond their traditional administrative functions, cities and municipalities are increasingly positioning themselves as autonomous political actors that articulate policy priorities and claims vis-à-vis higher levels of government. This shift is reflected in the proliferation of transnational municipal networks over the past 25 years, within which cities coordinate policy responses and exchange best practices, particularly in the fields of climate action, human rights, and migration (Frick 2025). In order to adequately address local challenges in the areas of migration and integration, existing partnerships should also be strengthened by the EU, so that early and cooperative coordination takes place between the European Union, the Member States and the local and regional authorities in the preparation and implementation of measures at EU level (Bendel et al. 2019). So, the policy paper “A Local Turn for European Refugee Politics” for example is asking for “…the European Commission should

organise an exchange of good practice in cooperation with the European Integration Network which is aimed at Member States and their municipalities and based on this develop obligatory components for the structuring of the Partnership Principle." (ibid.).

As municipalities increasingly assume a political role and actively mediate between global policy frameworks and local implementation, their perceived and actual scope for action has expanded. This development is evident in the ongoing "local turn" in European migration and integration policy, which highlights the growing diversity of municipal approaches to managing migration, reception, and integration processes (Frick 2025). This development should be accompanied by better financial resources for municipalities, as well as granting municipalities more say (Bendel 2019).

In Germany, municipal engagement in the reception of refugees has been institutionalised, inter alia, through the "Cities of Safe Harbors" alliance, initiated by the civil society organisation Seebrücke. This alliance brings together municipalities that express their willingness to receive asylum seekers rescued at sea. While the level of readiness to admit refugees varies across municipalities, local declarations of intent are generally underpinned by broad-based local coalitions involving elected officials, municipal administrations, and civil society actors (Schammann 2020).

At the same time, the scope of municipal authority in refugee reception remains contested. In particular, there is ongoing debate as to the extent to which municipalities may exercise discretionary powers to admit refugees or develop independent reception programmes, and whether such initiatives are compatible with, or potentially in conflict with, the federal government's competence in immigration policy. These issues are currently the subject of legal-policy and constitutional discussions (ibid.).

The municipal migration policy cannot be approached as a uniform policy field. Cities, districts, and municipalities differ significantly with regard to their legal competences, financial capacities, settlement structures (including urban–rural characteristics), population composition, local migration histories, and the presence or absence of an active (migrant) civil society. Consequently, municipal capacities and scope for action vary considerably (ibid.).

Even where the so-called "local turn" does not materialise across all municipalities, the increased engagement and policy activism of individual cities and towns is contributing to a broader reassessment of the role of municipalities within the European and German multi-level migration governance system. This dynamic is prompting renewed debate on the distribution of responsibilities, competences, and coordination mechanisms across governance levels (ibid.).

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6. Thematic Expert Workshop

Contemporary societal challenges are inherently interconnected and cannot be effectively addressed through isolated or single-disciplinary approaches. This is particularly true in the context of scientific research. The WE-ID project therefore adopts a transdisciplinary approach in which research and innovation are co-developed in close collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, particularly those for whom the project's outcomes have direct relevance and practical implications.
In addition to its own academic expertise, the project actively incorporates knowledge and perspectives from other scientific disciplines, civil society actors, policymakers, and communities directly affected by the issues under study. This broad participation provides a robust basis for defining legitimate priorities and strategic directions. The project is guided by principles of meaningful dialogue and reciprocal learning, prioritising co-creation and exchange over a unidirectional transfer of knowledge from research to practice.

6.1 Why use Workshops

A workshop is an interactive event format where a group of people come together to work on a specific topic or task. It allows a high degree of active participation, discussion and group dynamics, instead of passive consumption. The focus on one topic within a limited timeframe achieves short-term activation of power reserves. With diversity of perspectives in the workshop a synergy effect is created and individual horizons are expanded. The purposes of a workshop could be information or knowledge transfer, creating a shared understanding, solving a problem or conflict, collection of data, e.g., tasks, processes, key performance indicators, concept development or decision-making. The goal is to achieve concrete results that extend beyond the workshop. Participants of a workshop are at best Specialists, affected individuals, or experts on a specific topic. Workshop results are group results and are jointly supported by the participants.

