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# DICHOTOMIES OF SUPRANATIONAL SOCIALISATION AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH – THE CASE OF COUNCIL OFFICIALS

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**Abstract:** *Research on socialisation in supranational environments such as the EU institutions has to face the complexity and diversity of the socialisation process. Theoretical differentiations can provide useful analytical frameworks, but all are not equally suitable for specific research purposes. They often take the form of dichotomies, such as the basic differentiation of socialisation as process and product. As shown by Zürn and Checkel, two important distinctions can be applied to supranational socialisation: actor's behaviour vs their properties, and agent vs structure. This paper argues that another dichotomy, one between causal and constitutive relations, is theoretically significant and analytically useful, in particular for research embedded in IR constructivism. It provides an empirical application of eight aspects of socialisation produced by the three dichotomies taken together, based on interviews with Council officials. Afterwards, it discusses what can be gathered from this illustration for further research.*

Socialisation is a process that affects behaviour and properties of individuals embedded in different communities (Zürn & Checkel, 2007). The constructivist and sociological shifts in the study of international relations and European integration have made socialisation one of the important topics of research. Such scholarship mainly concerns the consequences of secondary socialisation of people involved in international organisations.

Research on socialisation in supranational environments such as the EU institutions has to face the complexity and diversity of the socialisation process. To adequately understand and systematically explain supranational socialisation, we need to distinguish its aspects, mechanisms, sources, outcomes and so on. Various theoretical differentiations can provide

useful analytical frameworks but are not equally suitable for specific research purposes. They often take the form of dichotomies, such as the basic differentiation of socialisation as a process (of socialising) and as a product (the state of being socialised).

As shown by Zürn and Checkel, two important and deeply entrenched distinctions can be applied to supranational socialisation: actor's behaviour vs their properties (what is socialised?), and agents vs structures (where is the source of the socialising?). This paper argues for another dichotomy, between causal and constitutive relations. This distinction is also theoretically significant, as well as analytically useful, in particular for research embedded in IR constructivism. This argument is illustrated by empirical material gathered in interviews with Council officials from Poland.

In the first section below, I evaluate the existing typologies of socialisation. Then, I provide a solution to their shortcomings by introducing the above-mentioned new distinction. In the third section, I present the methods used to generate the material for the illustration of the new typology's empirical application, and then provide examples for each of the eight aspects of socialisation distinguished using the three dichotomies. Afterwards, I discuss the usefulness of the proposed typology for empirical research, considering each of the dichotomies and taking into account how useful they actually are confronted with qualitative data, which is the type of empirical material most commonly used in studies of supranational socialisation.

## 1. Theoretical evaluation: typologies of socialisation

Secondary socialisation, which occurs when individuals enter into new social situations, consists of assimilating the expected ways of thinking, feeling and acting in a given environment, introducing the individual to a portion of objectified social knowledge associated with a certain group of people, and producing a sense of membership in a community that takes some intersubjective understandings for granted. Therefore, we can distinguish: (1) socialisation mechanisms, through which the socialised individuals are introduced into organised interaction patterns, (2) content of socialisation – norms, values, attitudes and behaviours accepted and practiced in a given environment, and (3) socialisation effects, i.e. how the socialised individuals

begin to act in accordance with the group's expectations by recognising and internalising the above mentioned contents of socialisation. These processes differ between individuals – the ties to social standards built as a result are subjective and mediated by previous experience (Checkel, 2007, p. 5; Johnston, 2001, pp. 494–495; Juncos & Pomorska, 2011, p. 1098; Wendt, 1999, pp. 142–143).

Behaviour in accordance with norms doesn't equal internalisation of these norms. Material factors, persuasion, authority, or identification with a group may incline a change in behaviour without a similar change in normative beliefs of an individual (Johnston, 2001, pp. 488, 495). The unstable dynamics of secondary socialisation emphasises its processuality, continuity and reflexivity. While structures influence individuals' behaviour by providing them with its ready-made patterns (such as social roles), actors can in turn reshape social structures, e.g. by challenging established social practices (Hopf, 2018; Neumann, 2002).

Researchers usually adopt a narrowed down approach to socialisation, e.g. by operationalising it in a fairly simplistic way for the purpose of quantitative research (e.g. Kirpsza, 2016). Another solution consists of creating typologies of socialisation types, mechanisms, aspects, etc. Zürn and Checkel (2007) suggested employing a typology of first-order socialisation mechanisms. Their typology is based on two distinctions: (1) whether these mechanisms originate in agents or social structures; (2) whether socialisation results in changing constraints (which affect behaviour) or the preferences of the socialised. Based on this differentiation, Zürn and Checkel distinguished four main mechanisms: bargaining, social influence, arguing and cognitive role-playing (Zürn & Checkel, 2007, pp. 247–250).

Because of its emphasis on mechanisms, this typology fits the approach to socialisation which focuses on causal explanations and the so-called mainstream or "thin" constructivism prevalent in IR (Czaputowicz, 2016; cf. Kratochwil, 2016). However, if we move towards interpretive approaches and "thick" constructivism, the typology might be less helpful. Such approaches focus on meaning-making and in the context of socialisation might be studying how understandings frame behaviours and norms, how the actors involved define themselves in the context of entering a new group, how are they defined by that group, and how they name what they encounter (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; cf. Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014). My

solution to these limitations is distinguishing between causal and constitutive relations and making it less focused on mechanisms.

## 2. Solution: new typology of socialisation

The following part of the paper presents a new typology of socialisation that combines three key theoretical distinctions related to the sources of socialisation, its outcomes, and the nature of the relation between the two (cf. Wendt, 1999, pp. 143–145), expanding the notions present in the Zürn and Checkel typology with a distinction between causal and constitutive relations.

The first dichotomy is the one between the aspects of socialisation mainly driven or upheld by: (1) the structure in which the socialised individuals are embedded, and (2) the agents and their interactions.

The structure is closely related to the specific group of people, which is joined by the socialised individuals. It consists of collective knowledge, institutionalised norms of behaviour and roles attributed to its members. Collective knowledge is a subset of social knowledge – a set of convictions that encourage and allow the agents to participate in structure-replicating practices, meaning that these convictions can modify one's behaviour and, when internalised – can modify one's identity (cf. Doty, 1997, pp. 368–372; Wendt, 1999, pp. 150–165).

Agential aspects of socialisation can include outcomes of cognitive processes, such as the reduction of cognitive dissonance or the calculation of the most beneficial course of action. On the other hand, they can result from interactions between the agents. To describe these phenomena, Wendt (1999, pp. 143–145) uses the notion of "interaction-level microstructures". The main difference between them and the macro-structures lies in the point of view adopted: by the individual agents or by the structurally-rooted community. The agents can, for example, attribute roles to themselves or to others, modifying or perpetuating some of their properties. Even if those very roles are determined by the structure, their attribution is carried out by the agent themselves (cf. Doty, 1997, pp. 372–374; Wendt, 1999, pp. 326–336).

The second differentiation concerns consequences of socialisation which are either related to the (1) behaviour or (2) properties of the socialised individuals.

Behaviour, as the more easily observable and measurable, is the most popular subject of study in socialisation research, although it has to deal with challenges regarding interpretation of observations, for example regarding the motivations of the socialised individuals. Conforming to the norms and standards of a given community can be considered a rather typical effect of the socialisation process. This aspect of socialisation also includes attributing new meaning to actions.

Agents' properties, on the other hand, are less empirically tangible, yet some might argue that only a process which affects them is the "true" socialisation. By properties I mean internalised norms, generalised convictions, roles and identities, the modification or redefining of which may be either exclusive (e.g. when one part of identity is replaced by another) or inclusive (when new characteristics are added to the existing ones) (Suvarierol, 2011, pp. 194–195; Wendt, 1999, pp. 26–27).

The third differentiation concerns the difference between (1) causal relations and (2) constitutive relations. It goes beyond the considerations of Zürn and Checkel, and is inspired mostly by Alexander Wendt. As argued above, this addition makes the typology more interesting theoretically, in particular it allows for important (as I argue below) distinctions within the categories of behaviour and properties.

Causal relations can be identified in situations when we observe the cause (X) and effect (Y) that exist independently from each other, in the case of which X precedes Y, and Y would not have taken place if X would not have happened before (Wendt, 1999, pp. 77–79).

Constitutive relations, on the other hand, mean that one thing is what it is only based on and in its relation to another thing, and *vice versa* (Wendt, 1999, p. 25). Wendt (1999, pp. 83–84) points out that this constitution can happen in two manners: through internal structure (for instance through self-awareness or self-understanding of the agents) and through external structure (through what is usually understood simply as structure; i.e. the notional necessity or discourse that defines a given item, that determines what a given thing is).

The dichotomies described above result in eight possible combinations, or aspects of socialisation: (1) agential causation of behaviour, (2) agential constitution of behaviour, (3)

structural causation of behaviour, (4) structural constitution of behaviour, (5) agential causation of properties, (6) agential constitution of properties, (7) structural causation of properties, (8) structural constitution of properties. I discuss them below, using quotes from the interviews I have conducted as illustrations.

## 3. Methods

The empirical material used in the following section has been gathered by conducting in-depth interviews among officials who represented Poland at various bodies of the Council, which was part of a larger project concerned with tracing the links between socialisation and decision making in the preparatory bodies of Council (Ławniczak, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2023). Potential interviewees were contacted by email. Because the response rate to interview requests was low, additional interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling. Most of the interviewees worked at the Permanent Representation and, at the time of interviewing, they had between three and fifteen years of work experience in the Council. Most worked in more than one of the Council layers: working parties, Coreper, and ministerial configurations (as members of the delegation). Interviewees represented diverse policy areas. They were either experts delegated to the Permanent Representation by one of the ministries or more versatile diplomats, usually employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The interviews were conducted between March and September 2015 in Brussels (7 interviews) and Warsaw (3 interviews). All interviews were conducted in Polish, each took between one and two hours. Detailed notes were taken during interviews. I followed an interview guide, with additional questions asked *ad hoc* in order to clarify or deepen particular topics.

## 4. Empirical application: socialisation among Council officials

The first four socialisation aspects are related to the causal formation or the constitution of behaviour, by the agent themself or by the structure. In the case of the agent-based causation of behavioural change, change (or the adaptation to group expectations: Juncos & Pomorska, 2011,

p. 1099) is caused by the working of agent's internal processes and is usually motivated by the will to acquire some form of individual benefit. This socialisation aspect is typically described in terms of calculation, meaning that an individual decides to perform certain actions because these actions help them reach their goals. For instance, one of the interviewees declared that "if you can help a person, then you do it because there might be a time when you yourself might need help" (Interview 4), which can be read as describing the exchange of favours (in a diffuse rather than strictly tit for tat way).

The agential constitution of behavioural refers to the agents' outlook in the scope of which they perceive and define behaviours. A claim by one of the interviewees that they have "a lot of freedom in the case of sudden appearance of some kind of offer" (Interview 10) might be interpreted as an example of this, as the interviewee paints a picture of his actions which emphasises his freedom.

Turning to structural side, for the causal aspect of behavioural change there is some external gratification for the individual, which could mean obtaining something from the group or avoiding sanctions due to the way that group is structured, how it functions and what it affords. One official declared that "sincerity might result in being more liked by other group members" (Interview 3) – contrary to the agential side, this is a collective, rather than individual reward.

The structural constitution of behaviour can be illustrated with an example: "a good ambassador does not always follow their instructions" (Interview 7). This aspect manifests group-based definitions that may be shared by a given actor, but not necessarily – when a definition for a given behaviour is not the same as the definition adopted by the group, we can talk about a lack of socialisation of a given actor in this particular case.

The following four aspects of socialisation focus on the properties of the socialised. These aspects are generally referred to as "deep socialisation" or internalisation. On the agential and causal side, the aspect focuses on how agents' convictions change and how they become cohesive with other properties or agents' behaviour. In this case, a reference to a change in one's convictions concerning a given matter can be expected, for example some practices will be viewed as "right" or "correct" as a result of individual thought processes or as an outcome of confronting previously held convictions with actions carried out after individual's calculations showed that adapting or conforming will be profitable for the individual. This process happens

through reduction of cognitive dissonance and through rationalisation of individual's actions. The following quote illustrates a rationalisation: "We must remember that Coreper [the Committee of Permanent Representatives] is a forum for negotiations and that by following our instructions in each and every case with no exceptions, we would not get anywhere." (Interview 9).

Agent-based constitution of properties, on the other hand, is about self-determination, answering the question "who am I within this community?" and consequently attributing an appropriate social role to oneself. What is expected here are the references to specific views on oneself, for instance declarations such as: "My role is..." (Interview 10) or even "I am the government" (Interview 5). In some cases, such self-determination accounts are not easily interpreted, as for example an interviewee stating that they "want to present themselves as more *green*" (Interview 3), which could be seen as either a calculated modification of one's behaviour or an example of self-determination (the context of the whole interview suggests the latter).

The structural aspects concern the internalisation of norms adopted by a given group. If the change in agents' convictions results from the processes of learning or mirroring, we can talk about structural causal influence on agents' properties and expect descriptions of how the socialised individuals are affected by contacts with other group members. Interviewees have often declared how important it is "to learn how a given group functions" (Interview 6) and "to understand and acquire a desired level of knowledge on group's rules and practices" (Interview 2).

Structural constitution of properties reflects the fact that self-determination within a community is rarely a purely individual matter. The social context provides roles and partial identities to the actor (Wendt, 1999, pp. 175–177), which is why the observable manifestations of the constitution of properties of the socialised are more often present in the interviews in their structural aspects. In such a case, the definition of who an individual is, is valid only if this individual is seen as a member of a given community. This in turn is expressed in declarations of belonging to a given group and by describing oneself as its part or its member. Interviewees used such expressions as "our common goal" (Interview 7), claimed that "we are all looking in the same direction" (Interview 3) or that the Coreper ambassadors "are becoming a part of a community" (Interview 10). One might argue that such sense of belonging is related to an

increased level of trust and, to some extent, to a stronger inclination to put oneself in a more vulnerable position based on the belief that it would not be abused for example during the exchange of sensitive information (Juncos & Pomorska, 2014, p. 311). On the other hand, however, close ties within a community can lead to a groupthink syndrome (Novak, 2013, p. 1102) and result in rejection of any criticism.

## 5. Discussion: which dichotomies are useful?

As shown in the previous section, it is often difficult to clearly separate personal calculations of the agents and the influence of the structure on their decisions. Obviously, this doesn't invalidate the theoretical dichotomy between structures and agents (which has been the topic of countless scholarly debates). However, whenever the empirical material is generated in the form of interviews, it is difficult to differentiate between the two. Even very careful approach to this matter within the interviewing process might not suffice, as agential and structural aspects inevitably overlap in the narratives of the socialised. The fact that this issue is most prominent in the case of pairs concerning behaviour should not be surprising, especially if one accounts for the fact that behaviour (or rather behaviour which is meaningful and socially patterned, i.e. practice) is where agents and structures actually co-exist and sustain each other's existence.

The difficulties of using interviews as primary data generation method also show regarding the distinction between the behaviour of social actors and their internal properties, including beliefs and identities. For example, when interviewees say that things are done in particular way ("one typically argues for rather than against something", Interview 8; "consensus is being sought", Interview 10) or that everyone thinks so and so ("everyone understands that", Interview 4; "everyone knows how instructions are sometimes", Interview 5), they are in fact speaking about what they do and, at the same time, how it is understood, hinting at their agreement, perhaps belief. This dichotomy is particularly important for the ability to distinguish between surface level adaptation and deep socialisation (i.e. internalisation), so the weakness identified here should be treated seriously by anyone who wants to discuss the differences between the two.

Finally, the dichotomy between causation and constitution allowed for some nuanced distinctions between certain aspects concerning behaviour and properties. However, it doesn't escape all of the problems mentioned above. Let's return to the quotes concerning Coreper. One of the interviewees said that "a good ambassador does not always follow their instructions" (Interview 7) and I classified this statement as an example of structural constitution of behaviour. Another interviewee said: "We must remember that Coreper [the Committee of Permanent Representatives] is a forum for negotiations and that by following our instructions in each and every case with no exceptions, we would not get anywhere." (Interview 9) – this was classified as an example of agential causation of properties (in this case, rationalisation). A sceptical reader might question this distinction – however, there is a clear difference between the first one which is definitional towards a behaviour, and the second one which shows the process of accepting a certain way of doing things.

There is a similar pair of examples regarding the way objections are handled. One interviewee said that "even when the presidency's position is not acceptable, the statement will be very diplomatic – there is a certain way, a meta language" (Interview 1). This statement explicitly defines a behaviour as "a certain way," without offering the agent's understanding or saying what they think about it. Because of that, it is another example of structural constitution of behaviour. On the other hand, there is a colourful statement by a different interviewee: "In general, softening applies when it comes to the rebuttals, for example vis-à-vis the European Commission, first a good trifle, then a list of objections. This is such an obfuscation of the opponent" (Interview 10). Here the interviewee first provides a description of a way of doing things (again, it's structural constitution of behaviour) and then follows with rationalisation of their convictions regarding the proper way of doing things. In this second part, the focus is moved from the behaviour towards their properties. What I hope can be seen from these examples is that without the distinction between causation and constitution, it would be difficult to determine what such statements tell us about socialisation regarding agent vs structure or behaviour vs properties.

**6. Conclusions**

This paper explored the theoretical approach to supranational socialisation, in particular the attempts at typologising its different aspects. Taking the typology of socialisation mechanisms introduced by Zürn and Checkel as a point of departure, I proposed to make is less focused on mechanisms and causal relationships by introducing, alongside two existing dichotomies (agent vs structure, behaviour vs properties), the distinction between causal and constitutive relations. I used data gathered by interviewing officials working in the preparatory bodies of the Council of the EU to illustrate the new typology and discuss its application.

As is evident in the previous section, confronting the proposed typology with empirical material reveals the difficulties of imposing dichotomies grounded in theoretical distinctions on utterances of people involved in the process of secondary socialisation. It is therefore worth asking what other approaches could complement or replace the approach to socialisation which relies on typologising its different forms or aspects.

One such approach is practice turn. Practice turn focuses on how things are done in a particular formal organisation or informal group, social scientists engage with the meanings these actions have within these communities. This focus can help avoid many issues regarding agent-structure relations, and generally provide a new perspective to socialisation research (Ławniczak, 2019). Moreover, practice turn provides tools to analyse the ways in which norms can be performed without necessarily becoming internalised, and still be important for the political processes, which lessens the importance of the distinction between behaviour and properties (Adler-Nissen, 2016, p. 92)

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# INTER-REGIONAL EUROPEAN COOPERATION. MECHANISMS, OPPORTUNITIES, AND BENEFITS OF DIALOGUES BETWEEN REGIONAL ACTORS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2021-2027 COHESION POLICY

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**Abstract:** *The main problem when discussing cohesion policy is its results are challenging to measure. Even if, for almost thirty years' community action tried to solve regional disparities, considerable differences between certain parts of the European Union still exist nowadays. Therefore, the future purpose of territorial cooperation should be to support joint initiatives that establish cross-border and transnational network cooperation. This paper aims to determine the importance of inter-regional cooperation to increase the Cohesion Policy's performance. We would try to show that the regions facing the most significant difficulties in identifying comparative advantages and generating innovative specialization strategies either lack the historical or traditional basis for regional projects or do not have structures to represent them inter-regional dialogues.*

**Keywords: cohesion, cohesion policy, regional development, development strategy, regional policy, European integration, cooperation.**

## 1. Introduction

The effectiveness of cohesion policy in addressing regional disparities within the European Union has been a subject of ongoing debate. Despite nearly three decades of community action, significant differences persist among certain regions. The challenge lies in the difficulty of measuring the policy's impact on regional development. To enhance the performance of Cohesion Policy, it is imperative to prioritize inter-regional cooperation and foster joint initiatives that facilitate cross-border and transnational network collaboration.

This article aims to examine the importance of inter-regional cooperation as a means to bolster the effectiveness of the Cohesion Policy. Based on the hypothesis that inter-regional cooperation mechanisms, such as cross-border initiatives and transnational network collaborations, significantly contribute to enhancing regional development and reducing disparities within the European Union, and that dialogues between regional actors foster knowledge exchange, policy learning, and innovation diffusion, leading to enhanced policy coherence, effectiveness, and impact in the implementation of the Cohesion Policy, this article seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the mechanisms facilitating inter-regional cooperation among European regions?

2. What opportunities does inter-regional cooperation present for regional actors in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy?

3. What are the benefits of dialogues between regional actors in fostering inter-regional cooperation and achieving the objectives of the Cohesion Policy?

The methodological approach to achieve this goal is a qualitative one. Data will be gathered from official documents, reports, and publications related to inter-regional cooperation and the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy, including policy documents, program evaluations, and academic literature. The proposed methodology aims to provide a robust framework for investigating inter-regional cooperation mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy.

This study seeks to elucidate the mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits of dialogue among regional actors through a comprehensive review of relevant literature and a clear definition of inter-regional cooperation. By doing so, it will shed light on why the future of territorial cooperation should revolve around supporting joint initiatives that promote the enhancement of cross-border and transnational networks.

The article will provide a thorough literature review, exploring existing research and scholarly discourse on cohesion policy, regional development, and regional policy. This review will offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by regions in identifying comparative advantages and generating innovative specialization strategies. It will also examine the

historical and traditional foundations of regional projects, emphasizing the need for inter-regional cooperation to address the limitations faced by regions lacking such foundations (Roberts, 2017).

Furthermore, the article will underscore the significance of establishing structures facilitating inter-regional dialogue. By analyzing the potential benefits and opportunities arising from inter-regional cooperation, this study will emphasize the role of dialogue in promoting effective regional development strategies and fostering European integration (Anderson et al., 2022). The exploration of these mechanisms will provide a holistic understanding of how inter-regional cooperation can enhance the performance of the Cohesion Policy.

In conclusion, this article will contribute to the discourse on regional development and cohesion policy by highlighting the importance of inter-regional cooperation in overcoming disparities within the European Union. By examining the mechanisms, opportunities, and benefits of dialogues between regional actors, it will advocate for the establishment of joint initiatives that strengthen cross-border and transnational networks. The findings of this study will try to provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners involved in shaping the future of territorial cooperation and regional development strategies.

## 2. Enhancing Inter-Regional Cooperation: Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Inter-regional cooperation refers to collaborative efforts and dialogues between regional actors, aiming to address common challenges, promote joint initiatives, and facilitate cross-border and transnational networks (Smith, 2018). It encompasses partnerships and exchanges among regions, involving various stakeholders such as regional authorities, institutions, businesses, and civil society.

The concept of inter-regional cooperation has gained significance in the context of regional development and cohesion policies within the European Union. Its scope extends beyond traditional regional boundaries, emphasizing the need for collaboration across different regions to leverage synergies, share knowledge, and enhance collective capabilities (Jones, 2020). This cooperation can manifest in diverse forms, including joint projects, knowledge transfer, policy coordination, and joint governance structures (Brown, 2019).

Inter-regional cooperation serves multiple objectives and offers several benefits. Firstly, it enables regions to pool resources, expertise, and experiences, leading to enhanced innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth (Green & Johnson, 2021). Secondly, it facilitates the exchange of best practices, knowledge transfer, and capacity building, promoting mutual learning and development across regions. Moreover, inter-regional cooperation fosters social cohesion, cultural exchange, and identity building, strengthening the sense of belonging and shared European values (Anderson et al., 2022).

The historical development of Cohesion Policy within the European Union highlights a transition towards greater emphasis on territorial cooperation. Initially focused on addressing regional disparities and promoting economic convergence, the policy has evolved to recognize the importance of territorial cohesion and inter-regional collaboration (Roberts, 2017). This shift reflects a recognition that certain challenges and opportunities transcend administrative boundaries and require collective action.

Territorial cooperation plays a pivotal role in addressing regional disparities within the European Union. It enables regions to tackle common challenges such as economic restructuring, sustainable development, and social inclusion through joint strategies and coordinated interventions (Jones, 2020). By fostering cross-border and transnational collaboration, territorial cooperation promotes territorial integration, connectivity, and balanced development across regions (Smith, 2018).

The Cohesion Policy has increasingly integrated territorial cooperation as a core component, recognizing its potential to promote smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth (Green & Johnson, 2021). Through transnational and cross-border programs, the policy facilitates the exchange of experiences, joint planning, and implementation of projects that transcend regional boundaries. This approach enhances the effectiveness of Cohesion Policy in addressing territorial disparities, promoting innovation, and strengthening European integration (Brown, 2019).

Therefore, inter-regional cooperation holds significant potential for fostering regional development, addressing disparities, and advancing the objectives of Cohesion Policy within the European Union. By leveraging joint initiatives, knowledge exchange, and coordinated

strategies, regions can capitalize on their collective strengths, enhance competitiveness, and foster inclusive growth. The evolution of Cohesion Policy towards greater emphasis on territorial cooperation reflects the recognition of the role of cross-border and transnational collaboration in promoting territorial cohesion and addressing regional disparities.

Cohesion Policy within the European Union aims to reduce regional disparities and promote sustainable development across member states. Hereby, we try to examines the significance of inter-regional cooperation in driving the success of Cohesion Policy and advancing the goals of territorial cohesion and sustainable development.

One key benefit of inter-regional cooperation is its ability to facilitate the identification of comparative advantages. By sharing experiences, expertise, and resources, regions can analyze their strengths and weaknesses in various sectors and identify areas where they have a competitive edge. This process allows regions to develop targeted strategies that capitalize on their unique assets and promote specialization (Smith, 2018). Through inter-regional cooperation, regions can pool resources, share best practices, and enhance their collective capabilities, leading to more effective regional development (Jones, 2020).

Regions facing common challenges, such as economic restructuring or sustainable development, can join forces to address these issues collectively. Through shared planning, joint projects, and policy coordination, inter-regional cooperation enables regions to develop comprehensive strategies that transcend administrative boundaries (Brown, 2019). This collaborative approach enhances the impact and efficiency of regional development efforts, ensuring a more balanced and integrated territorial development across the European Union (Green & Johnson, 2021).

In addition, by creating networks and platforms for collaboration, regions can share ideas, technologies, and best practices. This facilitates the transfer of knowledge and fosters innovation within and across regions. Inter-regional networks serve as valuable platforms for exchanging experiences, building partnerships, and nurturing a culture of innovation (Anderson et al., 2022). The sharing of innovative approaches and successful experiences can inspire regions to adopt new strategies and improve their development outcomes.

