



# Stakeholder Feedback: Taking Stock of the Bridge Building and Eastern European Social Policy Network Initiatives\*

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## Introduction

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This policy brief takes stock of the Bridge Building (BB) and Eastern European Social Policy Network (EESPN) initiatives by capturing stakeholder feedback from the focal regions, i.e. the Western Balkan region and the Eastern Partnership countries. Questionnaires and interviews reveal that the BB and EESPN initiatives respond to the needs of the stakeholders and are promising practices for collaborating, sharing good practices and capacity building.

## Aims of Bridge Building and EESPN

The evaluation team carried out a document review to develop an understanding of the BB initiative including the EESPN.

**Keywords: Bridge building, evaluation, stakeholders, Western Balkan, Eastern Partnership**

The overarching goal of BB is to support the improvement of European cohesion and cooperation in social policy for the Western Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) and the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine). The BB initiative is co-funded by the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. Memoranda of understanding were signed with several Ministries of Social Affairs in the regions to foster cooperation through National Liaison Officials.

The Bridging Function is based on [three main pillars](#):

- identifying key issues of social policies in Europe through comparative research and developing projects by involving partner institutions at the international, European, and national levels;

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- transferring know-how through workshops, seminars, and policy consultation; and
- building capacity involving different public and private stakeholders in policy and research at different governance levels (central, regional, and local).

The EESPN supports the BB activities by establishing a transnational platform for exchanging information, connecting policy advisors, public authorities, research and NGO communities in social policy and using social media to disseminate information. Training opportunities such as summer schools, tailored trainings and jour fixes contribute to the knowledge transfer and advancement of social policies and their evidence base in the regions.

## Methods and challenges

The evaluation team used a **three-stage approach** to capture the stakeholder feedback:

- a. **Desk review** of existing documents to examine the BB and EESPN activities and objectives. Documents include founding documents, EESPN newsletters, minutes, member contributions etc.
- b. The **online survey** targeted all EESPN members, National Liaison Officials, and European Centre's Board Members. The survey was implemented with an online tool (LimeSurvey). It was confidential, but not anonymous so it followed the EC General Data Protection Regulations by asking for consent. The survey was kept short (15 minutes) and was composed of closed-ended questions and open-ended questions at the end. It was distributed through the EESPN newsletter and through member lists. The survey was open for six weeks and received 51 responses with 22 full responses. We were able to use 26 responses, which amounts to a response rate of about 30%. Due to the sample size, we did not disaggregate the responses by region and gender. Advantages of the survey were that it reached a wider audience and that it allowed persons to comfortably write their answers instead of responding to questions in an interview.
- c. The **semi-structured interviews** were based on the pool of survey respondents. The eight key informants were purposefully selected to ensure a diverse and balanced sample. Three informants were from the Western Balkan region, two informants from the Eastern Partnership Region. Furthermore, one European Centre Board Member, one international consultant, and one person from the commissioning institution (Austrian



Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection) were selected. The evaluation team analysed the responses with a qualitative data analysis software and coded them by themes.

**Challenges** were multi-fold including:

- **COVID-19 pandemic.** Due to the COVID-19 crisis the evaluation team carried out all data collection online. The survey and interviews were both adapted to the virtual environment. Some connectivity issues arose during the interviews.
- **Language.** English was used in interviews and survey. Some stakeholders were less comfortable to comment in English than in their local language.
- **Data availability and data collection.** The evaluation team relied on existing documents and low threshold data collection tools. Only a few qualitative interviews of key informants were feasible due to resource constraints.
- **Measuring outcomes.** The BB initiative deals with multiple outcomes, influencing factors, and target groups. Outcomes cannot be easily measured due to influencing factors. Surveys and interviews will capture stakeholders' perspectives and perceptions, which is only an indirect measure of outcomes, but can still provide useful evidence on the value of BB activities.
- **Internal evaluation.** The evaluation is an internal evaluation carried out by staff members at least partially engaged in the BB activities. Therefore, certain biases need to be considered.

## Findings

**“We are open to all the opportunities to get new knowledge, to learn best practices and to develop a legislation.”**  
**(Public official, Eastern Partnership Country)**

The general attitude towards and perception of the BB initiative and EESPN are positive among the respondents, and the preservation and expansion of the initiative are desired. Requests for improvement are expressed in relation to the involvement of NGOs, international organisations and other stakeholders such as private service providers, a wider range of trainings offered and stronger involvement of EESPN members.

The evaluation findings are organised in terms of relevance, coherence, and added value.

**Relevance:****Does the BB initiative meet the stakeholder, institutional, and regional needs?**

**“I read your newsletters, every letter, it’s very interesting, very useful. Sometimes we borrow some ideas or some small things [...]”**  
**(Public official, Eastern Partnership Country)**

Respondents indicated that the BB initiative is very important as they all consider it essential to build bridges between different countries and cultures in order to improve social policies. It was expressed that the activities should be continued and deepened, which shows that there is a need for further collaboration and transfer of know-how in the region.

