



We-ID Lunch Talk, 2026, May 12th, Lower Saxony State Representation in Brussels

Based on fieldwork in towns, rural regions and cities across Germany, Croatia, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Scotland, the EU-funded We-ID project examines how migration, demographic change and institutional capacity shape trust, participation, integration and democratic resilience. Early findings show how EU frameworks on migration, cohesion, youth and democracy can better support local realities—especially in regions facing demographic pressure, service gaps and political polarisation. Experiences differ widely across regions, offering opportunities for mutual learning between long-standing and newer immigration contexts. The points below summarise key findings and policy considerations for discussion.

Key Findings

- **Migration is now structurally embedded—even in regions with histories of emigration—but integration remains shallow.** It plays a key role in local economies, especially in labour-short sectors (e.g. up to 7–7.5% of the workforce in parts of Croatia). Integration remains largely workplace-based, with limited social interaction and weak coordination.
- **Local actors—municipalities, NGOs and cultural organisations—sustain integration but face systemic coordination gaps.** Yet they operate within fragmented national frameworks, resulting in clear implementation gaps. Poor coordination, limited funding, unstable support structures and a lack of shared public spaces constrain sustainable outcomes.
- **Integration is driven by pragmatism, but trust depends on institutions.** Everyday integration is shaped by work, safety, and local networks, while democratic trust depends on perceptions of fairness and institutional responsiveness. Migration is therefore both a demographic necessity and a governance challenge, with local actors carrying significant responsibility without matching support.
- **Cohesion is not the primary lens of lived experience.** People experience migration less through “social cohesion” than through resilience, identity and belonging. Instead, everyday realities of both local and migrant communities are structured around resilience, identity, and belonging. While these dimensions shape daily life, cohesion is more often evaluated indirectly, through perceptions of fairness, institutional performance, and social order.



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Distinct “resilience logics” across groups (locals, Ukrainian refugees, migrants from the Middle East) point to the need for more differentiated policies.

- **Integration requires communicative places.** Many communities lack social infrastructure—such as community centres, libraries or pubs—that enable interaction across groups. Churches often no longer play this role, while social life increasingly shifts online and within closed networks. Newcomers rarely connect with local communities. Especially in rural areas and small towns, multifunctional spaces are needed where different groups can meet, access services and interact in everyday settings.

Policy actions:

- **Align migration with labour market and regional development policies.** Short-term approaches are no longer sufficient. As migration is now embedded in local economies, “temporary stay” assumptions undermine long-term integration. Stronger alignment between EU migration frameworks (e.g. Talent Partnerships, legal migration pathways) and Cohesion Policy instruments could ensure that labour migration supports long-term regional sustainability, especially in shrinking regions.
- **Move beyond labour market integration: employment alone does not create cohesion.** Investment in community spaces, local initiatives, and everyday encounter zones is essential to foster interaction and belonging. EU funding instruments such as ESF+, AMIF, and ERDF should more explicitly support local social infrastructure.
- **Close the gap between national frameworks and local implementation** by strengthening multi-level governance and local capacity. EU policies could help to close this gap by i) reinforcing the partnership principle in Cohesion Policy, ii) supporting city-to-city and regional exchange platforms, iii) linking EU policy design more directly to local implementation realities.
- **Shift from project-based support to sustainable integration systems.** Integration measures, especially in social and cultural fields, remain fragmented and dependent on short-term funding. More stable EU funding and institutionalised support structures are needed to ensure continuity and equal access.
- **Reframe integration through resilience, belonging, and governance quality.** Policies focusing narrowly on “social cohesion” miss how integration is experienced in practice. Resilience (security, services, stability) is a precondition. Belonging is the bridge to cohesion. Institutional fairness and service delivery are central to trust and democratic stability.



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IDENTITIES - MIGRATION - DEMOCRACY (WE-ID)

Demography and Democracy, 12.05, 12:00-13:30

This closed exchange provides a confidential space to reflect on early findings and to discuss how EU frameworks on migration, cohesion, youth, and democracy can better support local realities — particularly in regions facing demographic pressure, service gaps, and political polarisation.

Programme

12.00 | Registration & Lunch Reception

12:30 | Early Insights from We-ID Fieldwork in European Local Communities

13.00 | Roundtable Discussion

13.30 | Closing Remarks & Networking Reception