Furthermore, by working together, regions can exchange ideas and expertise in areas such as renewable energy, environmental conservation, and sustainable transport. Through collaborative initiatives, regions can develop sustainable solutions that address shared challenges and contribute to the overall sustainability goals of the European Union (Roberts, 2017). Inter-regional cooperation thus becomes a driver for environmentally friendly and socially inclusive development.

In conclusion, facilitating the identification of comparative advantages, enhancing regional development strategies, and promoting innovation and knowledge exchange, inter-regional cooperation drives sustainable development and contributes to the achievement of territorial cohesion within the European Union. Policymakers and stakeholders should prioritize and support inter-regional collaboration to harness its full potential in advancing regional development and fostering a cohesive and prosperous Europe.

Cross-border cooperation initiatives serve as powerful mechanisms for inter-regional collaboration. One notable example is the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) program, which supports cross-border projects aimed at addressing common challenges and opportunities across national borders. For instance, the Interreg France-Spain program promotes cooperation between regions along the French-Spanish border, facilitating joint initiatives in areas such as tourism, environmental protection, and economic development. This program enables regions to share resources, expertise, and best practices, leading to enhanced regional development and integration.

The European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) program, also known as Interreg, aims to promote collaboration and integration among regions across Europe. While the program offers numerous benefits, it also faces certain downsides that need to be considered. This article analyzes the ETC program, highlighting its advantages and challenges.

One significant benefit of the ETC program is the promotion of cross-border cooperation and the development of joint projects. Participating regions can share experiences, knowledge, and resources, leading to improved regional development strategies and enhanced economic growth (European Commission, n.d.). The program fosters collaboration in areas such as

innovation, entrepreneurship, environmental sustainability, and cultural exchange, which contribute to increased regional competitiveness (Jensen & Tomàs, 2019).

Moreover, the ETC program strengthens social cohesion by fostering cooperation and understanding among diverse communities. It promotes social and cultural exchanges, leading to mutual appreciation and shared identity across borders. By addressing common challenges, such as migration, climate change, and demographic shifts, the program helps create inclusive and resilient societies (Coletti & Dragoș, 2019).

However, the ETC program also faces certain downsides and challenges. Administrative complexities pose a significant hurdle, as participating regions need to navigate different legal frameworks, regulations, and funding procedures (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021). Harmonizing administrative processes and streamlining bureaucracy is crucial to facilitate smooth implementation and effective collaboration.

Another challenge is ensuring sustained engagement and commitment from all participating regions. Maintaining active involvement and balancing the interests and priorities of diverse regions can be complex. Clear communication channels, inclusive decision-making processes, and adequate resources are vital to foster meaningful participation and long-term cooperation (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021).

Furthermore, cultural and linguistic differences may affect effective communication and collaboration. Language barriers can hinder the exchange of ideas and knowledge. Efforts to promote language proficiency, intercultural dialogue, and cultural understanding are essential to overcome these challenges and create a shared European identity (Van der Zwet, van Assche, & Bachtler, 2021).

In conclusion, the ETC program offers significant benefits in terms of cross-border cooperation, regional development, economic growth, and social cohesion. Collaboration among regions leads to improved strategies, increased competitiveness, and enhanced social integration. However, administrative complexities, sustaining engagement, and cultural barriers pose challenges that must be addressed. By streamlining administrative processes, promoting active participation, and fostering intercultural understanding, the ETC program can maximize its potential and contribute to a more cohesive and prosperous Europe.

Another example of successful cross-border cooperation is the Euroregion concept, which brings together adjacent regions from different countries to promote joint actions and policies. The Upper-Rhine Euroregion, comprising regions from Germany, France, and Switzerland, is an exemplary model of cross-border cooperation. It fosters collaboration in various sectors, including research and innovation, education, and cross-border mobility. By leveraging the strengths of each region, the Euroregion facilitates knowledge exchange, infrastructure development, and economic cooperation, contributing to the overall development of the participating regions.

The Upper-Rhine Euroregion is an exemplary cross-border cooperation initiative involving Germany, France, and Switzerland. This article examines the benefits and downsides of the Upper-Rhine Euroregion, highlighting its impact on economic development, regional integration, and cultural exchange.

One significant benefit of the Upper-Rhine Euroregion is the promotion of economic growth and competitiveness. The cooperation facilitates cross-border trade, investment, and knowledge exchange, creating a dynamic economic region (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). It enhances regional innovation systems by fostering collaboration between universities, research institutions, and businesses, leading to increased productivity and technological advancements (Veltz & Béal, 2016). The integration of labor markets and harmonization of regulations also contribute to job creation and improved economic performance (Wassenberg et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the Euroregion fosters regional integration and cross-border cooperation. By overcoming administrative barriers and promoting joint governance structures, participating countries enhance their ability to address common challenges (Wassenberg et al., 2019). The Euroregion supports joint initiatives in areas such as infrastructure development, environmental protection, and sustainable mobility (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). This collaboration strengthens ties between the participating regions and creates a sense of shared identity and cooperation (Diot et al., 2018).

However, the Upper-Rhine Euroregion also faces certain downsides and challenges. Language and cultural differences can hinder effective communication and coordination (Gaskell & Kobus, 2018). Disparities in regulations, tax systems, and social security

frameworks pose administrative complexities (Wassenberg et al., 2019). Overcoming these barriers requires continuous dialogue, mutual understanding, and harmonization efforts.

Another challenge is the need for sustained commitment and engagement from all participating regions. Ensuring equal involvement and balanced representation can be challenging, particularly when regions have varying levels of economic development and political influence (Diot et al., 2018). Maintaining active participation and effective decision-making processes are crucial for the success of the Euroregion.

In conclusion, the Upper-Rhine Euroregion offers significant benefits in terms of economic growth, regional integration, and cultural exchange. It promotes cross-border trade, innovation, and collaboration, contributing to the competitiveness of the participating regions. The Euroregion also strengthens regional integration and fosters a sense of shared identity. However, language barriers, administrative complexities, and the need for sustained commitment present challenges that require ongoing efforts to overcome.

The Carpathian Euroregion, comprising regions from several CEE countries, including Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, and Romania, fosters cooperation in environmental protection, tourism development, cultural heritage preservation, and rural development. The Euroregion promotes cross-border initiatives to address common challenges, such as biodiversity conservation, sustainable tourism promotion, and infrastructure development in mountainous areas. The Carpathian Euroregion contributes to economic growth, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion in the region through joint projects and partnerships.

The Carpathian Euroregion encompasses regions from multiple countries with diverse socio-economic contexts, including varying levels of development, infrastructure, and resources. This diversity can pose challenges in aligning priorities, coordinating actions, and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits across member regions. Many regions within the Carpathian Euroregion face economic challenges and limited financial resources, hindering their ability to participate fully in cooperative initiatives and invest in development projects. Unequal access to funding and disparities in economic development can exacerbate inequalities and impede collaborative efforts. The region is home to diverse cultural and linguistic communities, each with its own traditions, languages, and identities. While cultural diversity enriches the region, it can also lead to communication barriers, misunderstandings, and cultural sensitivities

that complicate collaboration and cooperation efforts. Also, many regions within the Carpathian Euroregion require support in building institutional capacity, enhancing technical skills, and strengthening governance structures. Capacity-building initiatives are essential to empower local communities, improve coordination mechanisms, and facilitate sustainable development within the Euroregion.

Addressing these challenges and downsides requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders, including governments, local authorities, civil society organizations, and international partners. Strategies for overcoming these challenges may include enhancing communication and cooperation mechanisms, promoting inclusive decision-making processes, mobilizing financial resources, strengthening institutional capacity, and fostering sustainable development practices within the Carpathian Euroregion.

Inter-regional cooperation in the Carpathian Euroregion can be improved, leading to sustainable development, enhanced resilience, and greater prosperity for communities across the region. Collaborative projects focusing on sustainable development, eco-tourism, and cultural heritage preservation can be initiated across Carpathian regions. For example, joint initiatives to promote sustainable agriculture practices, develop eco-friendly tourism infrastructure, and conserve biodiversity hotspots can enhance cooperation and foster regional development. Programs promoting cultural exchange, heritage preservation, and sustainable tourism development can strengthen cultural ties and promote mutual understanding among Carpathian communities. Cultural festivals, heritage trails, and ecotourism initiatives can showcase the rich cultural diversity and natural beauty of the region, attracting visitors and generating economic benefits for local communities.

Transnational network collaborations are equally vital in inter-regional cooperation. One prominent example is the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) cooperation, which involves countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. The BSR cooperation promotes joint projects and initiatives focused on sustainable development, innovation, and cultural exchange. The Baltic Sea Region Program supports transnational projects addressing common challenges such as maritime safety, environmental protection, and economic growth. Through this collaboration, participating regions benefit from shared expertise, coordinated strategies, and enhanced networking opportunities.

The Baltic Sea Region cooperation is a prominent example of inter-regional collaboration in Europe. One significant benefit of BSR cooperation is the enhancement of regional integration and stability. The cooperation fosters dialogue and cooperation among countries bordering the Baltic Sea, promoting mutual understanding and trust (Laakkonen et al., 2019). It facilitates joint policy development and implementation in various areas such as environmental protection, maritime safety, and transportation (European Commission, 2021). This regional integration strengthens economic ties and creates a common market for goods, services, and investments, contributing to increased trade and economic growth (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017).

Moreover, BSR cooperation plays a vital role in addressing shared challenges and promoting sustainable development. Environmental protection and conservation of the Baltic Sea ecosystem are key objectives of the cooperation (Laakkonen et al., 2019). Collaborative efforts focus on reducing pollution, preserving biodiversity, and improving water quality (European Commission, 2021). The BSR initiatives also promote sustainable energy solutions, innovation, and the transition to a low-carbon economy (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017). This contributes to the region's environmental sustainability and resilience.

However, the BSR cooperation faces certain downsides and challenges. One major concern is the varying interests and priorities among participating countries. Differences in political systems, economic development levels, and historical contexts can hinder decision-making and coordination (Laakkonen et al., 2019). Achieving consensus on complex issues may be time-consuming and require compromise.

Another challenge is ensuring effective governance and coordination mechanisms. The involvement of multiple stakeholders, including national governments, regional organizations, and civil society, requires robust institutional frameworks and coordination structures (Hansen & Rusinova, 2017). Maintaining engagement and active participation from all stakeholders is crucial for the success of BSR initiatives.

In conclusion, BSR cooperation offers substantial benefits regarding regional integration, economic growth, and sustainable development. Enhanced regional integration strengthens economic ties and creates a common market, while collaborative efforts address shared environmental challenges. However, the cooperation faces challenges related to diverse

interests and governance complexity. By fostering dialogue, strengthening institutional frameworks, and maintaining active engagement, BSR cooperation can continue contributing to the prosperity and sustainability of the Baltic Sea Region.

Furthermore, the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) exemplify successful transnational network collaborations. EGTCs are legal entities that facilitate cross-border and transnational cooperation, enabling regions to jointly plan and implement projects. The EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine," consisting of regions from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, promotes cooperation in areas such as spatial planning, transport infrastructure, and cross-border healthcare. Through the EGTC framework, participating regions establish long-term partnerships, streamline administrative procedures, and foster cross-border integration.

The EGTC are instrumental in promoting cross-border collaboration and regional development in Europe. EGTCs provide a legal framework facilitating coordination and joint decision-making among participating regions (Eefting et al., 2020). They enable the pooling of resources, expertise, and competencies, leading to more effective and efficient cross-border projects (Steurer & Schienstock, 2019). For instance, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" promotes regional economic development and competitiveness. The cooperation facilitates cross-border trade, investment, and knowledge exchange, enhancing economic growth and innovation (Freestone, 2020). It supports joint initiatives in logistics, tourism, and renewable energy sectors, promoting economic diversification and job creation (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). The EGTC also provides a platform for businesses and research institutions to collaborate, fostering entrepreneurship and technological advancements (Council of the European Union, 2019).

Furthermore, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" strengthens governance mechanisms for cross-border cooperation. It establishes a legal framework facilitating joint decision-making and coordination among participating regions (Freestone, 2020). The EGTC promotes subsidiarity by involving local and regional authorities in decision-making, ensuring their active participation (Council of the European Union, 2019). This collaboration strengthens governance structures and fosters better alignment of policies and strategies across borders.

However, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" also faces certain downsides and challenges. Language and cultural differences can hinder effective communication and coordination (European Committee of the Regions, 2021). Disparities in regulations, administrative practices, and funding mechanisms pose administrative complexities (Freestone, 2020). Overcoming these barriers requires continuous dialogue, mutual understanding, and harmonization efforts.

Another challenge is sustaining commitment and engagement from all participating regions. Ensuring equal involvement and balanced representation can be challenging, particularly when regions have varying economic development and political influence (Council of the European Union, 2019). Maintaining active participation and effective decision-making processes are crucial for the success of the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine."

Therefore, the EGTC "Euregio Meuse-Rhine" offers significant economic development, governance enhancement, and cross-border collaboration benefits. It promotes regional economic growth, innovation, and job creation. The EGTC also strengthens governance structures and fosters better alignment of policies and strategies. However, language barriers, administrative complexities, and the need for sustained commitment pose challenges that require ongoing efforts in order to be able to overcome them.

In conclusion, cross-border cooperation initiatives and transnational network collaborations are essential mechanisms driving inter-regional cooperation in the European Union. Examples such as the ETC program, Euroregions, Baltic Sea Region cooperation, and EGTCs demonstrate the benefits of these mechanisms in enhancing regional development, promoting knowledge exchange, and fostering integration. By embracing and expanding upon successful initiatives, the European Union can continue to harness the potential of inter-regional cooperation, facilitating sustainable development and fostering a cohesive and prosperous Europe.

## 3. The cohesion policy - between targets, achievements, and the need for reform

The European Union provides financial support through programs such as Interreg, which promotes cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation. For example, the Interreg Europe program supports projects that facilitate the exchange of experiences and best

practices among regions to improve regional policies and initiatives. This funding enables regions to implement joint projects, share knowledge, and build partnerships (European Commission, 2020). The European Structural and Investment Funds also provide financial assistance for inter-regional cooperation initiatives, fostering sustainable development and reducing regional disparities.

The Territorial Agenda 2030, developed by the European Commission and member states, sets out the strategic priorities for territorial development and emphasizes the importance of inter-regional cooperation. It highlights the need to strengthen collaboration, develop joint approaches, and foster territorial integration (European Commission, 2020). The European Urban Agenda and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region are further examples of policy frameworks that facilitate inter-regional cooperation by addressing shared challenges and opportunities within specific geographic areas.

Several successful case studies demonstrate the benefits of inter-regional cooperation projects. One such example is the Vanguard Initiative, a network of European regions collaborating on smart specialization strategies and supporting innovation-driven industrial modernization. The initiative brings together regions with similar industrial strengths to enhance their competitiveness through joint projects, knowledge sharing, and pilot demonstrations (Vanguard Initiative, n.d.). Another case is the Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean, which promotes cross-border cooperation between regions in Spain and France. The Euroregion focuses on economic development, sustainable mobility, and cultural exchanges, creating a platform for joint actions and projects (Euroregion Pyrenees-Mediterranean, n.d.).

Through a meticulous analysis of policy documents and program evaluations, it is evident that the mechanisms facilitating inter-regional cooperation have evolved to meet the dynamic challenges of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy. From the establishment of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTCs) to the integration of digital platforms and innovative governance structures, there is a concerted effort to foster cross-border collaboration and project implementation.

The European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) is an institutional mechanism that supports inter-regional cooperation. The EGTC European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino is a successful example of facilitating collaboration between regions in Austria

and Italy. This EGTC promotes joint initiatives in transport, spatial planning, and cross-border services, ensuring a coordinated approach to address common challenges (EGTC European Region Tyrol-South Tyrol-Trentino, n.d.).

In conclusion, funding opportunities and support mechanisms, policy frameworks and initiatives, and successful case studies demonstrate the potential of inter-regional cooperation. By leveraging these opportunities, regions can enhance their development strategies, foster innovation, and address shared challenges. Embracing inter-regional collaboration strengthens cohesion and promotes sustainable development, contributing to the overall prosperity of the European Union.

A comprehensive examination of policy documents and academic literature reveals a plethora of opportunities for inter-regional cooperation within the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy framework. The emphasis on smart specialization, sustainable development, and territorial integration presents a fertile ground for regions to leverage collective resources and expertise. Coupled with strategic programming and capacity-building initiatives, they offer avenues for driving collaborative endeavours and addressing everyday challenges (European Parliament., 2019). Still, inter-regional cooperation often faces administrative hurdles such as differing legal frameworks, bureaucratic procedures, and institutional fragmentation. These complexities can impede effective collaboration and project implementation. For example, the border region between Germany and Poland faces administrative complexity due to differences in legal frameworks and bureaucratic procedures (European Union Committee of the Regions, 2021). In this regard, establishing a joint administrative task force comprising representatives from both countries to streamline permit processes and harmonize regulations for cross-border projects could improve the cooperation between the two regions.

Also, a transnational network collaboration promoting innovation and entrepreneurship might struggle to secure adequate funding to support its activities. Limited financial resources hinder the network's ability to organize capacity-building workshops, facilitate knowledge exchange, and provide seed funding for innovative projects (Council of Europe, 2018). Such an example is the Baltic Sea region countries, which are facing challenges in securing funding for joint research and innovation projects, hindering collaborative efforts to address common environmental and economic issues. A possible solution to this issue could be establishing a

Baltic Sea Innovation Fund, supported by contributions from regional governments and private sector partners, to provide financial support for cross-border innovation initiatives and research collaborations (Council of Europe, 2018).

One significant benefit of inter-regional cooperation is its economic advantage to participating regions. Regional collaboration can pool resources, expertise, and infrastructure, increasing efficiency and productivity. By sharing knowledge and best practices, regions can stimulate innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic diversification (European Commission, 2021). For instance, the collaboration between Catalonia in Spain and Lombardy in Italy has resulted in joint research projects and knowledge transfer, fostering economic growth and technological advancement in both regions (Jensen et al., 2019). Inter-regional cooperation enables regions to tap into new markets, attract investments, and develop competitive advantages contributing to their overall economic development.

Social and cultural exchanges are also key benefits of inter-regional cooperation. Collaborative initiatives allow people from different regions to interact, exchange ideas, and appreciate diverse cultures. This promotes mutual understanding, cultural enrichment, and social cohesion. The Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, spanning the border between France and Germany, fosters cross-border cultural exchanges and joint events that enhance intercultural dialogue and community integration (Eurodistrict et al.). Such exchanges create vibrant societies and strengthen the social fabric of participating regions.

Furthermore, by working together, regions can address common social challenges, such as unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion. Collaborative projects can improve access to education, healthcare, and social services, ensuring more equitable development across regions (Van der Zwet et al., 2021). For instance, the Baltic Sea Labour Forum promotes cooperation between trade unions, employers, and governments in the Baltic Sea region, fostering social dialogue, labour rights, and fair working conditions (Baltic Sea Labour Forum, n.d.). Inter-regional cooperation thus facilitates social cohesion, reduces disparities, and enhances the well-being of communities.

By collaborating on environmental initiatives, regions can address shared environmental challenges like climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion. The Alpine Space program facilitates inter-regional cooperation among Alpine regions to promote sustainable

development, nature conservation, and climate resilience (Alpine Space, n.d.). Through joint efforts, regions can implement environmentally friendly practices, protect natural resources, and ensure the sustainable use of shared ecosystems.

In conclusion, inter-regional fosters economic growth, enhances regional competitiveness, and stimulates innovation. Inter-regional cooperation also promotes social and cultural exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and social cohesion. Additionally, it contributes to environmental sustainability and shared resource management. Examples such as the collaboration between Catalonia and Lombardy, the Eurodistrict Strasbourg-Ortenau, the Baltic Sea Labour Forum and the Carpathian Euroregion demonstrate the tangible benefits that inter-regional cooperation brings to participating regions. By embracing collaboration and sharing resources, regions can collectively address challenges, promote sustainable development, and achieve greater prosperity.

Inter-regional cooperation within the European Union brings numerous benefits, but it also faces several challenges and limitations. This article explores the key obstacles encountered in inter-regional cooperation, including administrative and bureaucratic hurdles, cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as the lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors.

One major challenge is the administrative and bureaucratic complexities involved in coordinating cross-border and transnational initiatives. Diverse legal frameworks, administrative procedures, and funding mechanisms across regions can hinder the smooth implementation of joint projects. For instance, the Danube Transnational Programme, aimed at fostering cooperation among regions along the Danube River, faces administrative challenges due to varying national regulations and administrative practices (Danube Transnational Programme, n.d.). Such hurdles require effective coordination and harmonization of administrative processes to streamline cooperation and facilitate project implementation.

Cultural and linguistic barriers pose another significant challenge to inter-regional cooperation. Differences in language, traditions, and cultural practices can impede effective communication and collaboration among regional actors. For instance, the collaboration between Eastern and Western European regions may encounter cultural differences that affect mutual understanding and hinder joint initiatives (European Commission, 2021). Overcoming

these barriers requires promoting intercultural dialogue, language proficiency, and cultural awareness to foster effective cooperation and ensure inclusive participation of all regions.

The lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors is another limitation of inter-regional cooperation. Some regions may have limited knowledge about the potential benefits of collaboration or lack the necessary structures to engage in inter-regional dialogues. This can hinder the identification of common interests and the development of joint initiatives. The Interreg Sudoe program, focused on transnational cooperation in southwestern Europe, addresses this limitation by supporting projects that raise awareness, build networks, and promote cooperation among regional actors (Interreg Sudoe, n.d.). Increased awareness and coordination efforts are essential to overcome this limitation and foster meaningful engagement among regions.

In conclusion, inter-regional cooperation faces challenges and limitations that need to be addressed for effective collaboration. Administrative and bureaucratic hurdles require streamlined processes and harmonization of regulations. Cultural and linguistic barriers necessitate intercultural dialogue and awareness-building initiatives. The lack of awareness and coordination among regional actors calls for increased efforts to promote knowledge-sharing and coordination structures. By addressing these challenges, inter-regional cooperation can overcome limitations and unlock its full potential to foster regional development, innovation, and cohesion within the European Union.

## 4. Conclusion

By fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among regional actors, inter-regional cooperation offers mechanisms to address common challenges, unlock opportunities, and achieve shared goals. This article explores the importance and benefits of inter-regional cooperation in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy.

Collaborative initiatives can lead to economic growth, enhanced competitiveness, and improved resource allocation by leveraging the strengths of different regions. Furthermore, inter-regional cooperation facilitates social and cultural exchanges, promoting mutual understanding, social cohesion, and a sense of belonging. Additionally, inter-regional

cooperation contributes to environmental sustainability and resilience by addressing shared environmental challenges and promoting sustainable resource management.

Several recommendations can be made to strengthen inter-regional cooperation in the context of the 2021-2027 Cohesion Policy. First, fostering awareness and knowledge-sharing among regional actors is crucial. Awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs can promote the benefits and potential of inter-regional cooperation, encouraging greater participation and engagement. Second, establishing effective coordination mechanisms and platforms for dialogue is essential. Regular forums, networks, and joint project development platforms can facilitate information exchange, coordination, and partnership building. Finally, ensuring the availability of adequate financial resources and support mechanisms is crucial for implementing inter-regional cooperation initiatives effectively. Enhancing funding opportunities and simplifying administrative procedures can encourage more regions to engage in collaborative projects.

By recognizing the significance of inter-regional cooperation and implementing these recommendations, the European Union can unlock the full potential of regional actors to achieve greater cohesion, sustainable development, and shared prosperity.

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# THE EU'S DEMOCRACY PROMOTION INITIATIVES IN SOUTH ASIA: PAST AND PRESENT

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**Abstract:** *The European Union (EU) and its member states have played a significant role in South Asia, consequently aligning with its fundamental principles, e.g., the rule of law, respect for human rights and minority rights, good governance, democracy, and equality based on values like inclusion, tolerance, justice, solidarity, and non-discrimination. The EU has always supported the promotion and consolidation of democracy, not only in South Asia but also across the world. In this sense, the study examines the EU's democracy promotion initiatives in association with its programmes. This study addresses the literature gaps in the comparison of the EU's democratic intervention with references from past and present perspectives. The article further investigates challenges in the region in the context of rising populism and satrapy in South Asia and its neighbourhoods. Afghanistan and Myanmar are the best examples of the current scenario. However, the rise of populist government has already been raised in Europe to challenge a liberal democracy, where positioning the EU's role in democracy initiatives is questionable in terms of credibility and impactful promises.*

Keywords: Democracy Promotion, European Union, South Asia, Satrapy, Elections.

## 1. Introduction: Understanding of the EU's Democracy Promotion Initiative

The Democracy Promotion Initiative is one of the priorities for the European Union to support democracy worldwide. The European Parliament cites that "Democracy remains the only system of governance in which people can fully realise their human rights and is a determining factor for development and long-term stability" (Lerch, 2021). The Maastricht Treaty of 1991, defined the foreign policy objectives as "to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms". Even the European Council and Commission expressed in their Joint Statement on Development Policy the incorporation of the promotion of human rights, democracy, rule of law, and good governance

in November 2000 (European Union, 2000). But in May 2001, the EU communication stated the term "The EU's role on Promoting Human Rights and Democratization in Third Countries". The 2001 Communication identified three major areas of engagement: 1) through promoting coherent and consistent policies, particularly in the promotion and mainstreaming of human rights through development and other official assistance; 2) by placing a higher pro-active approach, in particular by using the opportunities offered by political dialogue, trade, and external assistance; and 3) by adopting a more strategic approach to the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) by matching programme and projects(European Commission, 2001b; Jain, 2009, 2015a).

The European Council adopted the conclusions of the communication on 17 democracy support on November 17, 2009, which cooperates through the EU's External Relations. This is a new strategy outlined for the mainly country-based approach to democracy support with greater coherence and participation of all stakeholders. There is a key role for the 'directly elected EU institution' and the 'European Parliament is primarily committed to promoting democracy'. The EU refers to its democratic approach as complements to human rights as the grounded principle based on the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN-UDHR) as well as other international and regional institutions that follow standards on human rights, democracy, and elections. After 2015, the EU's democracy promotion initiatives were incorporated with 'the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' to support democracy in third countries. In particular, it focuses on goals 16 and 10, respectively, "accountable institutions and inclusive and participatory decision making and reducing inequality" (Lerch, 2021).

