

European Policy Brief

■ *The Role of Democratic Social movements in Trust & Distrust building*

Social movements and trust building

The erosion of trust in governance and established politics has become a major issue of political and academic concern in recent years, and experts are committed to identifying the main drivers and most effective remedies. In this debate, civic participation is regarded as a key element to tackle the ongoing crisis of trust in current societies. Yet, this approach is anything but simple as the crisis of trust goes along with citizens' political disenchantment, alienation, and retreat. In fact, in many countries, citizens tend to increasingly disaffect the traditional political arena and voter participation is low. At the same time, the various political arenas seem ill prepared to allow for proper civic participation. As also evidenced by recent EU reports on the rule of law, or on the implementation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, traditional channels of citizen participation have been marginalised and challenged in recent years. The deterioration of civic freedoms has increased with the pandemic crisis, with authorities imposing restrictions on the freedom of assembly and on participation. At the same time, the role of representative democracy has been weakened as Parliaments have seen their powers of initiative and control diminished. Institutions tend to revert to less challenging forms of dialogue, opposing direct participation of citizens, addressed as individuals, with collective forms of mobilisation such as traditional intermediary bodies or social movements, which are perceived as more political and contesting.

However, this is only one part of the story because we witness the emergence of new forms of collective participation all over Europe through social movements. These movements are particularly active at the local level and can mobilise many citizens on different societal issues because of their inclusive character and their participatory decision-making structure. At the same time, public authorities, even at the local level, are ill equipped to work with social movements. They are not open or used to consistently addressing proposals or demands from the public, while accountability, transparency, openness, and the ability to communicate are considered key features of institutions to ensure trust in governance.

Against this backdrop, the EU-funded project EnTrust dedicated part of its work programme to analysing the role of social movements in creating and reproducing trust and distrust. Through our work, we are covering an important research gap on the relationship between distrust in governance and collective mobilisation, and on the impact of social movements on trust building. We could gather qualitative comparative data on the capabilities of social movements to mobilise citizens distrustful of institutions around the achievement of a common goal and, eventually, to create change in policy making. We could also get an insight into how social movement members understand and envision rebuilding democracy, and the dynamics around trust building and public policy implementation.

To do so, focus group discussions were carried out with two different social movement members (“leaders” and “followers”) in each of the following countries: the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Greece, Poland and Serbia. The movements were selected because of their democratic character, namely being inclusive, non-discriminatory, and engaging citizens in horizontal decentralised decision-making. They also had to be active during the research. These movements covered an array of issues from environmental issues, solidarity with migrants, and women’s/LGBTIQ rights, to housing.

The EnTrust research and expert round table discussions between EnTrust researchers and experts from politics, civil society and academia demonstrated that the increasing engagement of citizens with social movements not only constitutes a relevant form of collective participation, but is also symptomatic of a trust gap between institutions and citizens.

Our evidence also shows that these new forms of mobilisation are not in opposition to more traditional forms: cooperation of social movements with NGOs is very common, grounded on shared values and perceived as beneficial. Moreover, mobilisation through democratic social movements aims at achieving positive change, and while members express distrust in institutions, they tend to consider general trust as being a pre-requisite for a functioning society.

Actions to rebuild citizens’ trust in institutions at all levels are urgent; therefore, we have identified an initial set of recommendations.

#1: Ensure the rule of law and strengthen democratic rights, including the right to protest

The full enjoyment of civic freedoms is at the heart of trust in governance. The European Union can play an important role in preserving democratic rights and the rule of law and, in particular, the right to protest and to participate, which have been particularly challenged in recent years. In its annual rule of law review report, the European Union analyses the existence of checks and balances to the rule of law which include civic space, and since 2022, it has addressed specific recommendations on this issue to several Member States. However, given the importance of civic space within trust in governance, we believe that the next reports should include a dedicated chapter on this issue, instead of a few paragraphs within the section on checks and balances. The chapter should be based on indicators assessing legal frameworks and policies, measuring the ability of institutions to interact with civil society and social movements, as well as allowing new movements and organisations to emerge. Compliance with country specific recommendations should also be monitored over time and made enforceable. In this way, the rule of law review cycle would also contribute to further citizens’ awareness and contribute to building deeper trust in the European Union.