6.2 We-ID Expert Workshop during Berlin Demography Days

For the first expert workshop, we decided to use the "Berlin Demography Days" theme and attach it to the first analog event day as a digital format. This gives us a workshop format that is well-framed but easily accessible – avoiding travel costs and requiring the least possible time – and encourages participation. A format that has already been successfully tested many times by Population Europe.
This year, the Berlin Demography Days on Monday, 27 October (Location: Wissenschaftsforum, Markgrafenstraße 37, 10117 Berlin) and Tuesday, 28 October (online) were focusing on the topic of 'Demography and Democracy'. The key question of this year's event was: What impact do demographic changes have on democracy? Following on from this, concrete options for action have been developed to strengthen democratic resilience at local, regional, national and international level.

The following questions dominate the contributions and discussions:

- How can anti-democratic resentment be counteracted from a demographic policy perspective?
- What challenges does our democratic society face in times of demographic change?
- How can transdisciplinary solutions be developed?

Following this, on the second day, October 28th, the We-ID Expert Workshop, entitled "Belonging and Democracy in a Changing Europe", took place online:

13.15 – 13.20 – Welcome Address

- Claudia Neu, Chair of Sociology of Rural Areas at the Universities of Göttingen and Kassel
- Andreas Edel, Executive Secretary of Population Europe | Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

13.20 – 14.20 – **Global Talent, Local Gaps: Skill Migration and Territorial Divides**

- Tanya Hristova, Mayor of Gabrovo Municipality & Member of the European Committee of the Regions
- Parvati Raghuram, Professor of Geography and Migration, Open University
- Saaya Sorrells-Weatherford, Founder and CEO of Emigreat
- Moderator: Hill Kulu, Professor of Human Geography and Demography, University of St Andrews

14.20 – 14.35 – Break

14.35 – 15.35 – **Rural but Plural? Migration and Belonging in Rural Areas**

- Bettina Bock, Professor of Inclusive Rural Development, Wageningen University & Research
- Blanca Casares Guillén, Policy Expert, AEIDL – European Association for Innovation in Local Development
- Sebastian Polak-Rottmann, Senior Research Fellow, German Institute for Japanese Studies
- Moderator: Claudia Neu, Chair of Sociology of Rural Areas at the Universities of Göttingen and Kassel

15.35 – 15.50 – Break

15.50 – 16.50 – **Who Belongs? Democracy in a Changing Demographic Landscape**

- Lenka Dražanová, Research Fellow at the Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute
- Michèle Lamont, Professor of Sociology and European Studies, Harvard University
- Anna-Maija Mertens, Executive Director of the German Institute for Compliance and President of the European Movement Germany
- Michaela Moua, European Commission – EU Anti-Racism Coordinator
- Moderator: Öndercan Muti, Project Coordinator, Population Europe | Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research

16.50 – 17.00 – Conclusions

7. Results First Thematic Expert Workshop

The invitation to the We-ID Expert Workshop, entitled "Belonging and Democracy in a Changing Europe" was accepted by 166 participants, who were divided fairly evenly between the three subtopics "Global Talent, Local Gaps: Skill Migration and Territorial Divides", "Rural but Plural? Migration and Belonging in Rural Areas" and "Who Belongs? Democracy in a Changing Demographic Landscape". It was a very diverse group of participants, including both experts and non-experts from science, policy and civil society from different regions of Europe.

7.1 Key Findings

The results of the first thematic expert workshop can be summarized as follows:

The three We-ID sessions at the Berlin Demography Days 2025 explored how demographic change, migration, and democratic participation intersect across Europe's diverse territorial realities. Bringing together policymakers, researchers, and local practitioners, these discussions marked a critical step in the We-ID analytical process—from agenda setting and thematic dialogue design to applied policy reflection.

Across all sessions, one message was clear: **Europe's migration and demographic transitions cannot be governed through economic or crisis management tools alone.** Integration must be understood as a civic and territorial process—anchored in **belonging, fairness, and participation.**

The session **"Global Talent, Local Gaps"** called for connecting EU migration, skills, and cohesion policies to address regional inequalities and unlock the full potential of labour mobility. **"Rural but Plural"** showed that migration can revitalise depopulated regions if supported by housing, childcare, and inclusive narratives, while highlighting gender equality and intergenerational solidarity as drivers of rural renewal.

"Who Belongs?" reframed democracy as a relational practice: belonging and respect, not just rights, sustain trust in institutions.

Together, these insights reaffirm We-ID's central argument—**integration as democratic infrastructure**—and align with major EU frameworks such as the *European Democracy Action Plan*, *EU Youth Strategy*, and *Cohesion Policy 2028+*.

They offer a forward-looking agenda: fostering local participation, gender-sensitive inclusion, and civic trust as foundations of Europe's social and territorial cohesion.