The Council adopted another communication conclusion on 'democracy based on the same principles of 2009 conclusions and the EU reconfirmed its commitment to combat challenges urgently and comprehensively through its external action. The new democracy promotion agenda includes "the undermining of democratic processes and institutions; low levels of trust in institutions and politicians; a shrinking democratic space for civil society; increased violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms; and manipulation using online technologies". In November 2020, the Council adopted another commitment to stepping up as

'EU Action Human Rights and Democracy'. The new Democracy Support Agenda defines the five-line of action that is called "Building resilient, inclusive and democratic societies". In 2012, the Council emphasised its role through civil society in the conclusion "The roots of democracy and sustainable development: Europe's engagement with civil society in external relations". The same commitment was reconfirmed as the conclusions of 19 June 2017 through "an empowered and resilient civil society as a crucial way to support good governance and the rule of law in any democracy" (Vandeputte and Luciani, 2018; Lerch, 2021).

Therefore, the EU provides funding related to democracy assistance related funding to its partner countries through the 'European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).' In this regard, the election observation is the backbone of the EU's support for democratic development in developing countries to employ the promotion of human rights, the rule of law, conflict resolution, and the peacebuilding process. The vision supports democracy and peace in the world, but it is also linked to development policy. The EU's external action is integrated into areas like trade, development, enlargement, and neighbourhood policy. The EU aims to pursue this through the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that drives 'political and diplomatic relations with third countries and multilateral institutions'. The EU viewed itself as a soft power organisation that is 'guided by a normative vision'. This soft power instrument is implemented through its peace and democracy support mission in third-world countries specifically towards fragile states and geopolitical context applied in those areas of conflicts, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the crisis of liberal systems (Jain, 2015a; Zamfir and Ionel, 2019).

However, this study draws attention to the objectives of the EU to emphasise strengthening its bilateral cooperation with countries in South Asia. There are eight countries in South Asia, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, the Maldives, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, which have unique features due to their natural diversity in aspects of cultural, social, economic, and political put together. The focus areas of the EU are mainly three: 1) human and social development; 2) good governance and human rights; and 3) economic and trade development. The region of South Asia is represented by a dysfunctional organisation called the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which tries to maintain its

multilateral relations with the other member states. The priorities of the EU for the countries of South Asia align with its policy, as a key objective is the reduction of poverty. In this regard, the European Commission prioritises good governance, human rights, and democratisation towards South Asia in the EU's development policy (Kumar Nepali, 2009).

Therefore, the EU strategy papers and the European Parliament aimed at promoting democracy as a key priority in South Asia to realise the importance of regional integration. This article traces applications of the EU's democracy promotion programme in the countries of South Asia with two frameworks: 1) past perspective (a historical evaluation) is an assessment of the EU's doctrine of engagement; and 2) present perspective is an assessment of the EU's empirical and contemporary engagement, especially when talking about rising current challenges like populism, Russian aggression and refugee crisis. This study answers three major questions: 1) How does the EU perceive South Asia in its foreign policy? 2) What is the basis for the EU's promotion of democracy and past engagement in South Asia? 3) How have people in South Asia viewed or perceived the role of the EU? and 4) Why has the EU engaged NGOs and CSOs for the implementation of democracy initiatives in the region? Additionally, this research also verifies the hypothesis: if populism is already rising among EU member states, there is a question about how the EU can play a credible role in South Asia.

## 2. Methods and Materials

However, South Asia is one of the conflict-affected areas of the world where the United States has also been involved with its allies for about 20 years. The region has seen religious fundamentalism (Afghanistan and Pakistan), long ethnic insurgencies (Sri Lanka), Naxalist extremism (India), moist armed insurgencies (Nepal), and the shadow of terrorism, especially in the past 20 years. Likewise, the region has also witnessed land and border disputes between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. Despite this, the region is craving peace and development, which encompasses challenges not only from the above-mentioned conflicts but also illiteracy, access to quality education, safe drinking water, human rights, health, and inequality, and South Asia is affected by extreme poverty (Bharti, 2021, 2022, 2023). In the following context, this study explores the human rights and democracy promotion and human rights interventions of the EU in South Asia and whether it's able to bring change and promise in the light of rising

populism not only in South Asia but also in Europe. In addition, it is also focusing on the effect of these aspects on the EU's agenda for promoting democracy and human rights throughout the world and raising the question of the credibility of the Union.

The EU supplies a humanitarian approach as an instrument of soft power[1] towards third countries. In this context, the Union's approach in South Asia is applied as a case study for this research, where the humanitarian approach is engaged through civil society organisations (CSOs), local authorities, and NGOs. Since the launch of democracy promotion initiatives, the EU has played the role of a humanitarian actor in international relations, and its promotion initiatives have been challenged in the discourse of academia. The discussion also deals with critical remarks by scholars in social science debates. The methodology is applied here based on primary (press briefs, EU and governmental reports, official Facebook posts, NGOs and CSOs websites, official statements, and parliamentary speeches) and secondary (newspaper clips and reports, online conferences and lectures, think-tank reports and working papers, magazines, works of literature, and archival). The data above are incorporated to analyse the engagement of the EU in democracy engagement in South Asia through qualitative empirical analysis methods with the application of partial content analysis. Likewise, this study draws on the EU's geostrategic coverage of South Asia through past and present engagements.

## 3. Tracing the History of the EU-South Asia Relations

Historically, there has always been a profound relationship between South Asia and the EU, whether it's political, economic, or cultural. Yet, South Asia has never been a top priority in regard to the policy of the EU. It had always been limited to African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries (Jain, 2015b). The first EU engagement in South Asia can be traced back to the 1967 Food Aid Convention, which was approved by the European Economic Community (EEC). India and today Bangladesh were beneficiaries of the Food Aid Convention. According to the Food Aid Agreement, India and Bangladesh were the main recipients of the EEC's aid, accounting for 6.5% and 6.4% of the total committed aid, respectively. After the introduction of

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[1] The term 'soft power' was coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye as the ability to attract other countries through diplomacy, culture and institutions rather than using the military (hard power) to perceived foreign policy goals. More can read, Nye Jr, Joseph S. Soft power: The means to success in world politics. Public affairs, 2004.

the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) of 1971, the EEC envisaged fostering development along with humanitarian aid for other than ACP states. Thus, the trade relations between the European Community and South Asia are also included (Birocchi, 1999; Amin, 2011, 2015). Looking outside the ACP, the mandate given by the Paris European Summit in 1972 and Lomé Convention-IV in 1975 was the waking moment for the EEC/EU to cooperate with other developing countries. Initially, it was established in the Mediterranean rather than in Asia and Latin America. (Frisch, 2008).

Furthermore, Britain was included in the EEC in 1973, and then the European Community started thinking about Asia/South Asia. India was the only country closer to being a member of the EEC. In the same year, India signed the first Commercial Cooperation Agreement in December (a similar agreement was followed by Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), and it was enhanced with trade in June 1981. Not only was India the first country to establish diplomatic relations with the EEC (European Parliament, 2003; Amin, 2015). In 1974, the European Community announced that its development policy would cover 40 countries in the Asia and Latin America (ALA) region, and the annual aid programme was dedicated to the poorest and rural areas (Tripathi, 2011). In 1976, the EEC launched a financial and technical assistance programme for "non-associated developing countries" and South Asia was also a beneficiary related to food aid and rural development. In 1985, the "non-associated developing countries" title changed to "developing countries of Asia and Latin America". In 1988, the budget for these two regions was also separated, respectively, "Latin America" and "Asia". Almost 500 million euros were dedicated to Latin America and 1 billion euros to Asia per year. The amount was channelled by the European Investment Bank (EIB) (Frisch, 2008).

Moreover, during 1994–2004, the EU and countries in South Asia signed five cooperation partnership agreements concerning the development of two-way trade, economics, and promotion of investment, financial and technical assistance, development aid, human rights, and democracy promotion. From a historical point of view, EU-South Asia relations are based on the third-generation agreement in reference to trade, bilateral political dialogues, and development assistance. The EU signed a third-generation Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development with countries in South Asia, viz., India and Sri Lanka (1994),

Nepal (1996), Bangladesh (2000), and Pakistan (2001). But there would be yet to sign a third-generation agreement with Bhutan and the Maldives, and the EU adopted the 2017 and 2020 strategy for Afghanistan (European Parliament, 2003; Amin, 2011, 2015).

Since the 1990s, the EU's concern towards South Asia has always been strategic, with almost all policies regarding democracy and good governance. Promoting democracy has been one of the desirable ends of achieving its foreign policy goal through a peace strategy, fostering a strategy of socio-economic development, and promoting human rights. In this regard, the EU and its member states use it as an instrument through democracy aid along with governance, human rights, and support for civil society (Smith, 2003). There was no other project undertaken under EIDHR for South Asia between 1994 and 2002. The EU adopted EIDHR in 1994 as a financial instrument for the promotion of democracy and human rights in third countries. However, South Asia received almost 6.5% (7.23 million euros) of the EIDHR financial allocations between 2002 and 2006. The EU and its member states were only engaged before 2001 in funding human rights rather than elements of democracy promotion. It only increased after 2001 as an active role through election observation in South Asia. (European Commission, 2007a; Jain, 2009, 2015).

In 2004, the EU and India signed a strategic partnership based on shared values and principles of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the promotion of peace and stability, as well as a rule-based global order on multilateralism and commitment to cooperation in various sectors (Benaglia, 2019; European Parliament, 2021). India, as a strategic partner of the EU and the world's largest democracy, can significantly contribute to democracy promotion and strengthen EU cooperation on regional and global levels. In the second EU-India Summit, both partners agreed to cooperate.[2] In 2005, both sides repeated the commitment and the strategy paper mentioned "look together for possible synergies and initiatives to promote human rights and democracy"[3]. Kugiel (2012) criticised that the commitment to democracy promotion has been silenced from the ongoing dialogue'. There are also no such as 'many examples of the practical implementation of these commitments'. Next, he mentioned that "democracy seems to

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[2] Cooperation agreed in "Joint Communiqué: Second India-EU Summit", New Delhi, 23 November 2001.

[3] The strategy paper signed on "The India-EU Strategic Partnership. Joint Action Plan", New Delhi, 7 September 2005.

have become more often a point of friction between the two than an area for cooperation" (Kugiel, 2012). There is an ideological divide between both sides due to 'distant civilisation values and divergent worldviews.

### 4. Growing Engagement of the EU and the Importance of South Asia

The 9/11 attack in the United States changed security dimensions in the context of non-traditional security threats and raised a serious question about the national security of the world, and it was an alarming concern for the EU in South Asia. Europe's prosperity is linked to South Asia due to security concerns. Post-9/11, the interest of the EU began to grow significantly, and the relevance of Pakistan became very important for counter-terrorism in the region. Until the 1990s, the region was not a main priority for the EU because its prime focus was the ACP and the EU was itself in the process of integration. The EU's major interest could be seen when India and Pakistan were invited to join the Asian-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in 2006. The EU is a uniform regional intergovernmental organisation, so there are obvious political and economic interests because both countries have economic growth in the region. The EU showed serious concern for the region, and democracy promotion and human rights initiatives were regarded as important engagements. After that, the Union started a more assertive role in South Asia, especially with the increased focus on engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan with numerous development activities (Tripathi, 2011; Mayr, 2020).

From a security perspective, there are two nuclear powers existing (India and Pakistan), and regional security complexity makes the region hostile. The footprint of militant organisations makes South Asia home to terrorism, and the presence of the Islamic State (IS) also creates a problem of fundamental extremism, especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are more affected by them. Except for the threat of terrorism, there are many other challenges, such as armed force groups, religious and ethnic extremism, and long-standing insurgencies. The current situation in Afghanistan raises several questions of stability, not only within the country but also across the region as a whole. After the drawdown of an international force in 2014 and the complete withdrawal of the US and its allies' forces on August 31, 2031, Afghanistan was already a top-10 fragile state, but the recent situation created instability after

the Taliban took full control of the country. The regional stability and peace of the region are important to the world, making South Asia a potentially significant security and strategic partner. India is the only country for this, which has a strategic partnership with the European Union. So, there are several reasons that attract the EU to further partnerships (Bharti, 2020).

Since the 1990s, almost all countries in South Asia have adopted an open market policy (liberalisation, globalisation, and privatisation), and significant growth (average 5%) has been seen in the region. South Asia is a diverse and dynamic region that shares a complex nature. Almost 1/3 (25%) of the population occupies 4% of the landmass of the world in this region. World Bank data showed that the region is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Rapid growth in South Asia is expected at 7.2% annually, even after the pandemic and the strengthening prospects in 2021. India is a strategic partner and one of the largest growing economies in the world. The World Bank report favoured that the largest population increased purchasing power, and at least 400 million have the spending capacity of any American or European, as well as growing potential markets (consumer size due to the large population) and attracting foreign investment (Vivekanandan and Giri, 2001; Mayr, 2020; The World Bank, 2021).

The European Union is one of the top trading partners with South Asia, and the Commission shows its core interest in the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), where they can deal with all the SAARC members on one platform as an easy engagement. The EU Regional Strategy Papers (RSP) for 2007 and 2014 have shown that regional integration programmes are a core objective for SAARC, along with ASEAN. The majority of EU trade is traded via maritime routes that provide interest in the Indo-Pacific, and security is also of concern. Recently, the Union expressed its attention to its involvement in conflict resolution with South Asian countries. The EU is an expert entity in trade and security secured by NATO, which can provide expertise to resolve security-related challenges and conflicts in South Asia so that a peaceful trade environment can be enriched. There are also non-traditional security challenges in South Asia in the context of climate change and global warming, and the whole region is facing the problem of an unwanted and unexpected climate crisis. In recent years, South Asia has experienced intense rainfall, heat waves, resulting flooding, cyclonic winds,

storm surges, etc. South Asia is one of the most significant in both traditional and non-traditional security aspects, which provides a market opportunity (Bharti, 2020).

## 5. The EU's Doctrine and Democracy Promotion Initiatives

The EU adopted a strategy paper in 1994 under the title "Towards a New Asia Strategy" that mainly focused on open access to the market and trade, with special emphasis on expanding and deepening its political and economic relations. 1994 Strategy Paper: one of the fourth objectives was "to contribute to the development and consolidation of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedom (application of core European values and norms)[4] in South Asia" (European Commission, 1994). Under this document, few countries in Asia were involved in consolidating democracy and promoting human rights, and support was provided for diversified areas such as elections, NGOs, free media, vulnerable groups' information, and sensitive human rights. But South Asia was not a top priority, except for India.

The European Union approved the 2001 revised Asia Strategy (Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership 2001), and it was the first paper that was concerned about the Kashmir conflict between India and Pakistan. It was almost based on a 1994 document but with more comprehensive and clear objectives for the development of cooperation policy and recognition of regional diversity. The 2001 revised Asia Strategy was once again chosen as the fourth objective out of six that mentioned "contribute to the spread of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law and protection of human rights" (European Commission, 2001). The paper emphasised the strengthening of the EU's political and economic presence in the region. It specifically mentioned 'actively supporting efforts towards strengthening governance and participation of civil society concerning Pakistan.' At that time, the EU was continuously encouraged via any opening towards democracy. The document also recognised threats to regional stability and ethnic conflicts, especially in Afghanistan and Sri

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[4] The EU and its member states have the common values and norms follows and aspire for all the policies, which is available at https://ec.europa.eu/component-library/eu/about/eu-values/.

Lanka, posed by terrorism and religious fundamentalism. The EU showed its concern and established political and policy dialogues with key countries.

After the 2001 Strategy Paper, the programme moved from bilateral to multi-county in 2005 and introduced the new "Strategy Paper and Indicative Programme for Multi-Country Programmes in Asia 2005-06". This programme is specially focused on addressing sub-regions (EU defines) notably SAARC. Once again, similar objectives were repeated in the 2001 paper for the promotion of democracy, good governance, and human rights. This paper was implemented for 2005–2006 with involvement in political, economic, and social affairs. In the 2005–2006 paper, the main focus was poverty and the implementation of trade liberalization. The special focus was on poverty, migration, and human drug trafficking. 11 action plans were adopted under the "Integrated Programme of Action," and the paper also recognised the world's most difficult political crisis: the conflict between India and Pakistan, the Maoist armed insurgencies in Nepal, the civil war in Sri Lanka, as well as ethno-religious insurgencies in Afghanistan. The EU was interested in supporting the resolution of the above political tensions (European Commission, 2005).

However, the European Union adopted the long-cycle RSP under the title "Regional Programming for Asia: Strategy Document 2007-2013" and was focused on regional cooperation, and South Asia (SAARC) was one of the key dialogue partners along with ASEAN. Although ALA regulation was replaced with the Instrument for Development Corporation (DCI) and was incorporated with the regional strategy programme for Asia in 2007. The strategy document for 2007–2013 concerned the protection of human rights and indigenous peoples. It was considered an unstable region in terms of large refugee and migratory flows, the risk of nuclear proliferation, a lack of respect for human rights, security challenges, and the fragility of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (European Commission, 2007). The RSP included three areas of engagement priorities, including cross-cutting issues such as the promotion of human rights, gender equality, the rights of children and indigenous peoples, and democracy. Under the DCI, an indicative budget of almost 775 million euros was allocated for regional assistance for Asia.

In 2014, the European Union updated and revised its Regional Strategy Paper (RSP) and adopted "Regional Programming for Asia: Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014-2020. RSP 2014–2020 has been taken as a key priority towards fostering peace, security, and stability. Thematic budget is covered under DCI as "Humanitarian Assistance, the Partnership Instrument; the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights; the Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace; and, to a lesser extent, the Instrument for Nuclear Safety Cooperation" (European Commission, 2014). The EU approved the "Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027," and heading 6 mentioned 'Neighbourhood and the World'. The seven-year budget is followed by a mid-term review and upholds fundamental values including democracy, human rights, peace, and stability. Globally, the EIDHR focused on democracy and human rights promotion with a thematic budget of 1.3 billion euros. The new strategy paper for South Asia is still under discussion (Velina, 2019).

## 6. The EU's Democracy Promotion Engagement in South Asia

The EU has chosen a 'bottom-up' approach to promoting democracy and human rights in South Asia that was delivered through the participation of civil society and NGOs. These were the main recipients of the EU's assistance. The impact was seen in the region as the role of civil society increased significantly, which has been debatable among scholars and policymakers. The democratic model and regionalism of the EU are often discussed and referred to in South Asia as a more accountable institution to the people. The promotion of democracy in the region was recognised as part of a 'peace strategy', with a focus on the inherent benefits of fostering socio-economic development and promoting human rights. Development cooperation and assistance programmes, bilateral political dialogue, and trade negotiation have been used as instrumental tools that have been applied through EIDHR funding in South Asia. The European Commission was taken into account by the European Union Election Observation Mission (EOM), which was first deployed in October 2001 to observe the general election in Bangladesh (Khatri, 2009).

Similarly, in Bangladesh, the European Commission identified six core areas of engagement, which include capacity building to consolidate good governance and the rule of

law. The Commission provided support for electoral reform, election observation, and the training of lawyers. The success of the EU was achieved in Bangladesh by participating in the Preparation of Electoral Roll with Photographs (PERP), which was completed in 2008. More than 80 million voters registered scientifically under a programme run by the Commission and contributed 15 million euros. Reliable conditions were created through the role of the EOM and helped to loft the 'State of Emergency' just two weeks before the day of the national election's polling day (Khatri, 2009).

Belal (2015) highlights in his research that members of the local civil society perceived the implications of the EU's neoliberal democracy support programme in Bangladesh. Political dialogue has been a key priority with government executives and opposition leaders in Bangladesh. The EU provided democracy assistance to Bangladesh in the following terms: 1) 100 million euros for 1999-2001 to support the 'governance and institution building' as development cooperation; 2) 560 million euros allocated for 2002-2006 to 'promotion of democracy and human rights' along with other engagement areas; 3) a total sum of 403 million euros provided to address 'governance and human rights' with the other two focal areas and comply with the MDGs during 2007-2013; and 4) the MIP 2014-2020 focused on three priority sectors along with strengthening democratic governance and a total of 690 million euros dedicated (Syed Belal, 2015). In 2019, the Joint Commission of the EU and Bangladesh Joint Commission committed and reviewed political developments from both sides in their 9th session. The session also discussed the strengthened role of democracy, the rule of law, and good governance, as well as the importance of holding a free and fair election, and Bangladesh reiterated its 'zero tolerance' policy in the context of accountability, violations of the law, and human rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

In Nepal, three major areas of engagement identified as being involved by the EU with national stakeholders and the international community collaborated for citizen action, and they were: 1) democracy and human rights; 2) empowerment of marginalised groups, e.g., women; and 3) Dalit and collective rights for excluded groups. Between 2002 and 2006, the EU provided 10 million euros for the democracy assistance programme in Nepal. After the successful restoration of democracy in 2008, the EU revised its priorities in Nepal through peacebuilding,

education, and consolidation of democracy as the support areas for 2007–2013. Nepal became the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal on May 28, 2008, after the end of 240 years of monarchy. The EU opened its full delegation to Nepal in 2010 and allocated 120 euros in aid under the 2007-2013 country strategy paper (Jain, 2009, 2015; Khatri, 2009; Furness, 2014; Limbu, 2020).

In addition, the 'Election Support Programme was launched in 2015 to improve the capacity of the Election Commission and other stakeholders to plan, train, educate, and participate in gender-neutral and peaceful elections. The EU supported its aid through two large programmemes: 1) a contribution to the Nepal Peacebuilding Trust Fund (NPTF) and 2) an education budget support programme. The EU's MIP 2014-2020 highlights its support for post-conflict Nepal in sustainable rural development, education, and strengthening democracy and decentralisation. The indicative allocation total of 74 million euros from the EU was provided for strengthening democracy during 2014–2020. In 2019, the "Federalism Support in Nepal" programme adopted a two-way approach: 1) building the capacity of institutions and people through the 'Provincial and Local Governance Support Programme' (PLGSP); and 2) fiscal decentralisation through the 'Integrated Public Finance Management Reform Programme' (IPFMRP), with 32.35 million euros supported for it (Government of Nepal, 2014; European Commission, 2015, 2021b).

In Pakistan, the European Union favoured a partnership approach to supporting the democracy-building process. Then the EU became part of the 'Friends of Pakistan Forum', which was launched in September 2008. Since then, the EU has continued to support the Government of Pakistan in its effort to consolidate democracy. The EU supported micro-projects due to the security threat posed by terrorism. The EIDHR financial allocation was supported by a micro-project with 2,715,000 euros in Pakistan during 2002–2006. The Union's EOM supported the February 2008 election, which helped to increase public confidence in democracy in the country. Abbasi (2009) argued that there is a fragile democracy in Pakistan that requires support and assistance from international actors, which can help establish a strong foundation and strengthen state institutions. It can also help to overcome the threat of terrorism and fundamental extremism in the country. In this regard, the EU can play a significant role in

Pakistan. The role of the EU can be seen in the areas of good governance, strengthening civil society, and democratic electoral processes (Abbasi, 2009; Khatri, 2009).

On June 1, 2021, the Joint Commission of the European Union and Pakistan took place via video conferencing on "Democracy, Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights," and the "EU reaffirmed its commitment to the promotion and protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms with respect to religious freedom and belief (EEAS, 2021). The European Union EOMs initiatives undertaken in the following years in South Asia: Bangladesh (2008, 2014, and 2018), Bhutan (2008, 2013 and 2018), Nepal (2008), Pakistan (2002, 2008, 2013 and July 2018), Sri Lanka (2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2020), and Afghanistan (presidential election 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019) (European Commission, 2008b; Dupont, Torcoli and Bargiacchi, 2010; Jain, 2015).

In Bhutan, the political system changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy in 2008. The first National Assembly elections took place on March 24, 2008, and the European Union participated after an invitation from the Royal Government of Bhutan. The EU-EOM observed this election and ensured the electoral process met international standards. At that time, the Chief Observer was Javier Pomes from EU-EOM, a Member of the European Parliament, and six core teams and nine long-term observers were appointed from 13 Member States. So, the observation was carried out in all 20 districts for 8 weeks (EUEOM, 2008; European Commission, 2008a).

Currently, the EU supports Bhutan through the Annual Action Programme, which was launched in 2020. The Union supports the extent of the "Action Document for Promoting Good Governance: Support to Civil Society and Bhutanese Parliament Engagement with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)". The Action programme contributes to improving access to information, transparency, and accountability. However, the main aim is to improve and strengthen the capacity of civil societies to engage them in sustainable development and good governance. The EU reports say that the action programme is part of MIP 2014-2020, and its main purpose is to contribute to "Democracy and decentralisation strengthened," which is a target of the key national result of Bhutan under the five-year plan (2018-2023) adopted by the government.

European aid is funded under the DCI for a cycle of 2014–2020 to Bhutan, and the amount of 42 million euros is included in the development policy (European Commission, 2019).

The 9th Annual Consultations between the European Union and Bhutan took place on December 15, 2020, and the priorities focused on the EU-Bhutan partnership under the MFF 2021-2027 on three thematic areas: climate change, good governance, socio-economic development, and recovery from COVID-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). But in the case of Afghanistan, the EU funded the project "Support of Enhanced Sustainability and Electoral Integrity in Afghanistan (PROSES)" to support electoral intuitions in the country. The project was implemented to support the election cycle concerning the parliamentary and district elections in October 2018 and the presidential and provincial elections in April 2019 (PROSES, 2021). However, the EU supported its long-term commitment to support peace, security, and prosperity, and more than 4 billion euros in development aid has been provided since 2002. Under the MIP 2014–2020, the EU focused on three priority sectors: peace, stability, and democracy. (European Commission, 2021a).

However, the latest press release on behalf of the EU declared that the negotiation process has been offered to the Taliban for the guarantee of security and peaceful coexistence. The EU committed its support to the people of Afghanistan towards democracy, good governance, human rights, and development in the country, as well as counterterrorism (European Council, 2021). The European Union foreign ministers agreed to the talks and engaged with the Taliban, but formally stepped down to recognise the new government. Josep Borrell, a High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, mentioned that "in order to support the Afghan population, we will have to engage with the new government in Afghanistan, which does not mean recognition; it is an operational engagement." (Euronews, 2021).