#2: Defend local democracy

Local democracy is the place where government is closer to citizens and where decisions have a more tangible impact. It is also at the local level where social movements are born and are most active.

Nevertheless, this proximity and impact are currently jeopardised by a tendency towards centralisation, the fragmentation between different levels of power, and the inability of local authorities to adapt to new forms of participation and respond to citizens' needs. Local governments are also struggling with reduced capacities and resources.

In the current context of overlapping crises (for instance, the war in Ukraine; the ecological transition), investment in participatory democracy is particularly critical. Structural changes are vital to mitigate the impact on employment, social inclusion and migration. The EU should pressure member States to ensure and boost local democracy, by prioritising this issue in dialogue and in cooperation with local authorities, and civil society.

We recommend, therefore, that the European Union and Member States develop concrete actions to defend local democracy. Investment in democracy should start from the local level to the EU level, and vice versa. Only through such an approach can we build resilience and common perspectives within our societies.

The EU should not simply invest in developing infrastructure, or administrative and judicial capacity, as we have seen with the EU recovery package, but it should also be thoroughly involved in the development of democratic participation. This means empowering local governments to interact with civil society, organisations or social movements, giving them the appropriate tools, dedicating financial resources, and favouring partnerships with civil society. The EU could make better use of its technical support instrument, the programme that provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms, by more proactively supporting

participation and partnership with civil society, including through a dedicated flagship programme. It could also include stronger requirements for partnership within regulations for structural funds and ensure that this aspect is an essential part of the review of the Recovery Package. In this context, we would like to highlight the experiences of social movements of cooperation with civil society organisations and local governments, resulting in the adoption of concrete development plans.

We also suggest that Local Democracy should be the main theme of next year's edition of the European week of regions and cities, gathering local authorities EU institutions and civil society.

#3: Reinstating channels of dialogue and civic space

While representative democracy must be safeguarded as a key safeguard to the rule of law, it can only effectively contribute to trust building if Parliamentary assemblies or local councils are consistently able to address public concerns through a structured dialogue with citizens.

As the concluding statements from the Conference on the Future of Europe highlight, the EU should develop a 'full civic experience' for Europeans, ensure that their voice is heard, including in between elections, and that the participation is effective, and participation and prior involvement of citizens and civil society are an important basis for political decisions to be taken by elected representatives. In its press release to the rule of law report for 2022, the Commission underlines that "...in some Member States, there is still no formal framework to consult stakeholders, which is a

concern, and civil society organisations continue to face challenges such as funding issues, negative narratives and restrictions to their operating space”.

Institutions at all levels must also be more open to dissent and criticism if they want to ensure a real connection with the grassroots. They should be more trusting of these social movements and civil society at large.

To restore trust, EU and member States must create and maintain favourable conditions for civil society at all levels to flourish, including through the provision of adequate funding and access to funding sources. They should reinforce and sustain, in a complementary way, all the tools and mechanisms for the democratic participation of citizens.

In particular, the EU should reinforce its Democracy Action Plan by contributing to developing a continuum of democracy from the local to the EU level, and vice versa. The EU should support concrete actions, starting from the EU level, to develop a new participatory culture by designing a dedicated strategy for democratic participation, and redesigning the way it interacts with social movements, civil society and citizens at large.

This should include guidelines for participation, training for civil servants, and a variety of innovative and complementary tools that address dialogue with civil society social movements, and the development of other forms of participation more specific to citizens.

#4: Developing a culture of participation

Social movements bring an important contribution to trust in governance because of the way they are organised, their inclusive nature,

and their ability to decentralise decision making. Because of their constructive distrustful attitude, they have the potential to contribute to a renewal of structured civil society organisations and instigate change in institutional structures.