7.1.1. Global Talent, Local Gaps: Skilled Migration and Territorial Divides

Europe's talent geography remains deeply uneven. Skilled migration and investment continue to concentrate in metropolitan and innovation hubs, while peripheral, industrial, and rural regions experience persistent skill shortages and demographic decline. Speakers emphasised that **national migration frameworks lag behind modern labour realities**, remaining bureaucratic and nationally siloed despite increasing digitalisation, cross-border mobility, and hybrid work.

The panel underscored that **"attraction" alone is insufficient**; Europe must focus on **activation** — ensuring that newcomers can use their skills fully through transparent recognition systems, fair working conditions, and inclusive communities. **Local governments**, not only national authorities, are best placed to coordinate training, placement, and integration, but often lack competences and resources.

7.1.2. Rural but Plural: Migration and Belonging in Rural Areas

Rural Europe is far from uniform. While depopulation, ageing, and masculinisation challenge many areas, other regions are being quietly reshaped by **in-migration — both domestic and international** — as young families, remote workers, and entrepreneurs seek affordable housing, healthier lifestyles, and new opportunities.

Speakers highlighted that **demographic change can be a catalyst for renewal**, not merely a symptom of decline. Rural communities that invest in **housing, childcare, digital access, and social infrastructure** can transform migration into demographic and civic revitalisation. Intergenerational cooperation and women's participation emerged as key drivers of innovation and community resilience.

Gender equality correlates strongly with innovation and population growth; regions where women participate equally in economic and civic life display higher retention and vitality. The session also addressed new **national and strategic interests** in rural areas — ranging from climate adaptation to food and security logistics — raising questions about governance, land use, and local voice.

7.1.3. Who Belongs? Democracy in a Changing Demographic Landscape

This final session examined the **emotional and relational dimensions of democracy**: recognition, respect, and belonging. Speakers argued that democratic legitimacy depends on whether citizens — long-settled or newly arrived — feel seen and valued by their institutions.

Research presented by *Lenka Dražanová, Michèle Lamont,* and *Anna-Maija Mertens* demonstrated that **perceived disrespect and invisibility** — especially among working-class, rural, or younger populations — fuel democratic disengagement and populist sentiment. Belonging must therefore be cultivated through *everyday democratic spaces* such as schools, associations, workplaces, and municipalities.

The session stressed that **disinformation and authoritarian populism** exploit unmet recognition needs rather than purely economic grievances. Counter-strategies must be relational — listening, dialogue, and inclusive communication — rather than moralistic correction.

7.1.4. Common We-ID threads: Belonging as Democratic Infrastructure

Across the three sessions, common threads emerge that define the **We-ID approach**:

Dimension	Key Message	Policy Implication
Work and Economic Participation	Workplaces are everyday democracies where rights and trust are practiced.	Embed diversity management and worker representation criteria in EU social and cohesion funding.
Place and Territorial Cohesion	Integration unfolds locally; belonging depends on access to services, housing, and civic spaces.	Align migration and rural policy under future Cohesion and CAP frameworks.
Democracy and Recognition	Respect and visibility sustain democratic legitimacy.	Integrate recognition and fairness indicators in EDAP, CERV, and Cohesion monitoring.
Gender and Intergenerational Solidarity	Inclusion of women and youth revitalizes both demography and democracy.	Mainstream gender equality and youth participation across EU demographic and regional strategies.

Figure 2. Common Threads of all Sessions
Source: Own Representation

These insights confirm that **economic development alone cannot rebuild trust**; *social fairness, inclusion, and local ownership* are equally essential pillars of sustainable democracy.

7.1.5. Continuity with Previous We-ID Publications

Stage	Output	Contribution to Analytical Continuity
Agenda-Setting Workshop (2024)	Identified nine thematic priorities — local cultures, fairness, labour barriers, youth, rural divides, etc.	Provided the conceptual basis for structuring thematic dialogues.
Thematic Stakeholder Dialogue Concept (2025)	Designed participatory framework for engaging stakeholders across levels and regions.	Operationalised dialogue on belonging, workplaces, disinformation, and youth.
Policy Insight (Population Europe, 2025)	Synthesised early results into an EU-facing narrative on trust, inclusion, and democratic resilience.	Articulated We-ID's central message: *integration as democratic infrastructure.*
Berlin Demography Days (2025)	Field-tested and expanded these findings with practitioners, local leaders, and researchers.	Validated key hypotheses through multi-sector dialogue and policy reflection.