## 7. The EU's Engagement in South Asia through NGOs and CSOs

The EU's involvement in Sri Lanka was considered a conflict between the EU and the Government of Sri Lanka over an insurgency with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There was a long-standing insurgency in Sri Lanka for a period of 26 years. The EU

and its member states emphasised their own individual relationships with Sri Lanka. The relationship between the EU and Sri Lanka is based on the 1995 Cooperation on Partnership and Development Agreement. Hence, both became partners in trade and economy other than recipients of aid by Sri Lanka. Because the agreement did not cite references to 'conflict and also included no conditionalities or clauses stipulating the agreement' in "cases of violations of human rights or a failure to maintain democratic principles". Due to conflict, the development policy was not properly implemented in the eastern and northern parts of the country. The main point of conflict between the EU and the Sri Lankan government was that the EU stood out with its involvement with the LTTE due to its advocacy of human rights. In 2003, the commissioner for foreign relations met with the LTTE chief Prabhakaran for a discussion on the peace process. The EU-Sri Lanka relations were of a small level of cooperation. The EU cited violence against labour and human rights in Sri Lanka, and the country did not get GSP+ benefits between 2008 and 2013. The GSP+ was renewed in 2015[5] and Sri Lanka started receiving benefits in 2017. The EU funded 11 projects in the areas of human rights, democratic participation, and civil society development. The total budget allocated is between 400,000 and 600,000 euros under the EIDHR and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) Programme (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2009; European Commission, 2010; Frerks and Dirkx, 2017).

Despite the low relations between the EU and Sri Lanka, the EU funded 113 small and medium-sized projects during 2000–2015. It was particularly focused on the areas of human rights, civil society, and democracy promotion, with a focus on conflict prevention and resolution, civilian peacebuilding, peace, and security, as well as support for local and regional NGOs. Frerks and Dirks (2017) found in an interview with a local NGO that received funding under the EIDHR that this mainly works for human rights and advocacy. They also alleged that the Rajapakse government NGO was a 'tiger' and tried to force the intervention of NGO intervention in society. The government-controlled media branded the NGO as a terrorist. The following organisations mentioned that working for local NGOs was impossible and limited during the Rajapakse government, especially in northern Sri Lanka: *Platform for Freedom, The*

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[5] More can see at Council of the EU, Council Conclusions on Sri Lanka, Press Release 820/15, 16/11/2015.

*Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), French NGO ACTED, and CSO-Local Authorities Action and Partnership Programme (CLAPP).* However, in another part of Sri Lanka, positive responses from NGOs were observed. According to a statement by an NGO official, "I implemented seven EU projects. I am happy to work with the EU. They are the main donors here in the north. We did great things with the support of the EU. Without them, I do not think Sri Lanka would develop"[6] (Frerks and Dirkx, 2017).

In addition to the challenges of working under Rajapakshe, NGOs and CSOs express mainly positive aspects of contributing to the development of democracy and the promotion of human rights in Sri Lanka. Post-conflict in Sri Lanka, there are no such problems found, and stakeholders are also mentioned as having significantly supported the EU's 'consistent and relevant post-conflict reconstruction and development programme', especially in conflict-affected areas. In a similar example presented by Jiwan Subedi, who is a Political Affairs Officer at the Delegation of the European Union to Nepal, he mentioned that EU countries played an important role after the post-conflict resolution. Currently, the EU as a whole engages CSOs and NGOs in the democratisation process, rural development, and human rights support. He also mentioned that even in times of global pandemic, the EU is consistently supporting Nepal. Almost 1200 NGOs and CSOs are working in Nepal with the EU's funds in a wide range of areas.[7] Former Nepalese Ambassador to Denmark, Yuba Nath Lamsal, also expressed that Europe and Nepal had very old relations, and the European countries have been supporting us in development, democracy development, and human rights support as our important partners.[8] An international NGO, 'World Movement for Democracy', is also a recipient of aid in Nepal and works with several CSOs. The government strictly controls CSO funding because CSOs need to spend 60% of their funding on infrastructure projects or goods and services. Therefore,

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[6] More interview of NGOs officials and representative can see in the report of "Frerks, G. and Dirkx, T., (2016). EU engagement with Sri Lanka. Dealing with wars and governments. Borgh, C. van der, Frerks, G., and Dirkx, T., Findings on EU peacebuilding capabilities in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Honduras, Guatemala and Sri Lanka– A Desk Review. Utrecht: Utrecht University".

[7] Lecture delivered at Online NIICE International Conference on "Understanding Nepal's Foreign Policy" in Session 'M', "Nepal-Europe Engagement" on 28 November 2021.

[8] Lecture delivered at Online NIICE International Conference on "Understanding Nepal's Foreign Policy" in Session 'M' "Nepal-Europe Engagement" on 28 November 2021.

there is limited funding for human rights and democracy initiatives in Nepal that include research, advocacy, and educational programmes (World Movement for Democracy, 2021).

In 2018, the EU funded a three-year project launched by News Network with the cooperation of Udayanakur Seba Sangstha (USS) for 'Supporting Human Rights Defenders Working Women's and Girl's Rights in Bangladesh'. This project aims to protect and promote the rights of girls and women. In the launch programme, there were also representatives of CSOs who extended support under the civil society initiative (Karim, 2018). Similarly, in India, an NGO called 'Human Rights Law Networks (HRLN)' is one of the EU-funded organisations that has 28 offices in India, and more than 200 lawyers are working to increase the expansion of constitutional rights in Indian society. HRLN mainly works for initiatives: criminal justice, Dalit rights, defending and defenders, disability rights, emergency and disaster response, environmental justice, HIV/AIDS and positive living rights, labour rights, secularism and peace, women justice, sexual minorities and gender rights, and others (ECCHR, 2021; Human Rights Law Network, 2021). For example, the EU-funded 'State Level Training of Elected Town Vending Committees (TVC) Members in Delhi' took place on September 1, 2021.[9] In general terms, throughout this study, it has been observed that the aid receiver or recipient appreciated the aid donor or provider. So, similar trends are also found here, and most governments, CSOs, NGOs, and other organisations have appreciated the support of the EU. The norms and principles of the EU are matched to the profiles of these organisations. However, academic discussion allows evaluation and criticism of the relationship between the donor and the receiver of the aid.

## 8. Questions of Credibility and Impactful Promises by the EU

The EU as a diverse donor of aid for democracy promotion initiatives and functioning has been appreciated by stakeholders in South Asia. But there are also critical perspectives on the EU among scholars and governments in South Asia. India has not yet joined the EU's promotion of democracy due to ideological beliefs, and India is not in favour of the imposition

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[9]   Information from Facebook wall of Human Rights Law Network (HRLN), available https://www.facebook.com/SLIC.HRLN/posts/10158053719956716.

of democracy. For example, former Indian National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon once mentioned that "a people cannot be forced to be free or to practice democracy."[10] The EU is admired for its 'bottom-up' approach, but India believes in the 'top-down' approach and democracy based on local norms and values (Kugiel, 2012). It is true that all Eastern leaders do not favour the Western standard of democracy import in South Asia. There are also some other concerns among scholars in academia.

Earlier, Muni (2009) argued that 'the EU's commitment to democracy is under strategic pressure and has made compromises with the position of the United States'. The EU has not been seen as a cohesive political entity with its member states committed to the promotion of human rights and democratic values because of its varying degrees among the members. According to the European context, civil society has become robust and vibrant, which leads to assumptions. There is an instrument in relations with South Asian countries that associates conflict with people and their interests. The core objective of the EU's South Asian assistance package for South Asia is to emphasise poverty alleviation. The EU works with the international community to assist South Asia through spreading awareness, the institutionalisation of democratic norms and practices, which includes at the level of political parties and NGOs, as well as delivering development through good governance (Muni, 2009).

In recent years, the rise of populist governments in Europe has raised a serious question about the credibility of EU liberal democracy promotion initiatives. There is also the question of impactful promise in South Asia, where the EU itself faces challenges regarding populism, Russian aggression and lack of common voice about refugee management. But Cadier and Lequesne (2020) argued that the rise of populist governments has recently even in Western democracies like Sweden and the Netherlands. So, the EU is affected by a key internal political development and is 'likely to have repercussions on its foreign policy'. Populist governments in the EU have illiberal domestic policies, but they also have the "potential to undermine the EU's legitimacy, structural power, and resilience-building endeavours." There are critical views on populist governments in Hungary and Poland regarding the norms of the EU legitimacy of

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[10] Mr. Menon delivered his lecture "16th Prem Bhatia Memorial Lecture 2011: India and the Global Scene", India International Centre, New Delhi, 11 August 2011.

democratic government and rule of law principles. On the other hand, the Polish President advocates for the building of a democratic path in Belarus and requests that the world help them. The populist actor just contests liberal norms in domestic politics and the EU, but they criticise the rhetoric of external actors who contest the international liberal order. Therefore, both authors agree that 'populist governments weaken the legitimacy of the exporting of democratic governance and the principle of the rule of law and its effectiveness'. So, there is a contrast in the discourse and practices of parties when the populist party used to be in power (Cadier and Lequesne, 2020).

Dempsey argued that European populism erodes the global image of the EU over time, and illiberal policies would affect soft power (Dempsey, 2015). Schmidt (2015) presented a counter-argument that the rise of populist governments in Europe is affecting only national politics, but it is still a problem for the EU. Populism should not only be seen as a negative phenomenon, but it has also given voice to underrepresented groups in society. They have a proper place in the EU because it is an optimistic view (Schmidt, 2015). In the recent decade, there has also been a rise of populist governments in South Asia and a strong power holding. In this discussion, the EU democracy promotion and human rights initiatives also face tough challenges while being implemented in South Asia by national governments. Along with Sri Lanka and Nepal, India also imposed strict regulations on funding CSOs and NGOs. It is true that anti-democratic governments do not admire the involvement of NGOs in society and sue to vote on bank politics. Here, the situation in Central and Eastern Europe and South Asia is the same. The EU governments have imposed tough restrictions on pro-democracy, civil liberties, anti-corruption, and environmental NGOs and CSOs in Croatia, Hungary, and Poland. We are also imposing tough restrictions on foreign funding and publicly destroying their image (Butler, 2017). Despite the populist challenges in the EU and South Asia, the EU is committed to democracy promotion, which is pragmatic, idealistic, and psychological. So, the EU imposes political conditions for trade, exchange, and development assistance to third countries. The EU institutions and member states remain set to promote democracy as a policy priority despite effectiveness, which comes under pessimism (JCMS, 2018).

## 9. Conclusion

However, the European Union played an important role in democracy promotion in South Asia, where the EU established deep and close ties with India.[11]During the violation of human rights in Sri Lanka, the EU imposed the sanction, and they were no longer beneficiaries of the GSP. However, after the end of the civil war, the EU resumed GSP facilitation in Sri Lanka and extended the promise to respect labour laws and human rights in the country. Post-9/11, the EU increased its interest in South Asia, and over the past decade, cooperation has strengthened with not only the Union but also its member states. They repeated their commitment to the Afghan people to guarantee human rights in the Taliban regime, but they would not comprise and recognise the new government on these issues. The EU is closely working with South Asian countries to produce positive promises for promoting democracy, human rights, peace, and stability in the region. There are four main instruments of democracy promotion initiatives in South Asia: 1) political dialogue at the government level; 2) conditionality clauses for trade and aid; 3) capacity building of administrative staff, CSOs, and NGOs; and 4) election observations. However, this study recommends that the EU also increase its engagement at the governance level. This study contributed to important gaps because most of the literature was found in 2009, but new knowledge is needed. The discussion also found that previous literature should have included important strategy papers between the EU and South Asia.

In South Asia, there are some small states; for example, Bhutan and Nepal adopted democratic structures. The diversity is the uniqueness of both countries, not only in terms of culture but also in nature. Federalism and decentralisation are key priority areas in these two countries for the EU. This study recommends that the EU conduct a needs assessment to determine whether a liberal democracy with a full package of federalism and decentralisation would be successful or not. Due to the ethnic diversity of Nepal, the country has already suffered

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[11] In 2014, India graduated from International Development Assistance so India cannot receive aid. Then the European Union established implementing partners of development cooperation and democracy promotion in developing based on shared values and principles.

long-term insurgencies, and the federal structure can be challenging for the sovereignty of the nation. There is some influence of Chinese culture on the northern side of both countries, and they are closer to India on the eastern side, so this can be more challenging for South Asia. India has always alleged the imposition of moist insurgencies in Nepal and India by China.

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# DID THE CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE GO LOCAL? EVIDENCE FROM POLAND

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**Abstract:** *The aim of the paper is to analyse the involvement of the local and regional authorities within the Conference on the Future of Europe. The former, being closer to the citizens, could play important role in reaching "every corner of the European Union" and helping the citizens to articulate their ideas about the European integration. Therefore, the activity of the subnational level could contribute to the final success of the Conference (or failure – in case of lack of any actions). The analysis is based on the author's own empirical study conducted among the Polish territorial self-government units after the closure of the Conference. The local and regional authorities were asked if they informed the citizens about the Conference, organised events regarding this enterprise or took part in the events organised by other entities. The results show very low level of the activity, even among the territorial self-government units that are present at the European level. The conclusions regard both to the Polish circumstances as well as to the general performance of the Conference. In the first case, they unveil the unwritten practice among the Polish territorial self-government units on their involvement in the European affairs. Regarding the second point, the results indicate that the Conference did not manage to exceed the "European bubble".*

**Keywords**: **Conference on the future of Europe, local and regional authorities, subnational level, institutional engagement, Poland.**

## 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has been often accused of creating the state of "democratic deficit". In order to be "cleared of charges", the EU institutions – notably the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP) – have been coming up with several ideas on how to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the EU. The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE or Conference) was the latest attempt in that matter – and it has differed from

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the previous enterprises, both in regard to scale and the openness. The Conference has tried to reach the citizens through as many channels as possible. The latter had the chance to enter the discussion on the future of Europe through the Citizens' Panels or the Multilingual Digital Platform. However, this was not the only way since in its quest to get closer to the people, the EU has used the help of the ones that are indeed close – the local and regional authorities. They (among other entities, such as NGOs or social partners) were invited to take part in the CoFoE and pass further the ideas of the citizens gathered during the meetings organised on the subnational level. The question is if they have accepted this invite.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the involvement of the local and regional authorities in the Conference. The subnational level is in a better position than the European one in terms of engaging the citizens because of the smaller size and number of the members of the community. Hence, the activity within the CoFoE of the local and regional authorities could be a significant factor contributing to the final success (or failure) of the former. Although it is only one of the channels that was used to "reach every corner of the EU", it can be an indicator of the general performance of the Conference.

There are not so many studies on the Conference on the Future of Europe yet, mainly due to the short period of time that has passed since CoFoE's closing event. Nevertheless, one can find some first studies (Markowicz, Tosiek 2023; Oleart 2023; Crum 2023), including these that focus on the subnational level's involvement in this enterprise (Kölling 2022; Sautter, Reuchamps 2022; Antal 2022; see also Petzold 2022). For instance, studies from Germany analyse the activity of the *Länder* (Abels 2022; Peters, Ziegenbalg 2022). What we can find there, however, is a sole listing of the actions – but not the answer to the question of the scale of local and regional authorities' involvement. From this perspective, although this paper presents the data for only one member state, it will be the first one to assess the extent to which the subnational level took part in the CoFoE, as well as to look for reasons for that level of activity.

The findings are based on the author's own empirical study conducted among the Polish territorial self-government units (TSGUs) after the closure of the Conference. The analysis tries to confirm the hypothesis stating that the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the "institutional engagement" at the EU level. The "institutional engagement" is understood in the formal terms as: (1) being represented in the CoR in a form of member or

alternate; (2) having Regional Office in Brussels or (3) being represented in the Conference Plenary.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 introduces the theoretical framework, while section 3 is devoted to the CoFoE and the subnational level's involvement in this enterprise. The methodology and the results of the empirical study are presented in section 4. The analysis of the results is included in section 5. Finally, section 6 contains conclusive remarks.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In order to achieve the aforementioned goal of the study, this research draws on two theoretical frameworks: the "Europe with the Regions" concept and the Sociological Institutionalism (hereinafter also SI). The former serves to acknowledge that the CoFoE was quite a unique possibility of involvement at the European level for the subnational authorities, compared to the previous opportunities. In turn, using the SI framework allows one to demonstrate that this current involvement was shaped by the preexisting rules of subnational authorities' activity at the European level.

The "Europe with the Regions" may be seen as emerging from a (more popular) concept of "Europe of the Regions" (Schakel 2020, p. 772). In contrast to the latter, "Europe with the Regions" has a strictly scholarly (and not political) as well as more modest character. Instead of dreaming of the regions replacing the nation-states as the main actor of the European integration, it perceives the EU as a multi-level polity and seeks to analyse the channels of subnational level's involvement at the European level, like the Committee of the Regions (hereinafter CoR) or the Regional Offices in Brussels (Marks, Hooghe 1996; Panara 2019; Bącal 2022a). That leads us to two conclusions. Firstly, "Europe with the Regions" can be associated with the concept of multi-level governance (Schakel 2020). Secondly, the literature has hitherto focused on the representative aspect of regions' activity – that is on the ways of influencing the European decision-making process. That was seen as significant especially since approximately 60-80% of the European legislation impacts the regional and local level (Moore 2008, p. 518-519). However, what is generally missing is the participatory aspect, i.e. the ways the subnational authorities could involve the citizens in their activities at the European level (Tatham 2018, p. 676-677; see also Panara, Varney 2017 and Bącal 2022b, p. 68-61). This should not be ignored

since the main argument of the regions' European activity was that this will bring Europe "closer to the people". From this point of view, the Conference on the Future of Europe could be seen as a unique enterprise because its main goal (also in case of the subnational level) was to engage citizens. If we combine this with the CoFoE's Final Report (which will be analysed later) and the newly established European Commission's programme "Building Europe with Local Councillors" (European Union 2022), we might see the emergence of the new model of subnational level's activity at the European level. This model, in contrast to the "Europe with the Regions", focuses on the participatory aspect, and is based on the opportunities of local and regional authorities' activity at the European level that explicitly demand from them to involve the citizens. We may call this model "Europe through the Regions".

Sociological institutionalism in the EU studies has not been firmly associated with the analysis of the institutions of the subnational level. The scholars have focused mainly on the EU institutions, such as the EC or EP (Reh et al., 2013). However, there is no reason why this approach cannot be used to the analysis of the subnational level's functioning. Sociological institutionalism states that the institutional decisions are limited by the social structure and cultural environment (Weiner 2006, p. 38-39). As March and Olsen (cited in Börzel and Risse 2003, p. 66) write, in light of the SI, the institutions are driven by the "logic of appropriateness". It means that they do not always look for the most effective option but rather prefer to do what is socially expected from them (Risse 2019). The relation between the institutions and social structure goes in two directions. The structure can influence the functioning of the institutions, but the latter can also contribute to impact the latter (Weiner 2006, p. 38-39). The interactions between institutions and other entities (*inter alia* other institutions) shape the mutual behaviour and can lead influence the way one perceives themselves. In other words, the institutions can be subjects of socialisation (Börzel and Risse 2003, p. 66-67). Among the effects of this process, the SI has recognised the situation, in which the actors' actions – through frequent interactions – start to show more and more similarities (such result has been named "institutional isomorphism"). Secondly, to be seen as the "good members of the society", the institutions can internalise some rules that are widely acceptable in such society. The latter can be defined in more narrow sense, limited to the institutions. The interactions between them can lead to the establishment of some norms and/or practices that, although unwritten, will be obeyed (Jenson

and Mérand 2010). At least until the new rule will be recognised as binding for the group. The norms and practices can concern every aspect of the institutions' functioning as well as can be limited to the specific area of their activity.

## 3. The CoFoE and the involvement of the subnational level

The CoFoE was not the first attempt of the EU institutions to involve the citizens in the decision-making process – it has been preceded by *inter alia* Citizens' Dialogues. However, the scale of the Conference, its orientation on the strategic issues as well as its clear time schedule entitle to say that it was the unprecedented event in the history of the EU. As it was stated in the Joint Declaration on the Future of Europe, signed by the Presidents of the Council, EC and EP: 'the Conference on the Future of Europe is a citizens-focused, bottom-up exercise for Europeans to have their say on what they expect from the European Union. It will give citizens a greater role in shaping the Union's future policies and ambitions' (Official Journal of the European Union 2021a).

The Conference began on the 9th May 2021 and ended exactly one year later. It was based on three main pillars. The first one was the European Citizens' Panels, consisting of randomly selected EU citizens, tasked with putting forward recommendations that could be later discussed by the Conference Plenary. The European Citizen's Panels were accompanied by the National Citizens' Panels, organised in the 6 member states. The second pillar was the Multilingual Digital Platform. It gave the possibility to participate in the CoFoE in two ways: (1) by opening or joining the discussion on one of the given topics (climate, democracy etc.) as well as (2) by organizing the local event and uploading gathered recommendations. The final pillar was the Conference Plenary – the body consisting of the politicians, social partners and citizens. It worked on the proposals form the Citizens' Panels and the Platform and shaped them in a form presented in the Final Report.

In the formal terms, the Final Report was the main result of the CoFoE. Therefore, it was up to the EU institutions what to do with the citizens' proposals. Lack of the reaction would undermine the credibility of any future citizen-oriented initiatives. The EP was the most eager to strengthen the importance of the Conference by calling for the results to be basis for the Treaty

change (European Parliament 2022). The EC and the Council have chosen more of a technical approach, presenting reports on the particular citizens' proposals (Council 2022; European Commission 2022a). The main findings of these documents are that the EU already has introduced (or plans to do it) most of the measures. Moreover, in the 2022 State of the Union Address, Ursula von der Leyen has stated that the EC will include the proposals from the CoFoE in work the programme for the forthcoming years as well as it will make use of the Citizens Panels formula (European Commission 2022b). The Conference was also addressed by the European Council that in its June 2022 summit conclusions devoted 4 sentences to the CoFoE, 'taking note of the proposals' as well as instructing the Council, EC and EP to 'ensure an effective follow-up' (European Council 2022). The different reactions on the CoFoE has once again proved the difference between the intergovernmental and supranational institutions in regard to the citizens' involvement.

The CoFoE was the enterprise of three EU institutions – the Council, EC, and the EP. However, it does not mean that others could not be involved  The open structure of the Conference provided a place for several actors, not only those formally represented in the Plenary (such as national parliaments), but also political groups, for instance. As the CoFoE was an attempt to "bring Europe closer to the citizens", it had reserved a room for those institutions that are considered to be the closest to the people – namely the local and regional authorities.

Starting with the formal side, the subnational level was represented in the Conference Plenary. There were 12 representatives of the democratically elected local and regional authorities – 6 per each level. Moreover, one should also count the 18 representatives of the CoR. It stems from the fact that in order to be a member of this EU's advisory body, one has to hold a democratic mandate on the local or regional level (cf. Bącal 2022b). Therefore, the total number of the subnational level's representatives was 30. However, they cannot be classified as the most influential members of the Plenary. As it was stated in the Final Report, and in accordance with the Rules of Procedure, the 49 proposals were formulated on the consensual basis, but only between the Council, EC, EP, and national parliaments. Other members – citizens' side, subnational level, social partners etc. – "only" gave their support at the end of the procedure (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 35).

The Multilingual Digital Platform was another involvement opportunity for the subnational level. As the Platform Final Report states, the local and regional authorities were among the actors that had organised some events and later uploaded the results of the consultations (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022b, p. 18). The results of the empirical research will shade some light on the scale of activity in that matter.

The subnational level has been also mentioned in the documents establishing the framework of the CoFoE. The Joint Declaration states that 'under the umbrella of the Conference and in full respect of the principles set out in this Joint Declaration, we will organise events in partnership with civil society and stakeholders at European, national, regional, and local level, with national and regional Parliaments, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, social partners, and academia. Their involvement will ensure that the Conference goes far beyond Europe's capital cities and reaches every corner of the Union' (Official Journal of the European Union 2021). The Rules of Procedure formulates similar message and ads – in relation to the Platform – that it 'is open directly for citizens, civil society, social partners, and other stakeholders, as well as public authorities at European, national, regional and local level, as long as they subscribe to and respect the Conference Charter' (Conference on the Future of Europe 2021).

Apart from taking part in the CoFoE Plenary and organising events for the citizens, one should mention two additional points regarding the activity of the subnational level. The first one is the involvement in organisation of the European Citizens' Panels, that were organised in other places than Strasbourg (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 15). Secondly, the regions gathered in the initiative "Regions for EU Recovery" have issued a letter to the Executive Board right before the start of the Conference. In an opinion of the signatories, 'the framework for the CoFoE should ensure that Regions have the opportunity to directly contribute to all the fora of the conference. Moreover, we suggest that the CoFoE includes a plenary session designated to discuss the role of regions and multi-level governance' (Government of Catalonia 2021).

The subnational level can also be found in the proposals formulated in the Final Report. The Report's authors underline that the involvement of the local and regional authorities is needed to improve the efficiency of the EU's actions in areas like climate or economy

(Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 45, 54). However, most ideas concern democracy topic. On the one side, the EU should help the local and regional authorities to support the civic engagement (for instance 'provide enhanced structural support, financial and otherwise, for civil society, especially for youth civil society and support local authorities in setting up local youth councils' [Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 79]). On the other hand, the EU should make use of the local and regional authorities' help to communicate with the citizens more effectively and involve them in the decision-making process ('include organised civil society and regional and local authorities and existing structures such as the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the CoR in the citizens' participation process' [Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022a]). The main proposal in that regard seems to be to 'create a system of local EU Councillors, as a way to reduce the distance between the EU institutions and European citizens' (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a).

Separate attention has to be given to the CoR. As it has stated in its report summarising the activity within the CoFoE: 'since the end of 2020, the CoR has held – in addition to its regular debates during plenary sessions and commission meetings – a variety of events in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe, with the double objective of informing citizens and local politicians and developing its position regarding the future of Europe. In so doing, the CoR has worked together with local and regional administrations, associations representing local and regional interests, and EU institutions' (Committee of the Regions 2022a, p. 2). The CoR's actions can be divided into three main categories.

The first one contains the events organised by the EU's advisory body. Enterprises regularly organised by the CoR – such as "EU Regions Week" and "Young Elected Politicians programme" – have been devoted to the topic of the Conference. Apart from that, the CoR has also teamed up with German NGO Bertelsmann Stiftung to run a project "Close up Europe" (Committee of the Regions, Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022). The project consisted of 23 cooperation projects by total number of 67 regions and cities that have conducted consultations with the citizens. *Circa* 2000 people have participated in these events and have formulated more than 400 proposals on the future of Europe. The ideas have been presented in the summary report of the project. One of the main findings of the project is that "municipalities, cities and regions are

interested in developing modern and systematic citizen participation in order to influence local level politics through to the EU level" (*Ibidem,* p. 56).