Respondents shared the same understanding of the goals of the BB initiative and stressed their importance. Learning from best practices, exchanging with other countries from the region, and sharing research findings with other research entities and policy makers help them to improve their welfare systems. Respondents agreed that the BB initiative addresses the needs of the region and that all members are working towards the same goal.

**“The InCARE project is an inspiration from the Bridge Building activities. Some of the topics are taken on board and we are working on the development of such services”**  
**(Public official, Western Balkan)**

Respondents described EESPN products as very useful. Some pointed out that they read the EESPN newsletter very carefully to learn about new calls and initiatives. They also found information on new research findings that were shared on EESPN, and they expressed that they benefit from ideas and solutions implemented by other countries.

Several respondents have been involved with a joint research project with the European Centre. One joint research project contributed to a local government now considering additional aspects of social policy, namely the activation of vulnerable groups and the development of corresponding services. In another project (InCARE) a participatory approach is used to tailor care services to older persons in local communities in North Macedonia, Austria, and Spain. The project fosters close collaboration between those countries.

**Coherence:****How is the BB initiative placing itself in the region and aligns itself with other initiatives?**

The BB initiative cooperates with ministries, local research institutions, NGOs and consultants in the course of projects. Institutional cooperation or coordination with similar initiatives has been limited so far.

In-depth interviews revealed that many members would encourage the BB initiative to involve more local and international NGOs in its activities. In addition, it might be useful to reach out to private service providers, as the private sector is an important actor in the field of social policy in some countries and complements public institutions.



**“ [...] bringing in more voices from the single countries, because [...] when you have the public representative that’s not really reflecting the different stakes [...]”**  
**(Public official, Western Balkan)**

Respondents named complementary initiatives in the region including some funded by the regional development programmes from the [Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance](#) (IPA) in the Western Balkan region, the [EU Strategy for the Danube Region](#) including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Moldova, and the Ukraine, as well as the [Research Network on Social Cohesion](#) in South-Eastern Europe by the London School of Economics. Some of these initiatives are limited in time and may be subjected to changing priorities. Respondents regard the BB and EESPN initiatives as more long-term and therefore as an advantage over other initiatives.

Responses from the interviewees indicated that there is room for improvement in terms of internal coherence within the EESPN and BB initiatives. An important aspect regarding coherence that became clear during the interviews is that the terminology of BB and EESPN and the difference between these two initiatives are not communicated clearly enough. It was also not clear to all interviewees what role they play in these two initiatives and what is expected of them. A better overview and structured information about the initiatives would help members to participate more actively and contribute new ideas. One respondent also expressed the wish to strengthen the role of National Liaison Officials (NLOs) in the BB initiative. As a result of this longer timeframe, long-term relationships in and between the countries and with the European Centre can be fostered.

Some respondents indicated that not all activities need to relate to the entire region. In some cases, it would also be helpful to carry out region- or country-specific activities in specific thematic fields.

It needs to be kept in mind that, in international cooperation, it can sometimes be very small issues that facilitate or hinder interaction. For instance, as for dates both the UK and the US format was used, a respondent missed an online event.

#### **Added value:**

**What is the most valuable aspect of the Bridge Building activities for the stakeholders?**

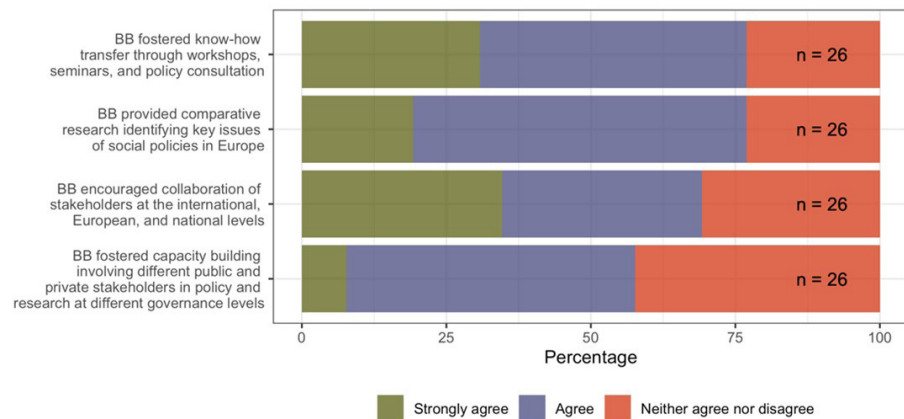
**Most valuable aspect of the initiative:**  
**“Networking, exchange of knowledge and experience”**  
**(Public official, Western Balkan)**

The BB initiative set 4 goals:

- a. Foster know-how transfer
- b. Provide comparative research
- c. Encourage collaboration of stakeholders
- d. Foster capacity building

The level of agreement on the achievement of the BB initiative’s goals ranges between 55% and 75%. Respondents identified knowledge transfer and networking as the most valuable aspects of the initiative. Selected results of the online survey are summarised in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Selected online survey responses**



**“Countries which made some progress in certain policy fields can share their experiences with others who still need to address these challenges.”**  
(Public official, Eastern Partnership Country)

Three quarters of the respondents agree that BB fosters **know-how transfer**. Knowledge is shared via the EESPN newsletter and the EESPN homepage. Both are rated good to very good by almost all respondents. One criticism is that it is difficult to find information about future plans and activities online, which makes it difficult for members to contribute at an early stage. Additionally, some information on the homepage is outdated.