Figure 3. Continuity with previous We-ID Publications
Source: Own Representation

Collectively, these steps form a **progressive analytical continuum**:
from diagnosing systemic fragmentation → to engaging stakeholders → to formulating actionable policy recommendations for the EU's post-2027 agenda.

7.1.6. Policy Alignment with EU Frameworks

EU Framework	Relevant We-ID Contribution
New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2023)	Emphasises need to complement border management with integration, skills activation, and social cohesion.
Cohesion Policy 2028–2034 (under negotiation)	Supports place-based inclusion and participatory governance—mirroring We-ID's rural and local focus.
European Democracy Action Plan (2020–2025)	Reinforced by We-ID findings on recognition, trust, and relational democracy.
EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027)	We-ID evidence on youth participation and engagement gaps aligns with its empowerment goals.
Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025)	Corroborated by rural and labour findings linking equality to innovation and demographic renewal.
Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (2021)	Strengthened by We-ID's evidence that migration and gender inclusion are pillars of rural resilience.

Figure 4. Policy Alignment with EU-Frameworks
Source: Own Representation

7.1.7. Concluding Synthesis: Toward a We-ID Narrative of Democratic Cohesion

The We-ID sessions at the Berlin Demography Days collectively demonstrated that Europe's migration and demographic transitions cannot be addressed through economic or administrative tools alone. They require a **new democratic infrastructure of belonging**—anchored in local participation, fair representation, and trust-based governance.

Three overarching conclusions emerge:

Integration as a Civic Process
Migration policy should evolve from a labour-market instrument into a framework for civic inclusion and democratic participation.
Workplaces, schools, and associations must be recognised as democratic spaces.

Belonging as Territorial Policy
Regional and rural strategies should invest in the infrastructures of belonging—housing, mobility, care, and culture—linking demographic renewal with civic engagement.

Recognition as Democratic Resilience
Democratic legitimacy depends on citizens feeling seen, valued, and included. EU frameworks should mainstream recognition and participation indicators into future cohesion, migration, and democracy strategies.

By interlinking **demographic adaptation, migration governance, and democratic vitality**, We-ID offers a coherent narrative for the EU's next strategic cycle:
A Europe that manages mobility not as crisis, but as community; not as control, but as co-creation.

8. Policy Relevance and Link to EU policy Framework

The session *Global Talent, Local Gaps: Skilled Migration and Territorial Divides* speaks directly to the **New Pact on Migration and Asylum (2023)**, the **Skills and Talent Mobility Package (2023)**, and the **Cohesion Policy 2021–2027 / 2028+** debates on regional competitiveness. It reinforces earlier calls in **Population Europe Policy Brief No. 37 (Attracting Skills and Talent to the EU)** to better connect migration policy with regional development and equality objectives.

Policy Relevance

EU Cohesion and ESF+ Funds should be mobilised to establish regional *skills observatories* and *one-stop integration services* that connect employers, migrants, and training providers.

Migration governance modernisation is essential: administrative predictability, harmonised recognition frameworks, and pathways for family and in-country mobility.

Gender-sensitive activation policies can unlock dual-career potential and address systemic underemployment among migrant women.

Talent policies must serve both **economic and social cohesion**—balancing urban magnetism with regional revitalisation.

The discussion during the session *Rural but Plural: Migration and Belonging in Rural Areas* connects to the **Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas (2021)**, **Cohesion Policy 2028–2034**, and **Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**. It aligns with findings from **JRC (Rural Entrepreneurship and Demographic Renewal, 2025; Territories and demographic change – Regional patterns and policy approaches, 2025)** highlighting the democratic implications of rural depopulation.

Policy Relevance

Integrate **rural inclusion and migration** into the post-2027 **Cohesion Policy** and **CAP Strategic Plans**, treating social inclusion as a dimension of rural resilience.

Strengthen housing, childcare, and care infrastructure through targeted EU and national funds.

Institutionalise intergenerational solidarity via co-housing, volunteer exchange, and civic innovation programs.

Empower local actors by **reducing project fragmentation** and funding discontinuity; move toward stable integration infrastructures.

Embed **gender-equality benchmarks** in rural innovation funding.

The findings of the Session *Who Belongs? Democracy in a Changing Demographic Landscape* complement the **European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP, 2020–2025)**, which calls for resilient information ecosystems and citizen participation, and the **EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027)**, which stresses meaningful engagement and belonging among young Europeans. They also respond to the **Cohesion Policy objective of a Europe closer to citizens**.

Policy Relevance

Promote **civic belonging** through local participation: strengthen schools, associations, and workplaces as “small democracies.”