Secondly, the CoR has adopted 4 resolutions, expressing its stance on the CoFoE. In the first one, from 2020, the EU's advisory body has welcomed the idea of the Conference and called for the decentralised approach with aim to reach every area of the EU, not only the capital cities (Official Journal of the European Union 2020). On its own behalf, the CoR has committed to helping the local and regional authorities with organising the events for the citizens within the scope of the CoFoE. The second resolution was adopted in May 2021 (Official Journal of the European Union 2021). Apart from welcoming the CoFoE once again ('[the CoR] considers the Conference to be an opportunity to bring Europe closer to its citizens and to strengthen their sense of ownership in the European project'), the CoR has also highlighted its own initiatives aiming at involving the citizens in the decision-making process. At the beginning of 2022, the third resolution was adopted (Official Journal of the European Union 2022a). The CoR has underlined the role of the local and regional authorities in supporting the civic engagement's development (Petzold 2022, p. 68). Based on that, the CoR (as the representative of these authorities) has called for strengthening of its own position – by being given the institution status as well as obliging the Council, EC and EP to justify their decisions on not taking the CoR's opinions into account. The EU's advisory body adopted its fourth resolution after the closure of the Conference (Committee of the Regions 2022a). In this document, the CoR has *inter alia:* (1) expressed a support for the EP's call to start the treaty revision procedure; (2) called for the place for the local and regional authorities at the future Convention deciding on the treaty change; (3) supported the idea that the national and regional parliaments should be able to suggest the legislative initiatives at the EU level in the future. Regarding other activities in that category, in 2021 the CoR has set up the High-Level Group on European Democracy. The group was chaired by the former president of the European Council, Herman von Rompuy. In the final report, the High-Level Group has called for staying within the current framework of the Treaties and trying to make use of its untapped potential (Committee of the Regions 2022c: 4). The report also suggests strengthening of the CoR's position, for instance concerning the consultation procedure or the subsidiarity principle.

The third component of the CoR's activity within the CoFoE was the presence in the Conference Plenary. As it was mentioned, the CoR had 18 representatives there. In that matter, the Report on the CoR's actions related to the CoFoE has stated that 'the CoR delegation's objective at the Conference's plenary sessions is to reach out to the other 420 delegates to strengthen the role of local and regional authorities in the democratic functioning of the European Union and to promote the territorial dimension of EU policies' (Committee of the Regions 2022a, p. 2). It is worth noting as well that the CoR (along with the Economic and Social Committee) has been granted a role of an observer to the Executive Board (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 7).

The CoR has also been the subject of attention during the Citizens' Panels and the Conference Plenary. In the CoFoE Final Report, one can find a proposal to 'reform the Committee of Regions to encompass adequate channels of dialogue for regions as well as cities and municipalities, giving it an enhanced role in the institutional architecture, if matters with a territorial impact are concerned' (Conference on the Future of Europe 2022a, p. 84).

To sum up the activity of the subnational level and its representatives within the Conference, two main remarks can be made. First of all, the local and regional authorities as well as the CoR (as the formers' representative) have taken some action in the matter of the CoFoE. The results of the empirical study will show how big was the scale of this activity and what were its determinants. Secondly, this activity has apparently not gone unnoticed since one can find some ideas about the future of the subnational level's functioning in the EU among the 49 proposals outlined in the Final Report that were put forward to be implemented.

## 4. Methodology and the results of the empirical study

The paper is based on empirical study that was conducted among the Polish TSGUs. It started at the end of July and ended at the beginning of September 2022. The research has had a quantitative form – using the right to access to the public information, the author has sent to the selected TSGUs the following questions:

1. Have the authorities of the TSGU informed its citizens about the CoFoE (opening, durance, closing)? If so – in what way?

2. Have the authorities of the TSGU organised any events within the CoFoE? If so – what was the topic of the event?

3. Have the authorities of the TSGU taken part in the CoFoE-related events organised by other entities? If so – were the citizens informed about that?

Concerning the TSGUs selected to take part in the study, they can be divided into three categories. The first one consists of the TSGUs that are institutionally engaged at the EU level. As it was mentioned, by "institutional engagement" concerns the CoR, Regional Offices in Brussels or the Conference Plenary. In fact, this category could be reduced only to the CoR, as the TSGUs that have the Regional Offices or were represented in the Conference Plenary, are also represented in the CoR. The second category is connected to the structure of the Regional Offices in Poland. On the total number of 16 Offices, 15 is run by the voivodeships[2]. The remaining one (Pomorskie Regional Office) has different form as it is an enterprise of the association of the TSGUs, "Pomorskie in the EU". On the 135 TSGUs being in the Pomorskie Region, 25 of them are members of this association. Therefore, the aim of selecting this category is to see if being the member of association active at the EU level leads to the greater involvement in the CoFoE. After receiving the first part of the results, it was decided to extend the study also to the capital cities of the voivodeships to see if the size of the TSGU has determined in any way its activity within the CoFoE. Total number of the study population is 182 TSGUs. Out of those, 179 have given the requested information, which gives the response rate of 98%. The division into the categories was made as follows: 36 TSGUs in the first category (35 have responded)[3], 135 TSGUs in the second one (133 have responded) and 18 TSGUs in the third one (18 have responded)[4]. Regarding the type of the TSGUs, the study was conducted among 16 voivodeships, 21 counties and 142 municipalities (out of those 80 were rural municipalities, 19 were urban-rural municipalities and 43 were urban ones).

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[2] "Voivodeship" is a Polish name for region.

[3] This number is lower than the combined number of CoR's members and alternates from Poland (42) because some TSGUs have more than one representative.

[4] As some TSGUs belong to more than one category the sum of the three categories is bigger than the study population. Moreover, although in Poland there are 16 voivodeships, there are 18 capital cities as 2 voivodeships have 2 capital cities.

The empirical study attempts to resolve the question of local and regional authorities' involvement in the CoFoE. Before presenting the results in each category, it may be worth looking at the general overview. The results are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish TSGUs.
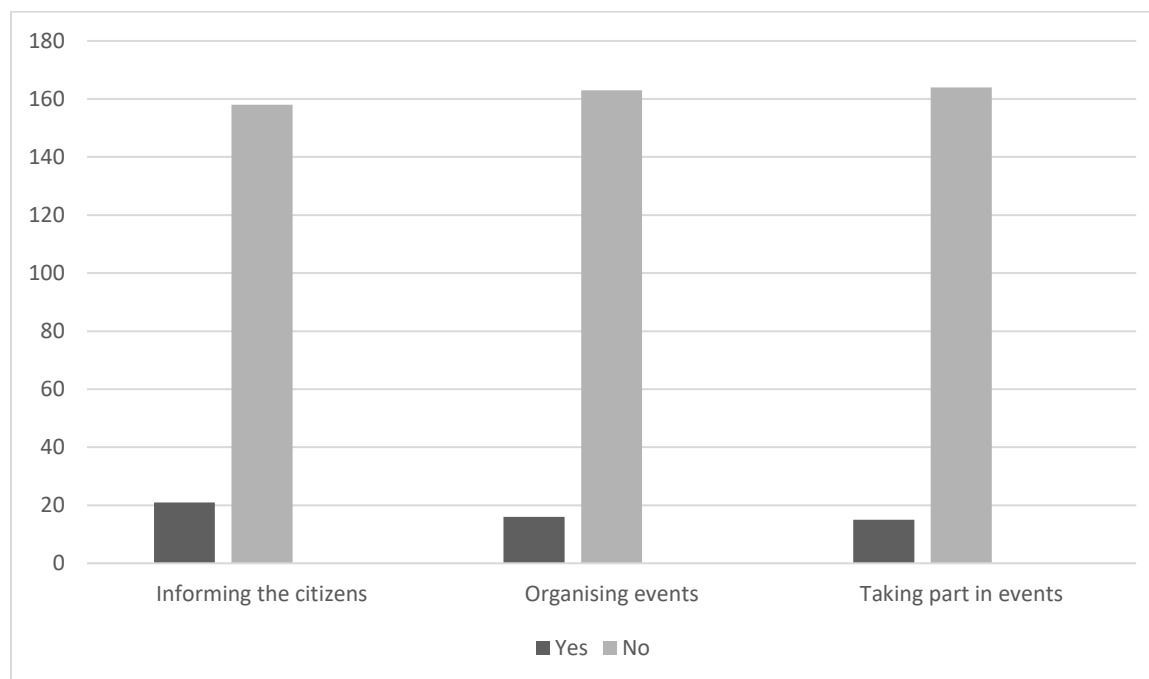


Source: author's own research.

Total number of the TSGUs that have undertaken at least one of the measures is 26. That leaves us with 153 TSGUs with no activity within the CoFoE – 85% of the study population. Having in mind that the goal of the Conference was to "reach every corner of the EU", it has to be said that it did not happen. The presentation of the results divided into categories will attempt to explain the factors that determined the TSGUs' activity in that matter.

Concerning the first category, one could assume that being "institutionally engaged" at the EU level gives not only better access to the information about the CoFoE, but also more opportunities to convert the citizens' proposals into legislative measures. Moreover, as the CoR's strategy on the Conference was to help its members organise some events, the TSGUs have had more encouragement to get involved. Figure 2 shows if these assumptions are justified.

Figure 2. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish TSGUs "institutionally engaged" at the EU level.
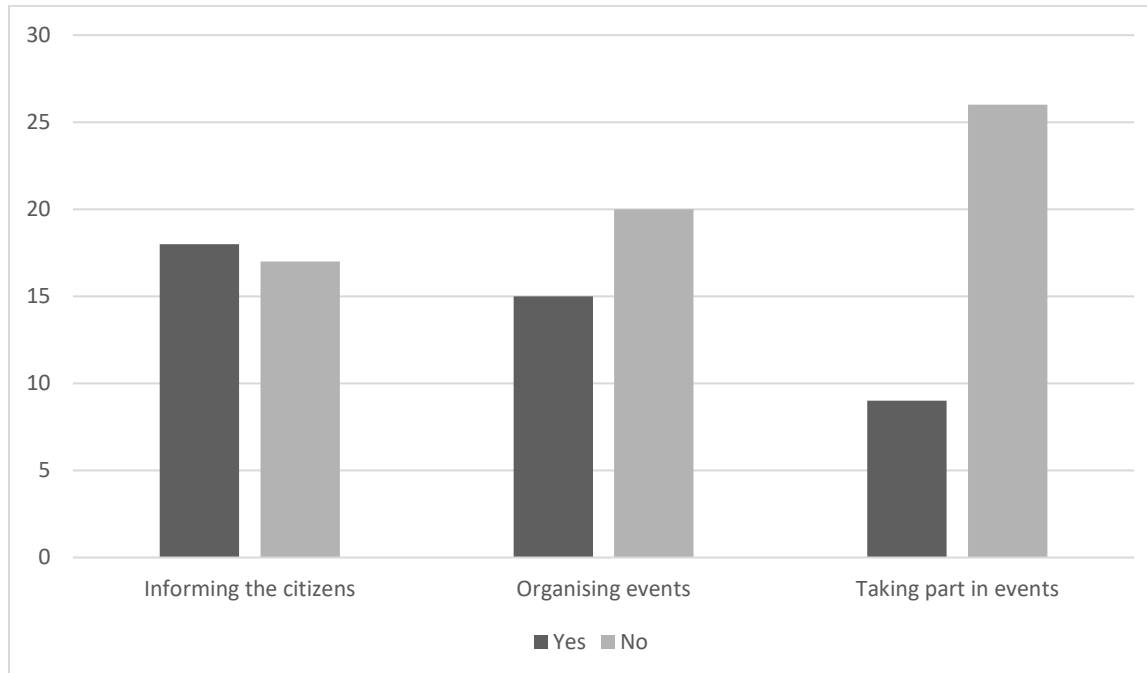


Source: author's own research.

The results may lead to two different conclusions. On the one hand, the percentage of TSGUs' activity within CoFoE within this category is much higher than on Figure 1. On the other, even among the "institutionally engaged" TSGUs the number of the active ones is bigger than the inactive ones only in one category – informing the citizens (which is the simplest task to do out of these three measures). Out of 35 TSGUs, 16 did not do anything regarding the Conference. Hence, it cannot be stated that being involved at the EU level automatically leads to undertaking some CoFoE-related measures. To throw more light on these results, further unpacking shall be helpful. As it was mentioned, this category consists of the CoR's members and alternates, TSGUs having Regional Offices in Brussels and CoFoE Plenary members. The latter two are also members or alternates of the CoR so the general results match the results for this EU's advisory body. When it comes to the TSGUs with the Regional Offices, 14 (out of 15[5]) have informed the citizens about the Conference, 12 have organised some events and 6 have taken part in events organised by other entities. There is only one TSGU with no activity. As one

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[5] Regional Offices run by the voivodeships.

can see, the percentage of TSGUs active within the CoFoE got higher, especially concerning the first two actions. It gets even higher in case of the Conference Plenary members. Three Polish TSGUs have participated in the plenary, one as representative of democratically elected local authorities and two as the representatives of the CoR. Two of them have informed the citizens about the CoFoE and all of them both organised the events and took part in the other's events. There were no TSGUs that have undertaken neither of the measures.

The second category – concerning the TSGUs of the Pomorskie Region - will allow us to test the "institutional engagement at the EU level" variable. Although its meaning stays the same, it has to be remembered that the Regional Office is run not by a single TSGU, but by the association of the TSGUs. Hence, the connection between single TSGU and the EU is somewhat looser than in the previous case.

Figure 3. Activity within the CoFoE of the TSGUs from the Pomorskie Region.
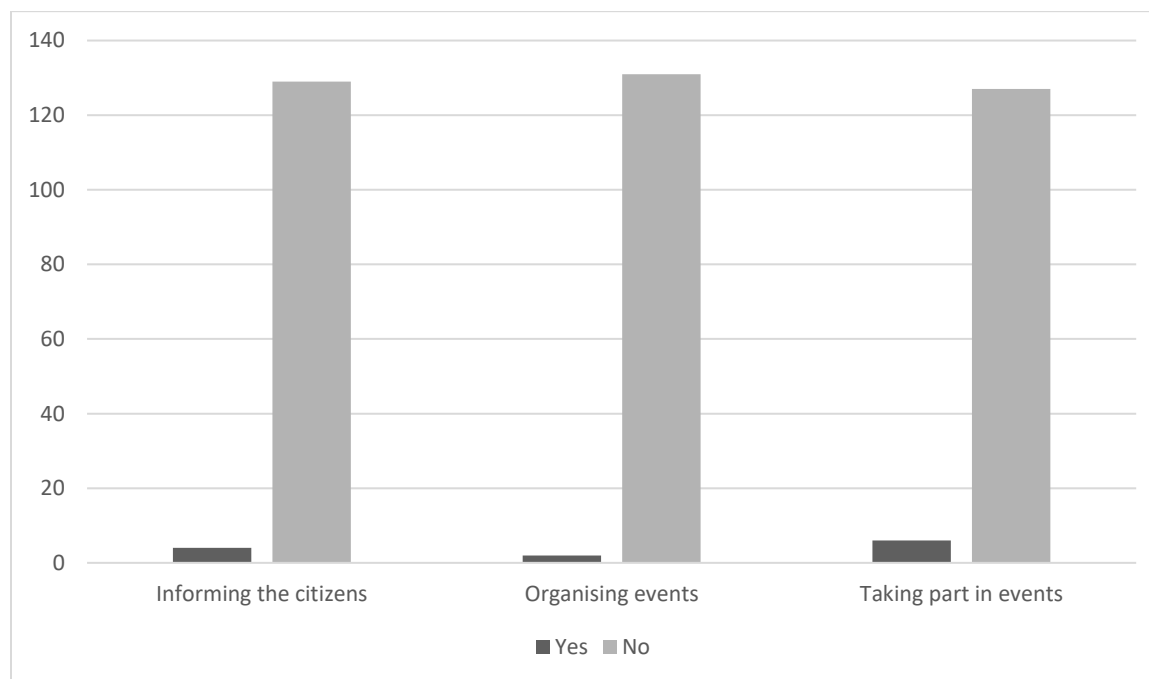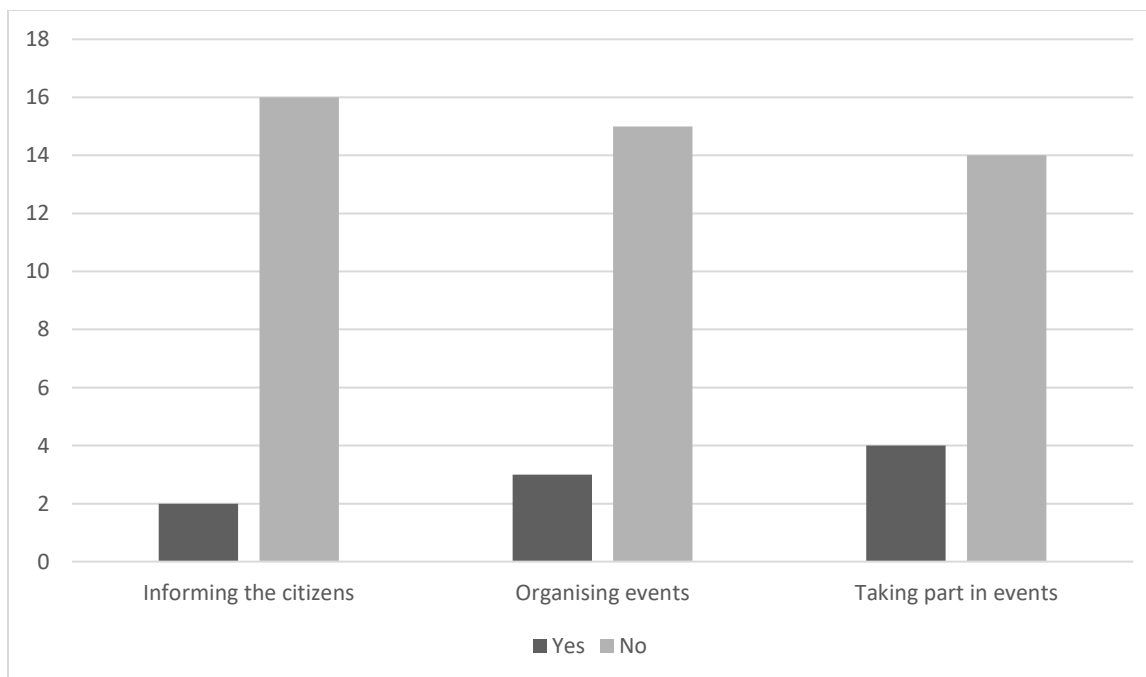


Source: author's own research.

The results presented above include both the TSGUs that are members of the association responsible for running the Regional Office in Brussels as well as those who are not members of this association. On the 133 TSGUs, there are 10 that have undertaken at least one of the actions.

It means that 92% did not do anything. Focusing on the "institutional engagement" at the EU level, the association running the Regional Office contains 25 TSGUs. Out of them, 3 have informed the citizens about the CoFoE, 2 have organised events and 4 have taken part in events organised by the others. There are 7 TSGUs with at least one activity. When it comes to the not-institutionally engaged TSGUs (n=108), 1 has informed the citizens, none have organised events and 2 have taken part in the other's events. Overall, there are 3 TSGUs that have undertaken at least one of the measures. These results do not allow to state that the being involved in the EU affairs (in this case – in a form of the Regional Office) does stimulate the activity within the CoFoE. Number of the active TSGUs is admittedly higher in the "institutionally engaged" category, but just by a couple. No breakthrough has been noticed.

The third category enables to take a more sociological point of view. Since it concerns the capital cities of the voivodeships (notably the biggest cities in the state), it will be an opportunity to prove if the size of the TSGU determines the activity within the CoFoE. If it does, it would indicate that in order to get involved in the Conference, one would need to have sufficient resources (financial, information) – "European capital" of some sort.

Figure 4. Activity within the CoFoE of the capital cities of Polish voivodeships.

Source: author's own research.


On the 18 cities, there are 4 with at least one activity. These combined results do not allow to prove the assumption regarding the size of the TSGU. To get the full picture, this paragraph will also contain the presentation of the results from the other types of TSGU. Starting with the rural municipalities, 1 of 80 has informed the citizens about the CoFoE and there was no activity regarding organisation of events or taking part in events organised by other entities. Hence, there was 1 TSGU with at least one activity. Urban-rural municipalities (n=19) have not taken any measures in any of the categories. Out of 43 urban municipalities, 3 have informed the citizens, 3 have organised events as well as 6 have taken part in the other's events – 7 TSGUs undertaking at least one measure. When it comes to counties (n=21), 2 have informed the citizens, none have organised the events and 3 have attended the other's events (5 TSGUs with at least one action). Compared to every other type of the TSGUs, the activity of voivodeships looks different. On the 16 voivodeships, 15 have taken at least one action. Detailed results for voivodeships are presented in Figure 5.


Figure 5. Activity within the CoFoE of the Polish voivodeships.
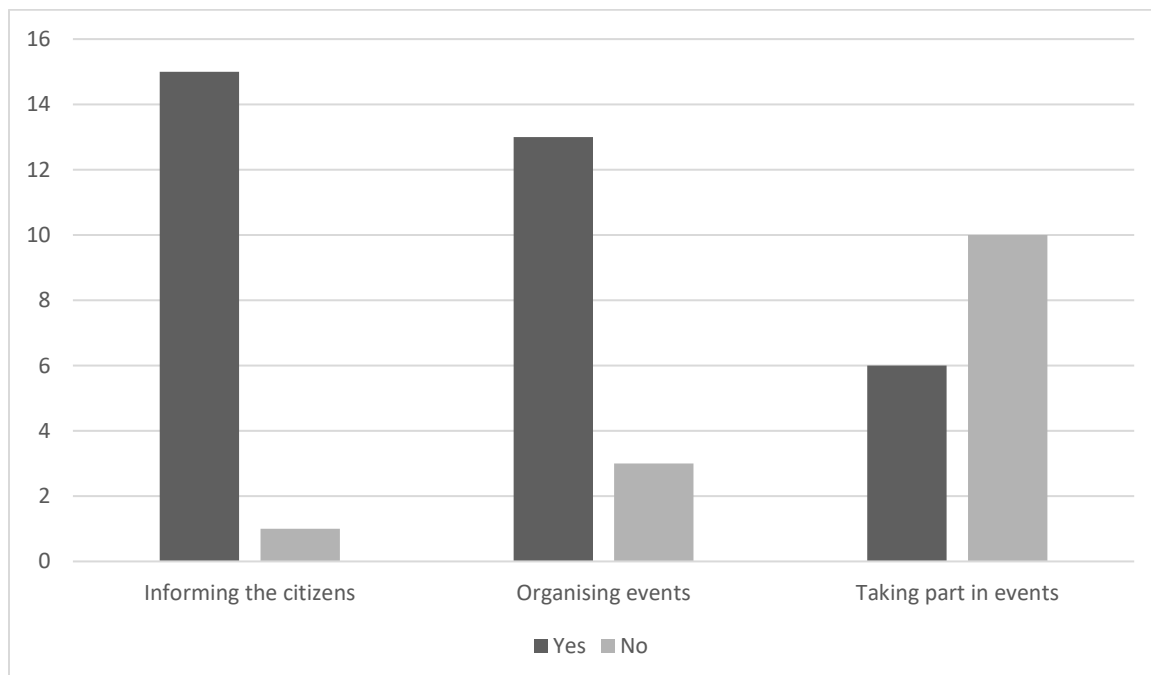


Source: author's own research.

To complete the picture, it is worth taking a look at the types of the activity that has been undertaken by the TSGUs within the CoFoE. Regarding providing information about the Conference to the citizens, it was mostly done by publishing information on the websites of the TSGU. The events concerned mostly the agricultural policy of the EU, EU's support for small and medium entrepreneurships, but also youth policy. There were also some events devoted strictly to local matters. The authorities of the TSGUs have taken part in the events organised by the other TSGUs, Europe Direct Information Centres as well as NGOs. Some decision-makers have taken part in the international events – for instance, one TSGU has taken part in the project of the CoR and the Bertelsmann Stiftung that was mentioned earlier. When it comes to the TSGUs with no activity, a number of them have tried to explain this fact by stating that they were not among the organisers of the CoFoE, or they did not get any information about it. Finally, in a few cases the author had to provide to the information about the CoFoE to the TSGU as its authorities did not know to what conference the author's questions relate.

## 5. Analysis of the results

There are two major conclusions that can be drawn up from these results. The first one concerns the hypothesis stating that the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the "institutional engagement" at the EU level. This engagement is understood in the formal terms since in regard to the CoR, Regional Offices in Brussels and Conference Plenary. At first sight, it seems that the hypothesis has been confirmed. The activity of the "institutionally engaged" TSGUs is the most visible, also when compared to the "size of the TSGU" variable. Moreover, that is also the case in the results of the TSGUs from Pomorskie Region (Figure 2) – although the difference is not that detectable. However, if one eliminates the Regional Offices from the "institutional engagement" category, the results change significantly. In this scenario, there are (on the total number of 20) 4 TSGUs that have informed the citizens about the CoFoE, 3 that have organised the events and 3 that have taken part in events organised by other entities. Overall, there are 5 TSGUs with activity in at least one category. Therefore, the activity of the "institutionally engaged" TSGUs is based on the TSGUs with Regional Offices in Brussels.

This point of view could lead to the conclusion that the original hypothesis should be reformulated to look more like this: the greatest determinant of the TSGU's activity within the CoFoE is the "institutional engagement" at the EU level in the form of a Regional Office in Brussels. However, before declaring success, one should consider two additional facts. First of all, the activity focused on involving the citizens in the EU decision-making process just does not comply with the role of the Regional Offices. Their goal is to represent the interests of the TSGU. Moreover, the nature of the interests that the Regional Offices should secure is primarily economic. The Offices undertake the measures to get the EU funds for their TSGU or lobby for adopting the law that would be beneficial from the TSGU's perspective. Such activity leaves little room for the citizens' involvement. The only thing that is in favour of the reformulated hypothesis is better access to the information about the ongoing EU activity. However, the members of the CoR have the same (or even better) access to such information. But in their case, it does not lead to greater activity within the CoFoE.