Decision-making processes would only gain from being more transparent at all stages, within all institutions and organisations. Distrust often stems from gaps in access to decision-making, and favours corruption. At the European Union level, the European Ombudsman has highlighted though enquiries and reports, key reforms in transparency in decision-making, such as ensuring access to the public to the preparatory works of the Council, improving timely public scrutiny of EU documents, and the reform of trialogues within the decision-making process among the three institutions.

Moreover, decision makers at all levels must invest in communication with citizens and civil society. The pandemic crisis has demonstrated how poor communication can lead to distrust. Our expert discussions have also highlighted problems where dialogue with social movements was problematic because of a lack of clarity regarding what was achievable in terms of resources or legal frameworks, or simply because of a proclivity of those in power, or technocrats, to take decisions alone. The EU could facilitate mutual learning and provide technical support in this area through training the decision makers.

Our findings on the internal workings of social movements have shown that expertise and science can be at the service of the public interest in a pandemic context, where we have seen increasing distrust among citizens towards science. However, they also highlight the need for academics to be confronted with

other parties as part of a democratic debate. We recommend research programmes at all levels to further promote and support cooperation between citizens and civil society with academic experts, and to promote research for the public benefit.

Research background: supportive evidence

Policy recommendations are based on comparative research findings and on an expert policy dialogue.

Research findings are the product of coordinated fieldwork and analysis in the seven countries of the EnTrust consortium. The work package was led and coordinated by Irena Fiket, from the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade, and her team, and has generated a rich data set comprising four focus groups per country with social movement members. In each participating country, two social movements were chosen for the analysis, based on the previously set criteria (we focused on democratic, currently active social movements, dealing with similar topics, like environmental degradation, human and socio-economic rights). The focus groups were held between March 2021 and May 2021; in each country, two focus groups were held with core members of the selected social movements, and two with the movements' followers. By distinguishing between "the core members" and "the followers", we wanted to capture an array of attitudes, coming both from those who were closely involved in all the movements' activities, to those who were intermittent supporters and close sympathisers.

The focus groups helped us collect qualitative comparative data about the capabilities of social movements to mobilise citizens' distrust in institutions, of making productive use of it, and eventually of transforming it into new practices of 'enlightened trust' building. Also, the collected data gave us the possibility to understand social movements' alternative visions of Europe – as a political and social space – and alternative ways of (re)building trust in its institutions. We gathered insights into the way these social movements interrelate with more established mainstream civil society organisations (CSOs) and political parties; we also explored their understanding of democracy, and their views about how democratic institutions could be improved on all levels of governance. Overall, the gathered data provided important insights into the relationship between trust/distrust dynamics and social movement participation and helped us design practical recommendations for trust-building at the stage of public policy implementation. As a follow-up to our research, an expert policy dialogue was organised, on 20 June 2022, that helped to further understand the mechanisms of trust and distrust, and identify possible solutions, or best practices, to disentangle these complex relations, and to reflect on how best to address them.

Key findings

Our research findings and the expert policy dialogue both highlighted the complexity of trust and distrust relations. Although there are some country-specific findings, our research suggests the presence of more general tendencies, problems and practices related to social movements and (dis)trust.

A) Before all, the majority of the movements are organised in decentralised structures, and they all value decentralisation and

horizontality, and prioritise deliberative practices, while at the same time acknowledging the issues of efficacy and feasibility of such structures. They perceive themselves as the protagonist of the new political practices, where equality and inclusiveness are important. Our findings indicate that decentralisation and non-hierarchical organisation of social movements are features that attract citizens the most, because they feel more empowered and willing to get socially engaged in organisations that nurture openness, inclusiveness and deliberation.