More than 75% of respondents state that BB provides **comparative research** identifying key issues of social policy in Europe. Respondents would welcome more joint projects. An open question remains their financing. Respondents from the research sector hope that the European Centre could fund such projects in the future.

**“I believe that the EESPN homepage is a very good platform through which we can share our work.”**  
(Researcher, Western Balkan)

Most respondents strongly agree with the BB objective to promote international **cooperation**. However, the overall agreement is slightly lower than for the above-mentioned objectives. Respondents describe the BB initiative and EESPN as an important platform for mutual learning, exchange, and support. Respondents hope that this aspect will be further strengthened in the future through a wider range of events and joint initiatives.

Of all the objectives, **capacity building** has the lowest approval ratings. Only just above half of all respondents agree with the statement that BB achieves this goal. Respondents would like to see more BB workshops and trainings in the



future. While some respondents would like to hold these online to allow low-threshold and flexible participation and to save on travel costs, others prefer country visits and face-to-face meetings to expand and renew networks and have a lively exchange.

**“Engage interesting speakers and organize more trainings”  
(NGO official, Eastern Partnership Country)**

The largest problem related to trainings and other events is their funding. For many members the already subsidised fees are still too high, and they cannot afford to attend. For this reason, the need for scholarships and further reduced fees was expressed. Additionally, bank transfer costs need to be taken into account as they further significantly increase participation cost.

## Summary of stakeholder recommendations

**“The Bridge Building activities have fostered know-how transfer through online communication based on many studies and analysis for social policies in different countries of the region.”  
(Public official, Western Balkan)**

From the received feedback, it can be concluded that members are satisfied with the BB and EESPN initiatives and that these should be continued and intensified. The BB and EESPN initiatives of the European Centre respond to the needs of its stakeholders and are regarded as an important platform for mutual learning and collaboration between public officials and researchers in the region.

The most valuable aspects of BB are know-how transfer and networking, which is why the focus of BB should continue on these two aspects. The EESPN newsletter is an appropriate tool to communicate relevant calls, events, activities and research results among members. The EESPN homepage is also appreciated, but the information provided there could still gain in timeliness.

The evaluation team identified three clusters of recommendations expressed by many stakeholders of the network. Please note that these recommendations reflect the respondents’ perspectives and need to be understood as such.

### 1. Increase trainings, both offline and online

Respondents found that more online and offline trainings should be offered in order to increase capacity building and cooperation between network members. This would address the third objective of the BB initiative “capacity building”, where many members feel that this has not been sufficiently achieved by the BB activities so far. A new activity of the BB initiative that follows on from this and that has attracted the interest of the members is the peer reviews that take place in 2021-2023.





## 2. Involve more NGOs and other private-sector stakeholders

Respondents recommended that more actors from national and international NGOs and representatives from private-sector service providers should be invited to the network. The initiative would benefit from the complementary perspectives of multi-sector key actors in the field of social policy, and holistic solutions to problems could be found more easily.

## 3. Continue to foster active involvement among members

Respondents stated positively that they had been able to take on an active role in the network and BB initiative. They expressed a desire to be even more involved in the planning of future activities. Different perspectives, needs and problems could be addressed from the beginning. This could also intensify the networking activities among members. This could also strengthen the partnership among representatives from different countries, particularly by collaborating on joint social policy projects. One thematic focus of such a joint project could be on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on social and health policies and services. The [BBinar initiative](#) offers exchange at a practical level about common challenges and progress on different social policy areas.

## Summary and outlook

From the received feedback, it can be concluded that members are satisfied with the BB and EESPN initiatives and that these should be continued and intensified. The BB and EESPN initiatives of the European Centre respond to the needs of its stakeholders and are regarded as an important platform for mutual learning and collaboration between public officials and researchers in the region.

The most valuable aspects of BB are knowledge transfer and networking, which is why the focus of BB should build on these two aspects. Intensifying these could also help to build the EESPN and BB “brand”. The EESPN newsletter is an appropriate tool to communicate relevant calls, events, activities, and research results among members. The EESPN homepage is also greatly appreciated. The information provided there could still gain in timeliness, while stakeholders from the region could showcase their own projects more visibly. This could enhance ownership and responsibility of the network members.

Funding is certainly one important obstacle relevant both for future events and projects. As there is a lack of suitable funding sources in the region, scholarships and project grants are needed. This aspect could be considered in future planning and possible funding schemes. Opportunities such as an open call for





funding small projects in the region have already been explored but need more tangible commitments by all partners.

For evaluating implementation and outcomes achievement in the future, the EESPN and BB initiatives could set goals and indicators for future milestones to be achieved (e.g. with respect to extending and intensifying the membership base), which would allow to work on increased visibility in the region.

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