The second factor that should be considered is the fact that in 15 out of 16 cases the Regional Offices are run by voivodeships. And in this remaining one, the voivodeship is involved as well. Hence, the attention should be turned to this type of TSGUs. As it was shown earlier, 15 out of 16 voivodeships have undertaken at least one activity within the CoFoE. No other result presented above shows the higher (or even similar) activity. So why is it the voivodeships that are the most involved in the Conference? It seems that in Polish circumstances the informal practice was established, according to which the voivodeships have adopted the role of the TSGUs "institutionally engaged" at the EU level. Such choice seems to be justified as the voivodeships have the sufficient size and finances to afford being present in Brussels. Regarding other types of TSGU, only a few of the biggest cities would be able to do that. Furthermore, in geographical terms, the voivodeship's engagement at the EU level covers the whole state. Therefore, the smaller TSGUs – counties and municipalities – can be also considered to be somewhat represented as their interests can be included in the general interests of the voivodeship they are located in. This is why the Polish law regarding the selection procedure for the candidates for members and alternates of the CoR states that all of the voivodeships shall be represented in that EU's advisory body. And this is also why the voivodeships have the Regional Offices in Brussels. So, these Offices are not determinants of anything. They themselves are a

result of the voivodeships taking on a role of the TSGUs taking care of the EU affairs. Since this practice covers the whole area of the EU's activity, it is also valid when it comes to measures of different character than economic. Hence, it also concerns the citizens-oriented enterprises like the CoFoE. Naturally, neither is the practice guarded by the legal principles nor the voivodeships try to prevent the other TSGUs from taking some measures focused at the EU level. As it was shown, there are some counties and municipalities that were active within the CoFoE. However, their activity was rather incidental – as were the causes for taking some actions. Among them are for example the activity of the nearby Europe Direct Information Centre or the personality of the head of the TSGU. There is no visible trend in that regard. The tendency can be spotted only in case of the voivodeships. That could be a sign that the TSGUs of the other types have also accepted the practice and do not interfere with the current state of affairs. Does this conclusion mean that the original hypothesis has to be rejected? Not necessarily. However, the "engagement" should be redefined. At the beginning, it was understood in the formal terms, meaning membership in the CoR, running the Regional Office in Brussels or membership in the Conference Plenary. At this point, the formal understanding should be replaced with the substantive one, meaning the practice that was established among the TSGUs at the national level. The formal meaning is the consequence of the substantive meaning. In such circumstances, the original hypothesis can be upheld.

The scope of the second major conclusion goes beyond Poland as it relates to the general performance of the CoFoE. The Conference was an unprecedented enterprise aiming at reaching the wider public and involving as many citizens in the debate as possible. There were several ways of ensuring that goal and using help of the local and regional authorities was only one of them. Nevertheless, having in mind that the CoFoE was supposed to "reach every corner of the EU", the activity of the TSGUs can be considered as a significant factor contributing to the final assessment of the Conference. The results presented in this paper dictate to consider the CoFoE rather in terms of the failure - especially in light of the original ambitions. The Conference has not exceeded the "European bubble". As it was shown, only one rural municipality have taken some actions concerning the CoFoE. There were no urban-rural municipalities and 7 urban municipalities active in that regard. The tendency according to which it is the most difficult to reach and engage the citizens from the smaller and/or rural communities has been proven many

times and the Conference has been no exception to that. Moreover, the CoFoE has not even filled out the "bubble" since it did not engage all (or at least vast majority) of the Polish TSGUs "institutionally engaged" (in a formal way) at the EU level. Out of 35 TSGUs of this category, 15 have not done anything concerning the Conference. This result goes even lower when eliminating the activity of the voivodeships, leaving us with 4 active TSGUs. Having in mind all the effort that was put behind the Conference, this is rather not the outcome that was wanted from the beginning. The "bubble" can be considered as filled out only when its boundaries are limited to the entities substantially involved, like the Polish voivodeships. However, it does not make the assessment any lighter for the CoFoE as the size of the "bubble" (and in consequence – the participants of the Conference) is significantly reduced. These remarks lead to one additional conclusion. It is somewhat difficult for the *ad hoc* enterprises (regardless of the scale of the attempts) to break the long-standing institutional practice (cf. Risse 2019, p. 134). Even though the CoFoE was substantially different from the other opportunities for the local and regional authorities to be involved at the EU level (because of its citizens-oriented and non-economic character), it did not change much regarding the behaviour of the Polish TSGUs. The unofficial principle has prevailed.

One should remember that these conclusions are based on the empirical results from Poland – one of the 27 member states the CoFoE took place in. Hence, they can explain the behaviour of the Polish TSGUs, but they might not match the results from the other member states in the analysed matter. Especially since Poland was not among the most active state in regard to CoFoE. As the Multilingual Digital Platform Report states, Poland was the state with the least contributions per the number of inhabitants (26 per 1 million [Conference on the Future of Europe, 2022b]). Furthermore, Poland did not organise the National Citizens' Panel. Therefore, the results from other member states may show the greater activity of the TSGUs. Such study would bring a different perspective and allow to assess the performance of the CoFoE in a more scrutinised way. Nevertheless, the results presented in this paper alone can contribute to the debate as they show the state of affairs in one of the biggest member states of the EU.

**6. Conclusions**

The local and regional authorities are in a better position than their European counterparts when it comes to reaching the citizens. It stems from the fact that it is easier to engage the citizens in the smaller communities. However, in a situation where the TSGU is not an organiser, but the participant of the initiative, one additional factor comes into play. It is the institutional environment, consisting of *inter alia* access to the information and the relation between the TSGU and the actual organiser. The CoFoE was such an enterprise. It has attempted to involve as many citizens as possible. Engaging the local and regional authorities was one of the measures to achieve that goal since the subnational level is considered to be "closer to the people". The results indicate that the Conference – at least in that area – cannot be considered as successful. Not only has it not reached "every corner of the EU", but it also has had troubles engaging the TSGUs that are present at the EU level, as members or alternates of the CoR. Despite its innovative character, the CoFoE did not change the "division of labour" of the Polish TSGUs. As a result, only these TSGUs that are normally dealing with the EU affairs have undertaken some actions regarding the Conference. The institutional habits have occurred to be stronger than the attempts to reach beyond the "bubble". Nevertheless, even if that is the case it does not mean that the further attempts to work with the local and regional authorities to engage the citizens in the discussions about the EU should not be undertaken. It takes some time and actions to form a habit as well as to change it. The CoFoE should be a lesson for the EU institutions on how to include the subnational level in the EU's activity more efficiently. Regarding the "Europe through the Regions", it is up to the future actions of the European institutions to see if this model will be developed. For now, we can say that its rise does not have to mean the fall of the "Europe with the Regions" model. These two models focus on the different aspects of subnational level's activity at the European level (participatory and representative, respectively). Furthermore, they can be attributed to the different institutional settings. For instance, the Regional Offices in Brussels can be associated with the representative aspect, whereas "Building Europe with Local Councillors" – with the participatory one (the CoR could combine both). Hence, the "Europe through the Regions" has the potential to enrich the picture of local and regional level's European activity. After all, this is what the citizens are calling for in the Conference's Final Report.

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# CONSIDERATIONS ON SPECIFICS OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT: A QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS BASED ON CASE STUDIES WITH INSTRUCTIONAL PURPOSES

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**Abstract:** *The present paper reveals a qualitative exploratory study of change management processes in either reorganization measures or system changes in German companies. The empirical endeavor deals with the content analysis of four descriptive case studies in the field of change management, built with and promoted for instructional purposes. Our results may serve as incentives for change management practitioners (i.e., change agents, project managers, coaches, and trainers) and scholars aiming the change management field of study and its related disciplines. We thus, encourage firstly, (1) the use of instructional case studies while teaching and learning about change and secondly, (2) the intensification of qualitative research endeavors, which offer an in depth understanding of the organizational mechanisms and flows*

**Keywords: change management; content analysis; case studies; organizational change.**

## 1. Introduction

> *„It is not the strongest of the species that survive,*
> *nor the most intelligent. It is the one*
> *most adaptable to change. "*
> Charles Darwin

In today's world, it is extremely important to acknowledge the futility of resisting change. The European Union's socio-demographic, technological and economic realities are changing rapidly, so rapidly that it is sometimes difficult to keep track of transnational and multinational organizations' intentions, despite modern strategic early warning system.

In modern teaching as well as in business, educators and managers are always confronted with the challenge of planning a certain process, developing procedures in a better and more innovative way (Errida and Lotfi, 2021; Jafaar et al., 2019; Long, 2013). Change processes happen in digitalization of businesses (Bagga et al., 2023; Girrbach, 2018) and public services, i.e., education (Lozano et al., 2014; Mei Kin et al., 2017), for the optimization of the organization procedures and business processes or even for restructuring and turn around interventions (Holten et al., 2020).

Although the thread of literature dealing with change management processes and models within organizations is oversaturated (Burnes, 2020; Errida and Lotfi, 2021; Nielsen, 2020), the way change management is taught and understood from a didactical viewpoint, remains a considerable research gap (Harvey and Kamvounias, 2007; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

The aim of our research is to shed light on the use of case studies as an efficient tool to teach and learn about change management in a university setting. The specific objectives of our research endeavor are twofold: (1) a pedagogical-fundamental objective of proving the effectiveness and richness of case studies in teaching change management concepts and (2) a pedagogical-applied objective with the goal of identifying similarities and differences between important change management themes which bridge theory and practice.

We report as important results of our paper (1) practitioner (i.e., in teaching) oriented guidelines for the use of case studies as effective class materials in change management education, (2) the identification of recurrent themes of change management practice and theory (Phillips and Klein, 2023), grounding our research in a qualitative analysis of case studies with instructional purpose and finally (3) demonstrating that without an in depth practice-oriented curriculum, catalyzed through the (pro)active students' involvement (Pitic

and Irimiaș, 2023), we cannot expect well prepared change agents in our private and public organizations in the future.

Specifically, our findings align with Phillips and Klein's (2023) and van der Heijden's et al. (2015) research which suggests some common strategies of organizational change implementation related to communication, stakeholder involvement, encouragement, organizational culture, vision, and mission. Thus, we show that teaching change management must derive from the organizational realities, meaning that the instructors have to be constantly anchored in the practicality and applicability of the class materials which they offer.

In the first section, information was provided about models of change management, change communication, barriers and success factors. The second section describes the research methodology used and the hypotheses put forward. The third section deals with the actual results analysis. First, the codes used during the analysis were defined. Then, after the category-based evaluation of the main categories and the comparative analysis of cases, the case studies were evaluated. This section also contains some visualizations and a critique of the methods. Finally, we discuss our findings against the background of previous research on change management practices and we draw some conclusions, bearing in mind that there is no research endeavor without any limitations; thus, we address them with the goal for further improvement of the future research agenda.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Change processes in organizations

Change management is a generic term which encompasses a wide and eclectic palette of models and frameworks for organizational strategies (Phillips and Klein, 2023). There are many different approaches to change, for example lean management attempts to optimize processes (Holten et al., 2020), strategic management attempts (Kraus 2015; Zelesniack and Grolman 2022) to develop strategy through analyses (such as SWOT or portfolio methods).

Thus, change management is activated when companies need new strategies, structures, processes, or systems (Lauer, 2019; Wick, 2020).

A change agent must be aware of the human interrelationships, understand the interactions between people and processes and have a fundamental and overarching approach to these composite elements of the organization (Fleig 2019; Islam, 2023). It is often said that change is the only constant. When we hear the word "change", on the one hand we can assign a positive connotation to the word (it stands for modernity, progress, future). On the other hand, we can also assign it a negative connotation (stressful, enervating, or destructive). This means that it is extremely challenging to successfully shape change because of its antithetical impact of the human's perception. The solution is first in acknowledging this apparent paradox (i.e., change is at the same time positive and negative), thus, both possibilities should be addressed (Ferdman, 2017) when trying to foster change even if it would mean to simultaneously apply antithetical HRM procedures, like for example, encouraging the same treatment of employees and at the same time considering individual differences.

There is a consistent scholarly line of thought (Staehle, 1999, p. 934; Kostka and Mönch, 2002, p. 16; Lauer 2019, p. 8), agreeing that methods can be applied primarily at three points: (1) individuals (i.e., the smallest social elements), (2) corporate structures (including, formal organizational and operational structures as well as strategies and resources), and (3) corporate culture (i.e., permanent, more informal structures, which are responsible for attitudes, values and informal rules of conduct).

There are various discussions about which factors can really make a change process successful, but there is still no common position on this. Essentially, there are four success factors: (1) Leadership: all managers must be prepared to change themselves and support the change in the company; they must agree to this. It is extremely important to find a change manager as early as possible who already has the recommended expertise. The problem-solving skills of managers are truly called upon in a change process (Phillips and Klein, 2023; Schwarz and Cokbudak, 2007); (2) Goal definition: the desired goals should be understood and accepted by the employees so that the change processes do not fail. The

company's vision should not be a secret from anyone. "This also enables employees to carry out their tasks better and in a more targeted manner" (Lauer 2019, p. 115-116); (3) Participation: change projects often go wrong due to a lack of employee participation. Unclear responsibilities and the lack of opportunities for co-determination cause demotivation. The employees affected should be actively involved and integrated in the change process. At the same time, the possibility of personal co-determination by employees is of great importance (Schiessler, 2013); and (4), Communication: the transfer of information before a change process should be credible, understandable, and convincing. People's needs and concerns should be listened to (Yue and Walden, 2023). It is also important to do this continuously, as employees can become unsettled during the process (Phillips and Klein, 2023). You can hardly communicate too much during the change process. It is also very important that managers communicate personally. This is still the most powerful medium. After all, you have to choose a language that suits the culture of the company (Schmidt, 2019).

## 2.2. Challenges of change

The most important task in any corporate change process is for employees to accept the changes that are going to happen. They should be prepared to see the project goals as an innovative change and find a common attitude with the management. Furthermore, it is crucial in a change process that the desired goal is clearly and precisely defined (Mast, 2014). The benefits must be just as clearly defined. There are two types of goals in this case (Maeck, 1990): (1) factual goals (the actual goals of the change project) (2) and personal goals (what do you want to learn from the project).

Change processes are usually very lengthy. The project team needs several months, sometimes several years, to complete the project (Wimmer, 2011). Throughout the entire process, it is important to be in constant contact with the employees affected and to communicate with them regularly. As a result, employees feel that they are truly part of the process and the team realizes that the project is a top priority (Geramanis and Hermann, 2016; Islam, 2023).

One persistent question is why the change projects fail sometimes. For the most part, the projects are not technically set up incorrectly, but they cannot be described as successful. Rather, the issue is that the interaction with those affected is not optimized (Bergmann and Garrecht, 2016). In any change process, it should be assumed that there will be resistance. Dealing with resistance is therefore crucial to the success of the process (Warrick, 2023). A distinction is made between three forms of resistance: rational, emotional, and personal resistance (Landes and Steiner, 2013).

In change projects, the company management also has clear tasks that they must carry out continuously. According to the distribution of tasks, management should not "leave the project alone". The change manager needs regular support from the company management. Otherwise, the change manager will desperately push ahead with the change without help. This can lead to the manager himself developing resistance to the project (Doppler, 2011).

Thus, resistance is the main problem with change because people tend to see change as a bad thing at first. Consequently, many change processes do not run as efficiently and effectively as they should (Lauer, 2019, p. 49).

While resistance is the most significant cause of failed change, there are other factors that can seriously complicate the life of a change process. A lack of direction during the change process and an unclear objective regarding the outcomes of the change can significantly slow down or completely ruin the change. Unclear objectives and visions are the cause of 56% of failed change projects (see Houben 2012, p. 7).

### 2.3. Leadership and communication in change management

The success of a company largely depends on the relationship between the people in an organization (Phillips and Klein, 2023). Namely, people should form a real team, build trust and empathy, and have common goals. Communication measures should be carried out efficiently by management, i.e., employees should not have any "gray areas" in their heads regarding project execution. Management should provide employees with all information and news in a timely manner (Schaff and Hojka, 2018). Not only the good news, but also the

bad news should be shared with employees. One could say that a company can only be profitable if its internal environment is in perfect harmony. Sometimes different companies hire so-called communication trainers to help with different projects and new situations (Flachenäcker, 2019).

Change communication is an important area of change management. The true significance of this phenomenon has only become clear in recent years (Phillips and Klein, 2023; Yue and Walden, 2023). According to Lies (2011), communication during change is a "neglected success factor" that can and must contribute significantly to the management of soft factors. To organize the communication process optimally, management must act responsibly. The role of managers is enormously important in change processes, they should operate as a guide for the other stakeholders. It is essential to emphasize that emotions and motivation change over the course of the change project (Güttel and Link, 2014, p. 20). The task of change communication is to address and influence these changes at the right time. Change communication can be used to significantly influence the emotions of employees and managers. It is an instrument of leadership to support change.

A manager must have a good relationship with his employees; mutual honesty, responsiveness and understanding are hugely important in such an environment (Krüger, 2018).

Very often managers and employees are not willing to change. This is because people love stability and security, which is why they do not want to leave this state easily (Freyth, 2020). Leaving the comfort zone is a real challenge for many people. People do not want change in the company for the following reasons (Arora, 2023): no proper information transfer (if they do not understand the process and the effects), not being able to (if they are confronted with new systems and are afraid that they will not be able to cope with them), not wanting to (those who have a lot to lose certainly do not make the changes with a good heart). The change manager must understand how to overcome these barriers. He must provide support and help for every employee.

At the same time, employees are no longer able to precisely define the meaning of their work due to the change. They have left their previous working pattern and are

dominated by a wave of uncertainty. Consequently, leadership should give the change a direction and explain the reasons why these actions are necessary (Phillips and Klein, 2023). In the further course of the change, the leadership should maintain this behavior to create a stable working environment (Güttel and Link, 2014, p. 21) in order not to condemn the project to failure for defective stakeholder engagement (Arora, 2023).

## 3. Material and Method

### 3.1. Motivation

A case study can help to link and analyze an individual case with a specific theory. The most common research questions are the "how questions" (Müller, 2021). The purpose of each case study is to provide new insights into the research topic. At the end of some case studies, there is still a need for solutions. Change management does not always produce the expected results, which is why further measures need to be taken. The conclusion of an ineffective change project often raises the question of what the participants can ultimately do, how they should behave to ultimately avoid the misfortune that has arisen.

A case study is therefore a qualitative research approach. This method is particularly suitable for the following fields of application: social sciences, political sciences, economics, media sciences, psychology, and linguistics (Müller, 2021). In relation to this paper, the phenomenon of "change management" from the field of economics is considered as a case. The use of case studies as a methodological approach has several advantages, such as: the investigated case can be analyzed from several perspectives, previously unknown problems can be identified, research is related to real life, detailed analysis of different cases.

### 3.2. Questioning

We selected five working hypotheses from the field of change management, vastly based on research by Lauer (2019), Doppler (2011), Zink (2015), and Phillips and Klein (2023) with the goal to unveil some overlapping procedural patterns dealing with inputs and outcomes of the change management process. The hypotheses are selected based on

deductive work in the field of change management. They come from the observations and assumptions of other studies that have been carried out in this area. These hypotheses are then taken as the basis for the deductive work, where the aim is to find out whether these assumptions can also be observed in the case of this work. In addition, at the end of this analysis, new themes that can be used for further work are proposed.

The following hypotheses are formulated regarding this work:

H1.     The change management measures are largely implemented after the emergence of financial difficulties.

H2.     The top-down approach is preferred for change management.

H3.     Change resistance appears where changes are not communicated correctly or in good time.

H4. Poor integration and the resulting work planning causes de-motivation among employees.

H5. Change managers who are chosen internally complete change processes more efficiently.

### 3.3. Method and tools

The four case studies stem from Nagel and Stolz' instructional work - "Shaping Organizational Change - Case Studies in Change Management": (1) "Just before Christmas", (2) "Software is easy", (3) "Mobile makes mobile", and (4) "Does the right hand know what the left hand is doing". The case study analysis attempts to gain a better understanding of the research, mostly by identifying (co)relations in the educational area of "change management". At the same time, this research is seen as multiple-case research, as the questions are observed through several case studies. Multiple-case research ensures that the results are more robust and reliable. The case studies are related to restructuring programs resulting from a re-location or a change in working methods. Emphasis was placed on the case studies being related to a restructuring program so that observations could be made through a predetermined variant of change.

There are various discussions about when it is more advantageous to work according to Kuckartz (2018) or, for example, Mayring (2008). With Mayring, one can observe a well-structured and theory-led approach. At the same time, there are many rules of interpretation,

but it is very difficult to apply them to one's own project without experience. Most of Mayring's questions are not specified or explained in detail, which is why uncertainties can arise during the process. Kuckartz, on the other hand, gives a better idea of the facets of qualitative content analysis. This approach is more modern and is based more on the methods of qualitative procedures or the use of QDA software (computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software).

With the help of qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018), text materials are analyzed systematically and according to rules. In his work, Kuckartz distinguishes between three basic forms of qualitative content analysis: content-structuring, evaluative and type-forming forms. In this paper, the content-structuring variant is used to gain relevant insights from the analysis of the case studies. The content-structuring qualitative content analysis process is defined by Kuckartz as follows. There are a total of seven steps that must be followed precisely during the work: (1) initiating text work, (2) developing main thematic categories, (3) coding the material with the main categories, (4) compiling text passages according to the main category, (5) inductively determining subcategories, (6) coding the main category, (6) analyzing the main category, and (7) analyzing the subcategories. In the following section, we will follow the above-mentioned steps in our qualitative endeavor.

## 4. Results

In this part of the paper, the text analyses are carried out among the corpora (case studies) and the hypotheses are tested based on the analyses. The qualitative content analyses are completed with the MAXQDA2022 program. During the analysis, 4 case studies (in German language) related to change management measures were used. The text analyses were created after the case-oriented evaluation to create a valid investigation based on the whole picture. In the first subsection, the codes[17] are thoroughly presented. The second

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[17] Coding has been done in German language in MAXQDA 2022 program and the themes, codes and sub-codes have then been translated into English for the reader.

subsection contains the most important aspects of the case studies. Parts of the case studies that are related to the hypotheses are extracted. This provides a descriptive answer to the hypotheses. The third subsection contains the actual content analysis of the case studies. With the help of deductive and inductive codes, the case studies are analyzed interpretatively. The analyses are often illustrated with visual tools in MAXQDA2022 to achieve a better representation.

### 4.1. Definition of codes and themes

The codes are the most important building blocks of this work, as it is through codes that the facts, most significant themes, and aspects of the texts can be learned. The analyses were carried out using both deductive codes and inductive codes. The most important difference between them is that the deductive codes can be applied to the material. They are pre-defined codes that function as a grid. In contrast, inductive codes are created from the material. By using inductive codes, new themes and aspects can be generalized and later confirmed or refuted. The work contains the interplay between inductive and deductive codes.

Five deductively formed and two inductively formed main codes were used in this work. Most of the main codes contain at least two sub-codes. There is an excess of inductively formed variants in the sub-codes, as the deductive sub-codes originate from the hypotheses. The hypotheses can only mention one topic in order to be specific and relevant. The main codes and their characteristics are presented in the following table:

*Table 1 Main themes, codes and subcodes of the content analysis in relation to the relevant literature*

| Name of the main code | Definition of the topic | Characteristics (Subcodes) | Explained Hypothesis | Relevant literature |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reasons for change management (deductive) | This category contains information on why companies need change management processes. | The reasons for change management are "modernization" | H1 | (Lauer, 2019) (Holten et al., 2020) (Islam, 2023) |

| | What factors can trigger change processes? | and "financial difficulties". | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Management approach (deductive) | There are various ways to lead during change management. This main code seeks the answer to the question: Which leadership method is most commonly used in change management? | Top-down" can be recognized as a management approach. | H2 | (Lauer, 2019) (Errida and Lotfi, 2021) (Bagga et al., 2023) |
| Change resistance (deductive) | This category gives the possible reasons for the appearance of change resistance. Change resistance does not evade any company during the change process. | In the case of change resistance, a distinction is made between "due to lack of time", "due to decisive change" and "due to inadequate communication". | H3 | (Lauer, 2019) (Errida and Lotfi, 2021) (Warrick, 2023) |
| Demotivation of employees (deductive) | This category includes the causes of employee demotivation. Why are employees demotivated during a change process? | "Progress of the change", "new ways of working" and "poor integration and work planning" can be identified as de-motivating for employees. | H4 | (Zink et al., 2015) (Warrick, 2023) |
| Change manager (deductive) | This code provides information about the person of the change manager. | Change managers distinguish between "evaluation of the project", "attitude to change", "internally selected" and "experience". | H5 | (Doppler, 2011) (Phillips and Klein, 2023) |
| Success of the change processes (inductive) | This code attempts to find an answer to the question: what factors contribute to the success of change management? | The "work culture", "change team" and "conviction to change" can be | H2 and H5 | (Errida and Lotfi, 2021) (Bagga et al., 2023) |

| | | recognized as the success of the change processes. | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Auxiliary means/Tools (inductive) | This category deals with the question: how can the project team better support the change processes? | A distinction is made between "Intranet" and "Information event" under the code "Tools/Auxiliary means ". | H3 and H4 | (Errida and Lotfi, 2021) (Yue and Walden, 2023) |

Once the case studies have been fully coded with the developed category system, we established regularities and comparisons between the codes. There are two options for the direction of the analyses. You can look at the analyses across a case (in this case a case study) (frequency of themes, appearance of codes). The other option would be to code the different text passages on a topic for different cases. This method can be used to work out which understandings of a topic are present in different case studies.

In the following evaluation, there are three major topics according to which the codes are categorized. The first theme is ***change management measures***, which includes the codes *reasons for change management*, *management approach* and *success of change processes*. The second major theme is ***employee perspective***, which contains the codes *change resistance* and *employee de-motivation*. The third theme is ***change team***, which includes the codes *change manager* and *tools*. The main aim of the category-based analysis is to obtain insights into the research questions by means of a descriptive presentation of results. The sub-codes aim to find answers to research questions or to address new research questions.

## 4.2. Comparative analysis of cases

This type of analysis is one of the most important techniques in qualitative research. The MAXQDA program has a "Compare Cases & Groups" function that makes it possible to compare the coded segments for cases easily and practically. Comparisons can be used to find out whether a certain phenomenon occurs in several cases. In addition to the frequency

of the phenomenon, information can also be obtained about the form in which a particular phenomenon occurred. In the qualitative method of this analysis, a so-called interactive segment matrix is created. This matrix very practically shows the code system in the rows and the text passages from various documents in the columns (see, Figure 2 , consisting of the Figures 2 to 8). This makes it easy to obtain information about the distribution of the codes. In the code system, there is either a purple or a red memo next to the designation. The red memos mean that the codes have been recorded deductively and the purple memos mean that the codes have been recorded inductively.

The first main category "Reasons for change management" (Annexe 1, Figure 2) was deductively assigned a subcategory „Financial difficulty". The analysis revealed that only one company introduced change management measures due to financial difficulties. However, a serious reason for the introduction of change management was the incentive to modernize. This observation was made inductively and occurred in all companies.