B) In most countries, the prevalent position of the social movements is that general trust is important for a functioning society, whereas “blind” or “naïve” trust are depicted as negative. Trust is the basis for any political action, but unconditional or blind trust in institutions or its representatives is deemed negative, as a certain dose of “healthy” distrust in institutions is important for critical thinking. General distrust in institutions is negative mainly because it leads to citizen apathy and reluctance to get involved in the social and political life of their societies.

C) Social movements express a high level of trust in expertise and science. Experts offer viable and feasible policy proposals that the movement can take further. Scientific knowledge is helping movements to gain credibility and legitimation in the public sphere. However, the source of expertise is not only in science, but also built through the practice of the movement members. While some movements rely directly on the (scientific) experts, others emphasise their own expertise as experts-activists who gained knowledge and skills through everyday engagement with affected communities and institutions. This means that movements are also a source of expertise that is precious for

addressing the needs of the citizens. Social movements underline that experts do not take part in the decision-making sufficiently, meaning that actual politics is not based on accurate data.

D) Cooperation of social movements with governmental institutions takes place mostly at the local level and is perceived to have unclear detrimental effects on the trust of citizens, while cooperation with non-governmental organisations is very common and can be based on shared values and is usually perceived as beneficial for the trust of citizens. Social movements believe that governmental institutions at the local, national and EU levels can, and should, do something to restore the trust of the citizens. The main ideas revolve around the need for local and national institutions to be more open to citizens, transparent in their decision-making processes, more accountable, and communicate more directly with citizens, social movements and other grassroots’ citizens initiatives.

E) Social movements share a demand for a more participatory and direct model of democracy. This is to be achieved by changing the legal framework to encourage participation and establishing the tools for more direct and uncomplicated citizen involvement. Social movements record the lack of willingness of institutions and representatives to engage with citizens directly, which is counterintuitive since both institutional and non-institutional forms are essential for good democratic governance. Democracy is reinvigorated through strong and active civil society and citizens’ engagement in social movements, participation in petitions, public consultations or referenda, standing in elections on behalf of political parties and taking part in protests and demonstrations.

F) Citizens also lack proper information and political education, in general. They may be severely restricted by social inequalities and also be prone to making decisions based on emotions and affects, which puts additional responsibility on institutions to design decision-making processes to ensure the maximisation of rational deliberation. Institutions should do more to reach out and involve citizens, according to the social movements. Institutions should engage in improving education for civic and political life in contemporary societies. They should also work harder to improve access to and the quality of information. The institutional system should be reformed to be more transparent and welcoming for citizens. Forms of direct participation are desired on the local level, bringing societies closer to participatory democracy.

Research parameters and project information

The EnTrust project is funded by the EU in the context of the Horizon2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 870572). The recommendations and findings presented in this policy brief are based on the [Integrated Report on the Role of Democratic Social movements](#), as well as on an [expert round table](#) between the research team and the following experts: Adrien Licha, European Association for Local Democracy; Alexandrina Najmowicz, European Civic Forum; Gordana Rammert, Council Member of the City of Bielefeld, and member of the European Committee of the Regions Young Elected Politicians Programme; Helmut Scholz, member of the European Parliament AFCD Committee; Anelia Stefanova, CEE Bankwatch Network.

The EnTrust consortium consists of eight partner teams conducting research and dissemination activities in seven countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland and Serbia) and at the EU-level. Its work-plan consists of seven work-packages devoted to the systematic analysis and reflection of different aspects of the topic:

1. The Theoretical and Normative Underpinnings of Trust and Distrust
2. Trust and Distrust at the Street-level of Public Policy
3. The Role of Democratic Social Movements in the Formation of Trust and Distrust
4. The Role of the Media in Trust and Distrust Building: Information or Polarisation?
5. Developmental-psychological Insight into Trust and Distrust
6. Appraising Citizens' Trust and Distrust in Governance: Forms, Determinants, Effects and Remedies
7. Civilising Trust and Distrust: Role Models and Recommendations

Further work-packages are committed to the dissemination, exploitation and communication of research, management and ethical issues.

Further information on the EnTrust project is available at www.entrust-project.eu.

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