Invest in recognition and communication: institutions should explain decisions transparently and engage locally (“decision debriefing”).

Bridge the trust gap through participatory governance, civic education, and local democracy compacts.

Combine **disinformation countering** with emotional and narrative engagement, especially for youth.

Support **trans-generational civic initiatives** under the **EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027** and **CERV Programme**.

This expert workshop, as well as the presentations by our colleagues from work package 5 (D 5.1), has confirmed and further reinforced the pillars of integration policy presented in Deliverable 2.1. Furthermore, the results, together with through literature review, also highlighted the need for a fourth pillar.

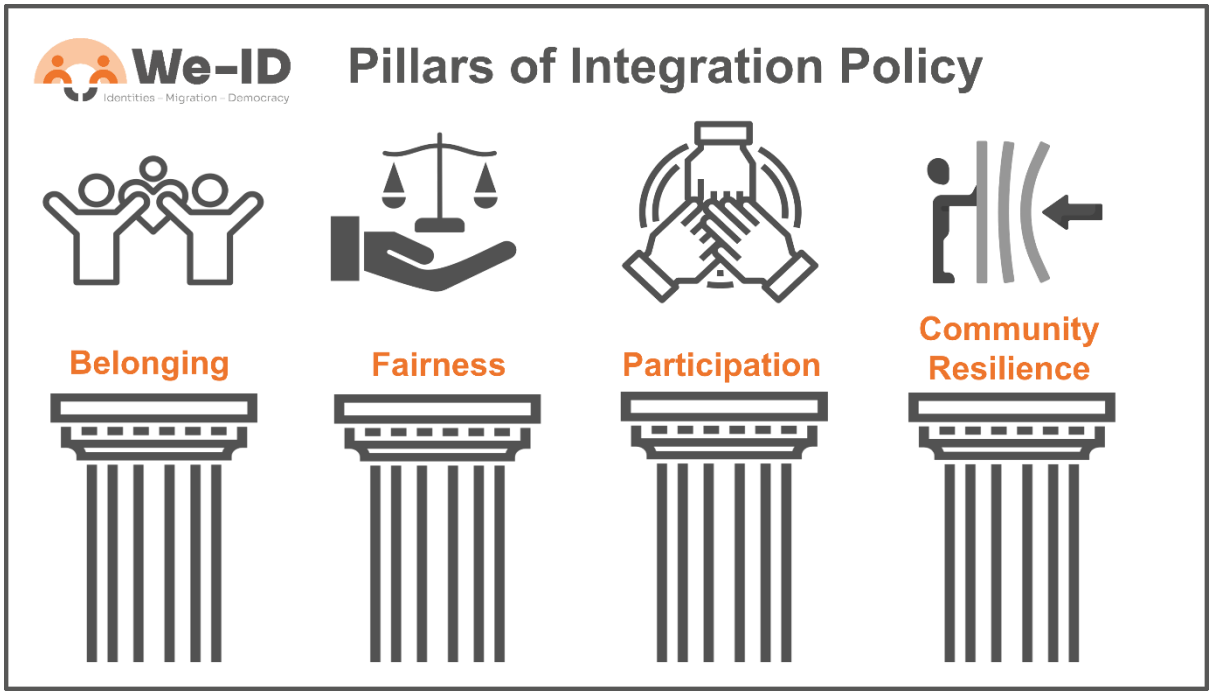

Figure 5. Pillars of Integration Policy
Source: Own Illustration

Considering the long-term structural conditions of demographic changes, resilient democratic communities can be understood as territories that are able to adapt to population ageing, decline, and increased diversity while sustaining social cohesion, trust, and meaningful democratic participation. Evidence from the We-ID Berlin Demography Days workshops shows that such resilience does not emerge from population growth alone, but from local capacity to manage change: inclusive workplaces as everyday democratic arenas, accessible services, contact zones or social places, where newcomers and long-term residents meet and interact, and beyond governance arrangements that coordinate across sectors and levels. In communities facing demographic and socio-economic decline, migration and mobility can become resources for renewal only where local actors are empowered to translate demographic adaptation into civic belonging and participation. In this sense, democratic resilience is the political and social dimension of demographic resilience: communities remain viable not because they grow, but because they are able to integrate newcomers, support intergenerational solidarity, and maintain institutional trust under conditions of change. This aligns with the JRC's emphasis (Testori, et al., 2025) on adaptive, place-based resilience and extends it by highlighting that democracy itself is a key infrastructure of resilience, particularly in territories experiencing shrinking populations, service pressure, and political polarisation.