The second main category "leadership approach" (Annexe 1, Figure 3) was deductively assigned a sub-category "top-down". Only this one sub-category is needed for the analysis, as the change processes in all case studies were led from the top down.

The third main category "change resistance" (Annexe 1, Figure 4) has a deductively formed sub-category "due to inadequate communication". This statement was confirmed in the sense that inadequate communication was a major obstacle for all companies. New findings were also found inductively in this main category, as the resistance to change was caused both by a lack of time (in 2 cases) and by the decision to change (in 3 cases).

The fourth main category "employee de-motivation" (Annexe 1, Figure 5) was deductively assigned a sub-category "poor integration and work planning". The analysis revealed that integration problems within a company were the main reasons for employee de-motivation. In addition, other reasons for de-motivation frequently occurred, which were "due to the progress of the change" or "due to new working methods". The most segments occurred in the subcategory "due to new way of working" (9 in total) and the fewest segments in the subcategory "due to the progress of the change" (5 in total). For all codes, the phenomenon was only observed in three cases.

The fifth main category "change manager" (Annexe 1, Figure 6) was deductively assigned a sub-category "internally selected". The cases confirm the view that it is preferable to select change managers from within the company. This was observable in all cases. Further findings in this field were researched inductively. From the inductive code "evaluation", it emerged that the change managers naively describe the implemented change processes as "good" and "appropriate", although the other participants have problems and difficulties because of the changes. Another inductive code shows that the four change managers, minus one, have no experience in implementing change processes. It is also important to mention that the success of the change project was only effective in one case where the change manager could actually demonstrate previous experience. This significantly increases the relevance of actual experience in change management.

Two main inductive categories were then formed. The first category was named "Success of the change processes" (Annexe 1, Figure 7). As mentioned earlier, only one change process from the four cases was successful. After the content analysis, 3 subcategories were formed here. An answer was sought to the question: what factors influence the success of the change project? According to the analyses, the subcategory "Conviction to change" was found in all cases. There are various methods for persuading employees to change. In this analysis, examples included information emails, trial tests, company-wide events, attractive offers, exploratory trips and city tours.

The second inductive main category is called "Tools/Auxiliary means" (Annexe 1, Figure 8) and deals with the question: how can the project team better support the change processes and communication? Two sub-categories were formed here. It was emphasized that the change team informed employees about the course of the change processes primarily through information events and intranet news. In addition, the intranet page was used for the mutual expression of opinions between the change team and employees.

**4.3. Visual tools**

The Code Matrix Browser (see, Annex 2, Figure 9) can be used to visualize the coding frequencies performed in the documents. From the graphical representation, you can see whether you have coded many or few segments to a category in the case of a particular document. The structure of this graphical representation is very simple. The rows contain the codes and the columns show the analyzed case studies. The nodes provide information on how many codes are present in the respective document. From the graphical representation, you can see which codes were assigned in larger numbers to the given document. You only need to look at the size of the nodes in more detail. For example, it is easy to see from the figure that in the case of the "Software is easy" case study, there were many references to the reasons for change management due to modernization.

In addition to the presented visualization tools we made use of the "Typology Table: Cluster" function in order to evaluate the similarities of documents in a cluster (see, Annexe 2, Figure 10). The first column of the table contains the evaluated codes. In the case of this analysis, the table also contains two columns formed by the clusters. Since the evaluation mode was used here, i.e. emphasis was placed on the occurrence of the codes, the number of documents in which the codes occur was specified in the typology table.

The last proposed visualization method (see, Figure 1 - Document portrait of the four case studies) can be used to display the occurrence of codes in individual documents. When using this tool, only one document can be selected and the individual main categories are displayed as one image in different colors. The advantage of this method is that the location of the individual main categories in the document can be precisely categorized and interpreted. At the same time, it is possible to observe which main categories were more important in the individual documents. The generated image shows only the coded segments from the documents. The sentences that were not assigned to any category are displayed as a white area.
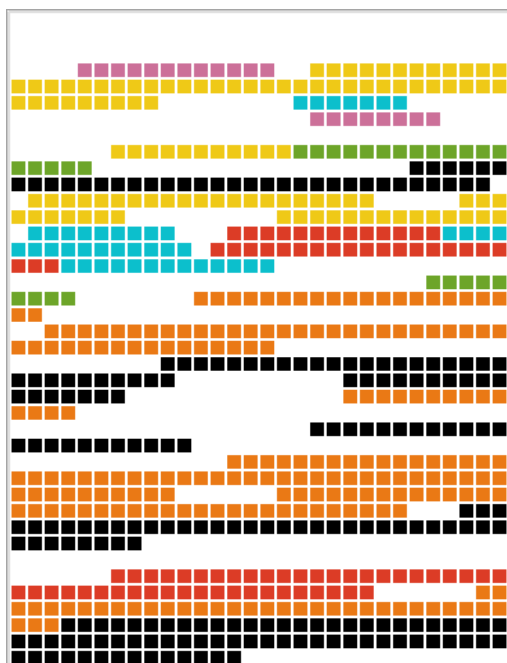
Case study "Just before Christmas"

Case study "Software is easy"
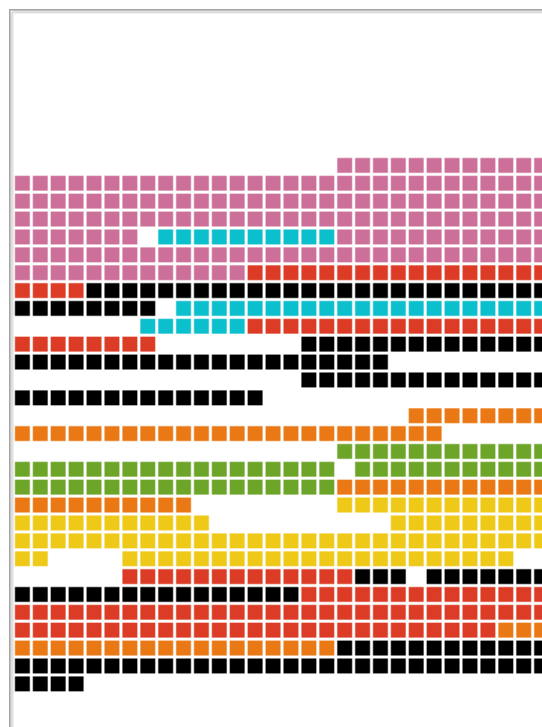
Case study "Mobile makes mobile"

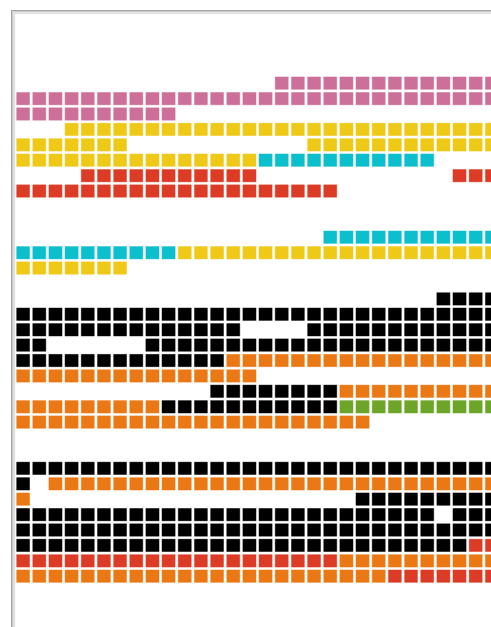Case study "Does the right hand know what the left hand is doing"

*Figure 1 - Document portrait of the four case studies*

From the image created for the "Software is easy" case study, for example, it can be observed that the reasons for change management (purple color) were communicated in great detail at the beginning of the document. Another example would be that the employees in the "Mobile makes mobile" case study were more affected by de-motivation (orange color) than the employees in other case studies.

By and large, the following conclusion can be drawn regarding the placement of individual main categories: the reasons for change management will generally appear at the beginning of the document. At the same time, the change team and the change manager are also introduced at the beginning. After the communication of the reasons for change management, the appearance of change resistance can be noted. In general, the change resistance will be present until the actual implementation of the change. After the introduction, employee de-motivation generally appears in all companies. At the end, evaluations of the success of the change project appear.

## 5. Discussion

The hypotheses were tested after the category-based evaluation of the main categories and after the comparative analysis of cases. The deductive hypotheses, which form the basis of this research, were measured using these two evaluation methods. In addition, the inductive codes were used to form new hypotheses to bring new findings to the surface in the area of change management.

The first hypothesis, according to which change management measures are largely implemented after financial difficulties have arisen, has been partially validated by our analyses. Out of the four case studies, there was only one case where the reason for change management could be related to loss generation. However, other factors also played an important role in this decision. In all case studies, the reason for the change process was the modernization of work processes. One could inductively formulate the following statement from this observation: change management measures are initiated because of modernization efforts (i.e., internal changes) and/or survival strategies. Our results align with Islam's (2023) research on effective change-supporting behavior.

The second hypothesis, according to which the top-down approach is the preferred leadership variant in change management, was fully confirmed by our analysis, as it was noticeable in all change processes that order flows from the top down. The highest decision-making bodies (such as boards of directors or top management) also have the final say in the composition of the change team.

The third hypothesis, according to which resistance to change appears where changes are not communicated properly or in good time, was confirmed in the sense that employees at all companies had problems with poor communication. There were cases where employees had difficulties with the poor timing of communication or with the actual communication.

During the analysis, other factors such as lack of time or unwillingness to change were also noted as contributing to resistance to change. At the same time, no new claims could be formulated from these observations because the phenomena had occurred in relatively small numbers. This conclusion results in the fact that the claims were not considered appropriate and relevant for the formation of a hypothesis. Taking the results which address our second and third hypothesis, we fully align our results to the meta-study of Errida and Lotfi (2021) on change management success, and Bagga's et al. (2023) transformational leadership approach, when taking into consideration, major strategic decisions which lead to fundamental changes in an organization. Moreover, we agree with Philips and Klein's (2023) recommendation for practitioners to provide employees with incentives to implement the change, underlining a considerable mismatch between practitioners' strategies and scholarly suggestions based theoretical models and frameworks. Thus, resistance to change and demotivation could be successfully overcome.

The fourth hypothesis, according to which poor integration and the resulting work planning causes demotivation among employees, was partially confirmed. In three companies, the reason for demotivation was that the integration measures and work planning were inappropriate from the employees' point of view. In the case study "Shortly before Christmas", the change agent had significant experience in change management, whereas the change agents from other case studies had almost none. For this reason, it is possible that in the case study "Shortly before Christmas" there was no complaint regarding integration

and work planning. The demotivation there was due to the new ways of working, such as the introduction of status information in the workplace. This reason for demotivation also occurs in other companies. From this observation, it could be concluded that employees at the beginning of a change process also misjudge innovative future-oriented measures.

The fifth hypothesis, according to which change managers who are selected internally complete change processes more efficiently, was only partially confirmed. Although it is important that change managers also have an internal view of the company's activities, actual experience with change management is essential. During a change process, you need to be familiar with many areas. The company processes, human relations, human behavior, organizational talent etc. are some examples of what a change manager should be aware of. In the case studies, all change managers were chosen internally and only in one case were the change processes described as successful. The hypothesis could be fully confirmed if the change manager is both internally selected and has relevant experience in change management. The relevance of experience is significantly enhanced here.

An attempt was made to discover new concepts and findings from the inductively formed main categories. At the same time, not all subcategories could be used to form hypotheses because some only appeared in a limited number in the case studies. From the main category "Success of the change processes", the sub-code "Conviction to change" was relevant because it was noticeable in all case studies. The aim of this main category was to find possible answers to the research question - What factors influence the success of the change project? Based on the observations, it could be argued that the persuasion measures prior to the implementation of the change processes can significantly shorten the period of uncertainty, but these measures are not necessarily related to how successful the change management will be.

## 6. Conclusions

People (i.e., students and/or employees) can only be motivated if their goals are known. However, people's goals are only secondary from the company's point of view. The manager's task is to harmonize the goals of the company and the individual. The manager must uncover new perspectives of the projects for the employees (cf. Giernalczyk & Lohmer, 2012). It must be clear to the employees why they have to solve the problem that has arisen and what benefits result from it. Thus, we recommend case studies as a very insightful method of practicing change management processes in a safe educational setting, which promotes openness, teamwork and problem solving.

The conclusion of this work reinforces the significance of its findings in the realm of change management. The study unveils a consistent pattern where modernization efforts take precedence across all case studies. This shift in perspective is instrumental in shaping our understanding of the underlying motives for organizational change. Furthermore, the confirmation of the top-down leadership approach as the preferred variant in change management underscores the enduring influence of hierarchical structures. The final decision-making power held by top management in forming change teams highlights the critical role played by organizational leadership in steering transformative processes.

Furthermore, we demonstrate that acknowledgment of resistance to change is arising from poor communication, whereas all cases emphasize the pivotal role of effective communication in facilitating successful change initiatives. However, the limited occurrence of additional factors such as lack of time or unwillingness to change underscores the need for a nuanced approach to addressing resistance.

We show that poor integration and work planning are linked to employee demotivation. The nuanced observation that demotivation in certain cases is tied to the introduction of innovative measures suggests the importance of considering employees' perceptions during the early stages of change processes. The nuanced confirmation of the hypothesis regarding internally selected change managers adds a layer of complexity, emphasizing that success is not solely dependent on internal selection but significantly enhanced by relevant experience in change management.

The inductive exploration of the "Success of the change processes" category introduces the crucial concept of "Conviction to change." While persuasion measures are identified as reducing uncertainty, the nuanced relationship between these measures and overall success underscores the multifaceted nature of factors influencing the success of change initiatives.

We show, as a major outcome of this research, how and why case studies are appropriate and relevant for future research on educational endeavors in the field of change management. At the same time, the limitations and further development of this research are further addressed.

Although qualitative content analysis is very transparent due to the predetermined rules and steps, there are also some disadvantages to this method. With this method, the quality of the results depends largely on the materials analyzed (Flick, 2002). One could argue that our case studies may be cherry picket, through convenience sampling methodology, thus making generalization endeavors futile or at least questionable. In order to obtain more relevant and credible results, the number of corpora should be increased in any case. Furthermore, the method of qualitative content analysis provides an opportunity to analyze the observed regularities in groups. Accordingly, one could work in research groups in order to better maintain objectivity. We strongly recommend that future research on teaching change management should promote more qualitative analysis of case studies, focus groups but also interviews, to grasp the students' perceptions regarding the quality and effectiveness of the used class materials. Thus, future research should focus on measuring the outcomes of using case studies as class materials while teaching, training and mentoring in the area of change management.

In conclusion, this study provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of change dynamics, offering valuable insights that challenge and refine existing assumptions, both in teaching and practicing change management. By redefining the drivers of change, highlighting the enduring influence of top-down leadership, and emphasizing the multifactorial nature of success, this work contributes to the ongoing discourse in

organizational change management while promoting and analyzing case studies as ideal tools for knowledge transfer in higher education.

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*Anexe 1 Interactive segment matrix of the coding scheme*



*Figure 2 The illustration of the main category "Reasons for change management"*



*Figure 3 The illustration of the main category "Management approach"*

**Figure 4 Illustration of the main category "Resistance to change"**

| Codes | Kurz vor Weihnachten (1 Document, 4 Coded Segm… | Software is easy (1 Document, 2 Coded Segm… | Mobil macht Mobil (1 Document, 2 Coded Segm… | …echte Hand, was die linke tut (1 Document, 1 Coded segme… |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | In den einzelnen Rückmeldungen von Kaderpersonen wird darauf hingewiesen, dass die E-Mail-Information kurz vor Weihnachten erfolgt sei und der Zeitraum für die Bestellung „suboptimal" und „zu kurzfristig" sei. Einige Mitarbeitende seien dann schon in den Ferien und viele andere seien in den letzten Zügen und schlössen ihre Projekte oder Arbeiten in der Regel unter Hochdruck ab. Andere Rückmeldungen gehen weiter und argumentieren, dass eine umfassende und | Viele Manager können keine klaren Angaben zum neuen System machen, da sie sich selbst unsicher sind. Jenna Janovic, die ein Team von Softwareentwicklern anführt, beschwert sich offen: Das ist nicht meine Aufgabe, meinen Leuten etwas über diese SAP-Änderungen zu erzählen. Die Mitarbeiterbefragung ist auch nicht der richtige Zeitpunkt hierfür. Solche Informationen müssen früh genug weitergegeben werden. So, wie es jetzt aussieht, haben wir | Godel spricht aus, was viele in Fribourg denken: Durch die Informationsveranstaltungen fühlten wir uns zuerst einmal stark verunsichert, also gar nicht ermutigt. An der zweiten Informationsveranstaltung erfuhren wir zwar Konkreteres – dass nicht alle KDZ'ler von hier nach Zürich wechseln können. Aber wir erfuhren nicht, wie das nun weiter vonstattengehen soll. Zudem blieben alle Informationen zur Organisation recht vage. Umzug\Mobil macht | Wieso musste das so unvermittelt kommen? Ich bin doch Mitglied des Kaders. Umzug\Weiß die rechte Hand, was die linke tut: 2: 3231 - 2: 3306 (0) |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | | | |
|   wegen Zeitmangel | | | | |
|   wegen der entschiedene Veränderung zu kurz | | | | |
|   wegen nicht entsprechender Kommu… | | | | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |

**Figure 5 Illustration of the main category "Employee demotivation"**

| Codes | Kurz vor Weihnachten (1 Document, 0 Coded Segm… | Software is easy (1 Document, 2 Coded Segm… | Mobil macht Mobil (1 Document, 1 Coded segm… | …echte Hand, was die linke tut (1 Document, 3 Coded Segm… |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | | Es ist wahr, Kurt gibt sein Bestes. Aber ich frage mich, ob der Erfolg von all dem hier im Endeffekt wirklich von ihm oder uns abhängt. Dass wir uns reinhängen, das ist nicht genug. Ein Beispiel: Unsere harte Arbeit bedeutet doch nichts, wenn sie nicht kommuniziert wird, wenn sie nicht zu den Leuten geht, die da nicht so in der Technologie drinstecken wie wir. Die ganze Energie im Projekt liegt eigentlich nur hier in unserem Team. Programm\Software is easy: 4: 1870 - 4: 2311 (0)  Yun Baian, der Leiter der | refektiert Teamleiter Georges Godel die erste Zeit in der neuen Abteilung „Operations": Gleich zu Beginn hat es Streitigkeiten zwischen den Fribourger und Zürcher Teamleitern gegeben. Unsere Arbeitsabläufe haben einfach mehr Sinn gemacht: einfach, verständlich, effizient. Aber es wurde gar nicht diskutiert. Es war immer klar: Wir mussten uns den Zürchern anpassen. Es wurde immer ins Feld geführt: „Hannes Dubacher will es so." Die Teamleiter kannten ihn von früher. Überprüfen | Milo Blumer ist über diese Entwicklung nicht nur glücklich: Was will man machen, wenn so viele nicht umziehen wollen! Jetzt gibt's halt frischen Wind in die Gruppe. Allerdings ist es schon so: Es ziehen eben nicht immer die Besten mit um. Ich denke da insbesondere an Jonas Schneider. Da wäre ich froh gewesen, wenn er nicht mitgekommen wäre. Aber das HR hat sich ja um jeden Einzelnen bemüht, ohne es mit uns zu besprechen. Zudem frage ich mich, ob mit der zusätzlichen Aufage, sich zuerst in Annesole |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | | | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
|   wegen des Fortschritt des Changes | | | | |
|   wegen neuer Arbeitsweise | | | | |
|   schlechte Integration und Arbeitsplan… | | | | |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |

| Codes | Kurz vor Weihnachten (1 Document, 1 Coded segme… | Software is easy (1 Document, 1 Coded segme… | Mobil macht Mobil (1 Document, 1 Coded segme… | …echte Hand, was die linke tut (1 Document, 1 Coded segme… |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | Es wird ein Projektleiter für die Einführung von BC gesucht und mit Pascal Gisin gefunden. Er beginnt seine Tätigkeit als Teamleiter in der IT-Abteilung des Kantons und im August 2014 als Projektleiter des BC-Projektes. Programm\Kurz vor Weihnachten: 2: 541 - 2: 763 (0) | Ein neues Projekt wird für die Vorbereitung und Implementierung des SAP-Systems aufgesetzt, unter der Leitung eines neuen „Implementationsteams" mit Klaus Ineichen als Teamleiter. Ineichen ist recht neu bei Gemma, da er erst 15 Monate zuvor als Softwareentwickler zum Unternehmen gekommen ist. Programm\Software is easy: 3: 970 - 3: 1270 (0) | Zeitgleich wird kommuniziert, dass Anita Weber, eine gewiefte Stabsmitarbeiterin aus der Zentrale in Zürich, das Umzugs- und Integrationsprojekt operativ leiten werde. Sie und Peter Bieri, der Projektassistent und langjährige Arbeitskollege von Anita Weber, bilden die Projektleitung. Umzug\Mobil macht Mobil: 4: 1024 - 4: 1316 (0) | Tanja Kovcic, eine langjährige Mitarbeiterin am Standort Neuwil im Bereich Logistik, konnte kurzfristig für die Koordination des Umzugs der Abteilung Diagnostik von Annesole nach Neuwil gewonnen werden Umzug\Weiß die rechte Hand, was die linke tut: 3: 991 - 3: 1196 (0) |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | | | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
|   Auswertung | | | | |
|   Einstellung zum Change | | | | |
|   intern ausgewählte | | | | |
|   Erfahrung | | | | |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |

*Figure 6 The illustration of the main category "Change Manager"*

| Codes | Kurz vor Weihnachten (1 Document, 5 Coded Segm... | Software is easy (1 Document, 1 Coded segme... | Mobil macht Mobil (1 Document, 2 Coded Segm... | ...echte Hand, was die linke tut (1 Document, 3 Coded Segm... |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | 1. Zu Business Communication Business Communication ist eine integrierte Kommunikationslösung mit einem grossen Nutzungsspektrum. Das System bietet nicht nur Telefonie, sondern auch Funktionalitäten wie Telefonkonferenzen, Instant Messaging/Chatten oder auch das „Teilen eines Bildschirms", um zum Beispiel ein Dokument gemeinsam zu bearbeiten. Business Communication unterstützt zudem orts-unabhängige Anrufe und | Kurz vor Weihnachten 2015 stehen Rahmen, Ziele und Ressourcen für das Projekt fest und die Mitarbeiter von Gemma erhalten eine E-Mail mit Informationen zum SAP-System. Es soll eine Reihe von sogenannten Town-Hall-Meetings geben; geplant sind zwei solcher Vor-Ort-Events über das Jahr, mit dem ersten unternehmensweiten Treffen am 31. Januar 2016. Greg Allen will diese Events nutzen, um persönlich den Fortschritt zu erläutern und den Sinn des Projekts, d. h. die | Um ausreichend viele Mitarbeitende des KDZ für die Aufgaben in Zürich zu gewinnen, arbeitet MOBIL für die Mitarbeitenden aus Fribourg ein – aus Sicht der Leitung – attraktives Angebot mit einer Gültigkeit von zwei Jahren aus. Mitarbeitende, welche von Fribourg nach Zürich pendelten, bekämen die Hälfte des Arbeitsweges als Arbeitszeit angerechnet und könnten einen Tag pro Woche von zu Hause aus arbeiten. Die Reisezeit im Zug beträgt je Strecke 1,5 h. Mitarbeitende, | Wir wollen natürlich dafür sorgen, dass so viele Mitarbeitende wie möglich nach Neuwil umsiedeln. Und so kümmere ich mich sozusagen um den menschlichen Umzug. Zum Glück ist das nicht der erste Standortwechsel bei der Eger Pharma AG. Ich kann also auf bewährte Verfahren zurückgreifen, und muss nicht alles neu erfnden. Umzug\Weiß die rechte Hand, was die linke tut: 5: 48 - 5: 371 (0)

Dazu gehört auch die Erkundungsfahrt nach Neuwil, zu der Désirée |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | | | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | | | | |
| Arbeitskultur | | | | |
| Veränderungsteam | | | | |
| Überzeugung zum Wechsel | | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |

*Figure 7 Illustration of the main category "Success of the change processes"*

| Codes | Kurz vor Weihnachten (1 Document, 4 Coded Se... | Software is easy (1 Document, 1 Coded se... | Mobil macht Mobil (1 Document, 0 Coded Se... | ...te Hand, was die linke tut (1 Document, 1 Coded se... |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | Am 20. November 2015 erfolgt eine kurze Intranet-News, die allerdings nur 35 % der Belegschaft liest – das kann man durch eine Auswertung der Klickraten genau ermitteln. Doch auch schon vorher und nachher bekommt ein Grossteil der Mitarbeitenden etwas davon mit. Allerdings kommen die Informationen dann häufg nicht wirklich präzise bei ihnen an, Programm\Kurz vor Weihnachten: 4: 1160 - 4: 1513 (0) | Eine Intranetseite wird im November 2016 eingerichtet, auf der die Mitarbeiter sich wichtige Aspekte des neuen Systems aneignen können. Kurt Ineichen sieht Vorteile in dieser Entscheidung: Die gesamte Projektorganisation, mit unserem Team und den Modul-Ownern und den Champions, wir sind alle präsent dort. Falls jemand also Probleme hat, kann er hierher kom-men und direkt den richtigen Ansprechpartner | | Tanja Kovcic hat für das gegenseitige Kennenlernen eine Intranetseite vorbereitet und nun freigeschaltet, sodass sich die Forschungsteams schon vor dem Umzug wechselseitig ihre Arbeit vorstellen können. Umzug\Weiß die rechte Hand, was die linke tut: 6: 934 - 6: 1139 (0) |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | | | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |
| Informatonsveranstaltungen | | | | |
| Intranet | | | | |

*Figure 8 The illustration of the main category " Tools/Auxiliary means"*

**Anexe 2** *Code Matrix Browser*

| Code System | Kurz vor Weihnachten | Software is easy | Mobil macht Mobil | Weiß die rechte Hand, was die linke tut |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gründe für Change-Management | · | ● | · | · |
| wegen Modernisierung | · | ● | · | · |
| wegen Finanzschwierigkeiten | | | · | |
| Führungsansatz | | | | |
| Top-Down | · | ● | ● | · |
| Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse | · | ● | · | |
| Arbeitskultur | · | | · | |
| Veränderungsteam | · | | · | ● |
| Überzeugung zum Wechsel | ● | · | · | ● |
| Change-Gegenwehr | | · | · | |
| wegen Zeitmangel | | · | · | |
| wegen der entschiedene Veränderur | ● | | · | ● |
| wegen nicht entsprechender Komm | ● | · | · | |
| Demotivation der Mitarbeiter | | | | |
| wegen des Fortschritt des Changes | | · | · | |
| wegen neuer Arbeitweise | ● | | ● | |
| schlechte Integration und Arbeitspla | | · | | ● |
| Change-Manager | | | | |
| Auswertung | | · | · | ● |
| Einstellung zum Change | · | · | · | · |
| intern vs extern | · | · | · | |
| Erfahrung | · | | | |
| Hilfsmittel | | | | |
| Zusätzliche Unterstützung der Mitar | · | | | |
| Informatonsveranstaltungen | ● | · | · | |
| Intranet | ● | · | | · |

*Figure 9 Code Matrix Browser with the frequencees of the coded segments*

| | Cluster 1 (N=1) | Cluster 2 (N=3) |
|---|---|---|
| Code: Gründe für Change-Management, Num | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: wegen Modernisierung , Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: wegen Finanzschwierigkeiten, Number | 0 (0.0) | 1 (33.3) |
| Code: Führungsansatz, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: Top-Down, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Erfolg der Veränderungsprozesse, Num | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Arbeitskultur, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 1 (33.3) |
| Code: Veränderungsteam, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Überzeugung zum Wechsel, Number ( | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Change-Gegenwehr, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: wegen Zeitmangel, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 2 (66.7) |
| Code: wegen der entschiedene Veränderung | 1 (100.0) | 2 (66.7) |
| Code: wegen nicht entsprechender Kommur | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Demotivation der Mitarbeiter, Number | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: wegen des Fortschritt des Changes, N | 0 (0.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: wegen neuer Arbeitweise, Number (% | 1 (100.0) | 2 (66.7) |
| Code: schlechte Integration und Arbeitsplant | 0 (0.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Change-Manager, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: Auswertung, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Einstellung zum Change, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: intern vs extern, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 3 (100.0) |
| Code: Erfahrung, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: Hilfsmittel, Number (%) | 0 (0.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: Zusätzliche Unterstützung der Mitarbe | 1 (100.0) | 0 (0.0) |
| Code: Informatonsveranstaltungen, Number | 1 (100.0) | 2 (66.7) |
| Code: Intranet, Number (%) | 1 (100.0) | 2 (66.7) |
| N = Documents | 1 (25.0%) | 3 (75.0%) |

*Figure 10 Visualization of the typology table*

# A NEW THREAT TO UKRAINE: THE RISE OF EXTREMIST PARTIES IN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

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**Abstract:** *This article closely examines four far-right parties from Western and Eastern European Union Member States, exploring the potential threats they may pose to Ukraine and identifying any similarities or differences in their messages. The study investigates how these parties use specific issues to win over voters and how they adapt their strategies to suit local customs and attitudes. It also highlights the potential risks these parties pose to democratic governance, especially when they obstruct legislative proceedings. The article further delves into the dynamics of these parties' rise to power, particularly in the context of a political landscape dominated by traditional parties and it scrutinizes the influence of public sentiment on the success of these parties and how they capitalize on public discontent.*

**Keywords: far-right parties, Ukraine, European Union, discourse, elections.**

### 1. Introduction

Extremist or far-right parties have attracted the attention of researchers over the past two decades due to their swift ascent followed by abrupt downturns and their ability to attract large numbers of voters in a short time. The cyclical nature of their emergence in times of crisis and the damage they can do to a democratic state are of particular interest in the run-up to crucial elections.

These parties, frequently labeled as populist or extremist, capitalize on public unrest and apprehension. They flourish by proposing oversimplified answers to intricate issues and exploiting societal rifts. However, their polarizing language and strategies only exacerbate societal conflicts and undermine the foundations of democratic institutions. The extremist leaders blame the mainstream parties for every negative thing that has happened in the past or

present, portraying their leaders as lazy, thieves or traitors to the people (Schedler, 1996, 291). By doing so, they manage to diminish citizens' trust in the traditional political class and then manage to win over voters more easily. This phenomenon could explain the surge of the extremist parties, especially in times of crisis, when they have many more issues to address.

Currently, the ongoing global crises started in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, then the crisis generated by the Russian Federation invasion in Ukraine and the refugee crisis have managed to provide multiple propaganda topics for extremist parties, topics that could be used in order to gain more power in the context of 2024 elections. In the actual context of the Ukraine war, the rise of these parties raises new dilemmas. As the extremist parties gain power, their discourse and strategies, which are focused on winning voters, may cause people to question Ukraine's future and the support of the Western states. This situation demands attention, especially in the context of this year's European parliamentary elections in the Member States of the European Union.

To this end, this paper aims to delve into the complexities of this issue, exploring the threats these parties may pose to Ukraine's stability and security amidst an ongoing conflict. We will scrutinize the potential future implications of the burgeoning extremist parties in Europe, examining their consensus (or lack thereof) on the situation in Ukraine. To navigate this multifaceted issue, we will employ a populist theoretical framework. This approach will enable us to dissect the rapid ascension of far-right parties, their appeal to specific demographics, and the potential influence they wield on both national and international politics.

In addition to applying the populist theoretical framework we will analyze the evolution of two far-right parties each from two Western and two Eastern European Union Member States and evaluate the potential threats they present to the ongoing backing of the Ukrainian state as it strives for liberation from the Russian Federation. Furthermore, we seek to identify any similarities or differences in the rhetoric of these far-right parties across Eastern and Western Europe. We aim to understand if factors such as geographical proximity to Ukraine and Russia, a history of communism, or developmental challenges have any bearing on the discourse of these parties. In regard to this, we will compare the rhetoric and beliefs of the main extremist parties from two Eastern European countries, namely Romania and Poland and two Western European countries, specifically France and Netherlands, focusing on their ideology, their attitude towards

the European Union and their position towards the war in Ukraine. This comparison will reveal how these parties may impact their respective nations' policies toward Ukraine, the potential effects on Ukraine's geopolitical situation and in the same time how they could influence broader European response to the ongoing conflict.

The four states selected for this study offer a broad spectrum of European political environments, thereby giving a general perspective on the ascension of extremist parties in various settings. These countries have been witnessing substantial political transitions towards far-right parties in recent times so it is relevant to study how they affect the decisions of the leaders of the traditional ruling parties (Nourbakhsh, 2023; Golder, 2023). Furthermore, since February 2022, with the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, all four nations have contributed to supporting Ukraine in its fight for territorial integrity, stepping up their financial, diplomatic, political and military efforts. However, the rise to power of extremist parties may affect the support given to the Ukrainian state, which poses a real danger to Ukraine's survival.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Populism perceives society as being split into two uniform and conflicting factions, namely "the people" and "the elite" (Miscoiu and Pantea, 2023), considering that politics should mirror the collective desire of the peoples (Golder, 2016). To this end, populist parties tend to promote unconventional ways of doing politics that oppose to the conventional ones used by traditional political parties (Miscoiu and Pantea, 2023). By doing this, the populist parties tend to treat political problems by reducing them, sometimes even to absurdity, expecting total yes or no answers, and denying the variables that can arise in complex situations (Golder, 2016). This practice is very harmful when it comes to sensitive political issues because the answer cannot always be simplified to the extent desired by the promoters of populism.

In terms of representing the interests of the people as opposed to the decisions made by the "elite" political class, populism can be inclusionary or exclusionary (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Inclusionary populism advocates for the provision of tangible advantages and civic liberties to be expanded to groups that have been historically marginalized and overlooked, being common among the left-wing parties in Latin America (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). On the other hand, exclusionary populism search to exclude specific groups from being part of "the

people", thereby restricting their access to these identical privileges and rights. This type of populism is common in the far-right parties in Europe, which are using cultural, religious or ethnic criteria for exclusion of certain groups (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Whichever type of populism is used, both versions exclude certain categories and favor others, which runs counter to the equal representation of the people in "the struggle" with the political elites.

As we shall see, the far-right parties analyzed by us fall into the second category of populism, in which on the basis of certain criteria they promote the exclusion of certain social categories from society. This exclusionary approach often results in these groups being marginalized and denied the same benefits and rights that are available to the rest of the population. This form of populism can have significant implications for social cohesion and equality. Furthermore, populist parties, by fostering a confrontational stance through their leadership, have the potential to shape public opinion and consequently sway the policies of established parties. These attitudes can extend their impact to global decisions, such as influencing the support of member states for Ukraine.

By analyzing the actions of the far-right parties in four European states through the populist framework we could gain a deeper understanding of their strategies, motivations, and impact on the political landscape. Also, by examining the attitude of these far-right parties towards the European Union and Ukraine we could gain a deeper comprehension of the threat they represent in the context of their rapid ascent at both the European and national levels.

### 3. Party profiles

In this chapter we will focus on the main extremist political parties from Romania, Poland, France and Netherlands by looking at elements such as self-description, political orientation, topics promoted, attitude towards the European Union and position in the conflict in Ukraine. These four case studies will help us determine if there are any differences between the main extremist parties from countries located in the Eastern and Western European Union.

#### Romania

The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) represents the main extreme right party in Romania. Founded in 2019, AUR calls itself a nationalist, conservative, unionist and patriotic party, supporting the traditional family, the free-market economy and the union of Romania with

the Republic of Moldova in order to achieve the Great Romania "within a strong, united and fair Europe" (Statute of the Political Party Alliance for the Union of Romanians, n.d.). Appealing to the nationalist side by promoting an exacerbated patriotism such as "Make Romania Great Again", AUR has managed to attract a considerable percentage of citizens since its formation. Positioning itself in contrast to the perceived corrupt political elite, advocating for its eradication, AUR steps into a realm not sufficiently explored by the other newly emerged parties (moderate in political discourse) and sets itself up as the saviors of Romanians dissatisfied with the direction in which their country is heading. At the same time, the party led by George Simion and Claudiu Tarziu also addresses the population disillusioned with the current political class, adapting recurrent conspiracy theories at a global level and transforming them into local conspiracies to explain the way the classical parties work but also the so-called failure of Romania's development (Coțofană, 2023).

The discourse promoted by the members of this party directed towards the traditional parties, and later, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, shaped around conspiracy theories, attracted the attention of political scientists who labelled this party as a fascist political movement (Bocancea, 2020) or as populist ultra-conservative (Stoica and Voina, 2023) who is supporting every anti-system movement among Romanian citizens.

Regarding the attitude towards the European Union, AUR is considered to be a Eurosceptic party, creating a negative image of the European Union and its policies which they describe as communist (Stoica and Voina, 2023) by showing themselves as promoters of the anti-communist/anti-EU movement. However, they are not advocating the dissolution of the European Union but only its reform, blaming the bureaucracy and comparing certain policies imposed by the European Union to when Romania was a communist country and the rules were imposed by Kremlin leaders (Griera and Leeson, 2023).

The party's attitude towards Ukraine is a rather negative one, with its leaders spreading fake news about the conflict in Ukraine, the Romanian state's support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees coming to Romania. In the first days of the war, AUR members were promoting Russia's official discourse, spreading fake news that there is no war in Ukraine (Chiruta, 2022) despite all the clear evidence of conflict. The anti-Ukrainian rhetoric of AUR members caught the attention of the public, who were largely pro-Ukraine. Journalists pointed out similarities

between the narratives of AUR members and those promoted by Russia, making the connection to Russia clearer to the public (Chiruta, 2022). AUR leaders continued to maintain their discourse, stating that the war "is not ours" (Dunai, 2023) calling on the politicians in power to stop all support for Ukraine and to rethink the partnership with the European Union and NATO (Dunai, 2023). This speech strengthened the party's already loyal electorate, which is prone to believing in conspiracy theories adapted locally by AUR leaders.

AUR manifested the anti-Ukrainian position also on the Ukrainian grain issue, setting themselves up as the saviors of Romanian farmers, but given their limited influence in decision-making, they failed to stop Romania's commitment to Ukraine.

However, what is dangerous for Romania, the European Union and Ukraine is the fact that in the last three years the number of AUR supporters has increased considerably due to citizens' dissatisfaction with the current political class as well as with the unnatural governing coalition formed by the National Liberal Party and the Social Democratic Party. While in the December 2020 parliamentary elections, AUR managed to win 9% of the electoral vote (Preda, 2021), the current polls are showing that Romania's main far-right party ranks third in voter preference with 19.5% at the parliamentary elections in 2024 (INSCOP Research, 2023) and with 18.4% at the European Parliament elections (INSCOP Research, 2024). The results of the electoral polls report a worrying reality for Romania as a far-right party has not managed to capitalize on the political scene in such a way in the last decade.


### Poland

The case of Poland is a delicate one given the Polish tradition of nationalist parties that share similar characteristics to those on the far right of the political spectrum. Over the years, the parties that have come to power in Poland have shared a rhetoric of protecting traditional values similar to that of far-right parties (Khmilevska, 2021). This is also reflected in the stance of Poland's current ruling party, Law and Justice, which promotes traditional conservative positions on social and family issues (Fella, 2024), as evidenced by its record of restrictions on abortion, policies perceived as racist towards Middle Eastern refugees, and anti-LGBTQ campaigns.

However, in this article, we will focus on another far-right party who is raising concerns regarding the violence in their speech and who is considered to be a radical right-wing party, namely the Confederation of Freedom and Independence.

Established in 2018 as a political alliance for the 2019 European Parliament election, the Confederation of Freedom and Independence (often simply referred to as the Confederation) later grew into a full-fledged political party opposing to immigration, LGBTQ+ community and advocating for an intensely nationalistic perspective of the state, authoritarian governance and socially conservative values, coupled with a radical economic agenda (Rae, 2019). The founders of the Confederation, Janusz Korwin-Mikke and Grzegorz Braun are well known as extremist, promoting antisemitic opinions and conspiracy theories that denies Holocaust even defend Hitler (Woroncow, 2023). The Confederation members were the most vocal opponents of the measures taken by the Polish Government during the COVID-19 Pandemic, being against vaccination and restrictive preventive measures (Woroncow, 2023).

Having a libertarian vision of the state, the young leaders of the party, Slawomir Mentzen and Krzysztof Bosak, promote a Eurosceptic discourse without, however, bringing into question a possible reform of the European Union. Statements such as "we don't want the Jews, gays, abortion, taxes and the European Union" are common in the speeches of both leaders mentioned before (Kostrzewa and Marczewski, 2023) highlighting the main issues they will "solve" once in power.

Regarding the attitude of the party towards Ukraine and Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Confederation of Freedom and Independence members have criticized the Polish government for providing "excessive" support for Ukraine calling the ruling party as "servants of the Ukrainian people" (Alan-Lee, 2023) because of the large number of Ukrainian refugees to whom the Polish government has offered financial support. In addition to criticizing the Polish government, several politicians in the Confederation are self-declared Putin supporters and even calls him "his excellency" (Woroncow, 2023), implying that the United States is to blame for the conflict in Ukraine by arming Ukraine and provoking the Russian Federation (Alan-Lee, 2023).

Raising an electorate that responds favorably to the opposition against the ruling party and to the discourse against Ukraine propagated by Confederation members, the radical far-right party has succeeded to secure 7.2% of the vote in the 2023 parliamentary elections (Cienski,

2023) and has now managed to rise to 9% in voter preference (Politico, 2024), being ranked fifth in Poland's election rankings. While the Confederation of Freedom and Independence may currently lack sufficient public support to seize power or secure numerous seats in this year's European Parliament elections, the influence it wields over the incumbent government through its propagated discourse is notably significant. For instance, in an attempt by the current government to take over from the Confederation's propaganda themes, relations with Ukraine have been sidelined. This has even led to a cooling-off phase, culminating in the stopping of Ukrainian grain transit through Poland.

**France**

When it comes to France, the main far-right party is National Rally. The party, originally founded in 1972, has a history of strong, charismatic leadership. It first gained prominence under the stewardship of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who served as its leader from 1972 to 2011 (Ray, 2024). His tenure was marked by controversial policies and a hardline stance on immigration. In 2011, his daughter, Marine Le Pen, took over from her father and spearheaded the party until 2022, marking the most illustrious era in its history.

While the age of this party may place it in the category of traditional French parties, the National Rally identifies itself as still outside the French establishment (Ray, 2024). This is supported by a decades-long history marked by Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and misogyny. These controversial positions have kept the party on the fringes of mainstream politics, despite its longevity. However, when Marine Le Pen assumed leadership of the party in 2011, she strategically distanced herself from the extremist narratives traditionally associated with the National Rally, while continuing to campaign against immigration (especially from Islamic countries) and European Union (Ray, 2024).

The party's perspective on the European Union has evolved since the era of Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership. During his tenure, the National Rally (named the National Front until 2018) advocated for a "Frexit" and rejected any positive aspects of the European Union. While now, after the rule of Marine Le Pen, the National Rally seeks to restructure the European Union in a way that experts describe as being able to paralyze the entire work of the European institutions (Henley and Rankin, 2022). The ultra-nationalist stance of the party, coupled with its hate speech

against immigration and Islamism, could certainly undermine the foundations of the European Union, potentially even seeking to dismantle it.

As for the position of the National Rally to Ukraine it should be noted that this also differs according to party leadership. During the leadership tenures of both Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen, members of the National Rally were accused of maintaining close connections with the Kremlin and funding the party with Russian money. However, the party's current leader, Jordan Bardella, has sought to distance himself from this past by acknowledging what he calls a "collective naivety" about Vladimir Putin's intentions and ambitions (Laubacher. 2023). Moreover Bardella and the MEPs from the National Rally supported the European Union resolution that condemned Russian Federation aggression in Ukraine in March 2022. But this pro-Ukraine stance was extremely short-lived because when it came to voting on financial aid packages for Ukraine, in November 2022, the MEPs from the National Rally abstained from voting (Goury-Laffont, 2024). Besides the leader of the party, other members of National Rally publicly declared the anti-Ukrainian opinion asking the French President Macron to focus on making a peace conference calling him "irresponsible" for sending arms to Ukraine (Goury-Laffont, 2024).

The National Rally is leading in French election polls with 28%, while the next political party has just 24% (Politico, 2024). The prospect of the National Rally rising to power is a plausible scenario that could significantly impact the democratic apparatus in France, impede decision-making processes within the EU, and diminish support for Ukraine.

**Netherlands**

The Dutch political scene is dominated by the Party for Freedom (VVD), a far-right party with nationalist beliefs founded in 2006. The Party for Freedom, with its distinct characteristics of nativism, authoritarianism, populism, and Euroscepticism (de Jonge and van Kessel, 2023), has positioned itself as a significant force in the political landscape of Netherlands.

The Party for Freedom primarily focuses on issues such as immigration, a subject that has enabled it to maintain its voter base, Islam, the European Union, foreign policy and climate change (France 24, 2023), proposing drastic solutions in order to solve the country's problems. As reported by France 24 (2023), the far-right party's election program proposes a series of measures like implementing a stricter immigration policy, banning Islamic scarves in public

institutions, disallowing Islamic schools, Korans, and mosques, constructing new nuclear power stations and acting in the best interests of the Netherlands and its people.

As regards to the European Union, the main speech promoted by the party leader, Geert Wilders, revolved around the Netherlands' exit from the European Union in a referendum entitled "Nexit", blaming the European Union for the immigration policies (de Gruyter, 2023). However, after Brexit proved that leaving the European Union is not the best alternative, Wilders has changed the discourse choosing to stay in the European Union and, together with other parties sharing the same grievances, to change it from inside (de Gruyter, 2023).

Despite the fact that the Party for Freedom has condemned in 2022 the Russian Federation invasion in Ukraine, the attitude of the members of the party towards Ukraine is not a positive one. Wilders accused the former Duch government of giving military aid to Ukraine, stating that the Dutch household will pay the price for a war that is not theirs (Chiu, 2023). Recently, the leader of the party, announced that it will oppose further support to Ukraine with weapons and military equipment (Reuters, 2024). Wilders's statement comes at a time when the Netherlands has been one of the primary suppliers of military equipment to Ukraine.

The stance taken by the Party for Freedom's leader is increasingly concerning because the party won parliamentary elections in the Netherlands held in November 2023, winning 24% of the votes. As far as the European elections to be held this year in the Netherlands are concerned, the outlook is not promising. The Party for Freedom ranking first in the electorate's preferences with 33% (Politico, 2024), it will certainly achieve a good result in the European Parliament elections in 2024 and manage to win more seats in the European Parliament.

### 4. Comparative Analysis

From the above presented analysis, it's evident that all four parties share key traits such as nationalism, Euroscepticism and a stance against immigration, elements that align with the typical characteristics of far-right parties (Golder, 2016) and also integrate into the exclusionary branch of populism.  However, we note that the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Confederation for Freedom and Independence are relatively new parties, formed in the last 8 years, unlike the National Rally or the Party for Freedom, which have been part of the political scene in France and the Netherlands for much longer.

While the far-right parties in France and the Netherlands have gradually developed their narratives and accumulated supporters over time by addressing various significant societal issues, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has experienced a rapid ascent, successfully garnering a substantial supporter base in a remarkably short period taking advantage of the existing separation between the political and social classes and maximizing their electoral gains by setting themselves up as the true representatives of the citizens. In the case of Poland, we can see that the Confederation for Freedom and Independence did not achieve such a rapid rise, which can be explained by the existence of several parties that identify with the characteristics of the extreme right. An example in this case would be the Law and Justice party, which in one form or another has been at the center of Warsaw politics for the last 20 years. Yet the fact that all these parties have managed to rise in the polls in recent years shows a general dissatisfaction of citizens with the traditional political parties and their policies. Still, this dissatisfaction is reflected to a greater extent in Western European countries than in Eastern Europe. The Party for Freedom has emerged victorious in the internal elections and the National Rally is currently leading in the election polls while in Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians is only third in the election rankings after the two traditional parties and the Confederation for Freedom and Independence is only fifth.

Although Euroscepticism is a common theme for all four parties, their proposed solutions differ. The National Rally and the Party for Freedom initially proposed the exit of states from the European Union and its dissolution, but after Brexit they moderated their discourse to propose EU reform. In the case of Romania, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has consistently pushed for reforming European institutions, acknowledging citizens support for EU membership. In contrast, the Confederation for Freedom and Independence maintains its Eurosceptic discourse by calling for Poland's exit from the European Union and promoting a negative image of the European institutions. This divergence from other far-right parties underscores not only the radicalism of the Confederation's members but also the dissatisfaction of a significant percentage of Polish citizens towards the European Union.

Concerning the attitude towards Ukraine, we can see similarities in opposition to support with money, weapons, or military equipment. Both the Alliance for the Union of Romanians and the Party for Freedom in Netherlands adopted a speech focused on the costs citizens will bear

for the war in Ukraine, creating an image of distancing from Ukraine through phrases such as "the war is not ours" (Dunai, 2023) or "the household will pay the price for a war that is not theirs" (Chiu, 2023). On the other side, the Confederation and the National Rally have expressed their strong disapproval of the measures taken by local politicians to support Ukraine, calling them "irresponsible" for sending arms to Ukraine (Goury-Laffont, 2024) or "servants of the Ukrainian people" (Alan-Lee, 2023).

### 5. Conclusions

Our analysis of the main right-wing parties in Romania, Poland, France and the Netherlands revealed a common base of issues addressed with the aim of winning voters. Whether we are talking about hostile attitudes towards the European Union and immigrants or exaggerated nationalism, all the parties mentioned are trying to take advantage of these themes to gain power. However, the way these parties operate is tailored not only to local customs but also to citizens' attitudes sowing a certain flexibility of the far-right parties.

As with traditional parties, the rise of a party in a political space where there are other parties sharing the same ideology is extremely difficult. We see this in the case of the Confederation, which is not enjoying as strong a rise as the other three parties mentioned. The rise of these parties and their accession to power in some countries may also lead to the gaining of a significant number of seats in the European Parliament. In this scenario, a possible alliance of far-right parties in the European Parliament could block the legislative process and initiate procedures to reform or restructure the European Union. However, we must also take into account the co-decision process at the level of the European Union which can prevent attempts to damage the European Union's ability to function. At the same time, we have to look at previous MEP mandates held by far-right parties, which, although they have raised certain difficulties in cases such as the vote on aid packages for Ukraine or the vote on sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation, have not had the power to block the legislative process or to initiate proposals that would harm the entire European Union.

The negative attitude towards Ukraine, it could have two possible explanations. The first explanation may be that these parties want to win over voters who do not support Ukraine or who are undecided on the issue by taking on the role of opponents of support measures for

Ukraine. For the second explanation, we have to take into account the alleged connections of some members of these parties with the Russian Federation. There is a possibility that the anti-Ukraine discourse is simply an alignment with Kremlin-coordinated propaganda. In this way, by opposing Ukraine, members of these parties can gain funding and voters.

Whatever the reasons behind the opposition to Ukraine we can see how dangerous they could be in the context of the war initiated by the Russian Federation. A clear demonstration of the potential risks that far-right parties pose to Ukraine can be seen in Poland. Here, the the winning party in the October 2023 elections, Law and Justice, sought to attract the Confederation for Justice and Liberty's voters by embracing some of their propagandistic narratives which subsequently led to a deterioration in relations with Ukraine.

Regarding the commonalities or disparities between the four parties we can point out that they promote the same issues that fit the typologies of far-right parties. Elements such as the state to which they belong, their proximity to Ukraine and the Russian Federation and their communist past are not criteria for differentiation. The main elements to be taken into account when differentiating between these parties are the political configuration in their countries and the attitude of citizens towards the issues that are the focus of extremist propaganda. If the political scene is dominated by traditional parties, as in France, the Netherlands or Romania, then extremist parties will have a chance to rise sharply in the polls on the back of public discontent. However, if the political scene is divided between several parties promoting a harsh, extremist discourse, as in the case of Poland, then newly established parties will find it hard to gain ground. On the other hand, the attitude of citizens towards certain issues is extremely important and also has the capacity to differentiate these parties. If in Romania a good part of the citizens supports the country's membership in the European Union, then the discourse of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians will also have a moderate discourse towards the European Union, a reformist discourse. However, if these parties identify a lack of interest among citizens in other topics or even a saturation, they will tend to promote those topics, as in the case of the Netherlands, where the Party for Freedom is vehemently opposed to supporting Ukraine.

Whatever the issues promoted, the fact that these far-right parties turn any mainstream issue into a fight against the mainstream parties, even blocking the legislative process in some

places, is a danger to democracies. Public support for such parties is even more worrying, and could set a dangerous trend for future generations of politicians.

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