

# Cohesion Alliance Survey

## on the future of Cohesion Policy

- Results -

**#CohesionAlliance**   
FOR A STRONG EU COHESION POLICY



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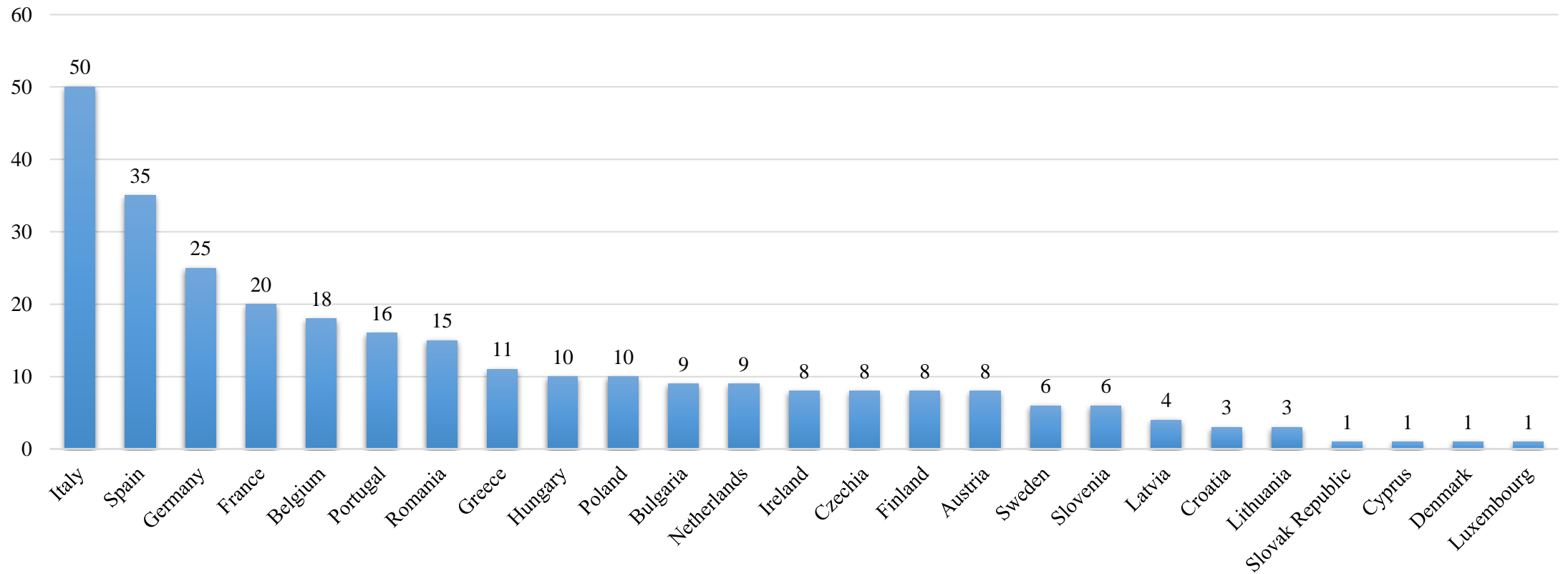


- The **Cohesion Alliance** has invited multiple actors to take part in a **wide-ranging consultation** exercise aimed at gathering the stakeholder views in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of Cohesion Policy.
- To this end, a **Survey on the future of Cohesion Policy** was conducted from 16 March 2023 to 30 June 2023.
- The survey aimed to support the development of a joint position of the Cohesion Alliance on the **future of Cohesion Policy** ahead of the publication of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report and the European elections in early 2024.
- The survey received feedback from **286 respondents** representing almost all European countries and gathered the views of different segments of society (**civil servants, Managing Authorities, civil society, economic and social organisations, local and regional politicians**).

## Methodological note on the results analysis

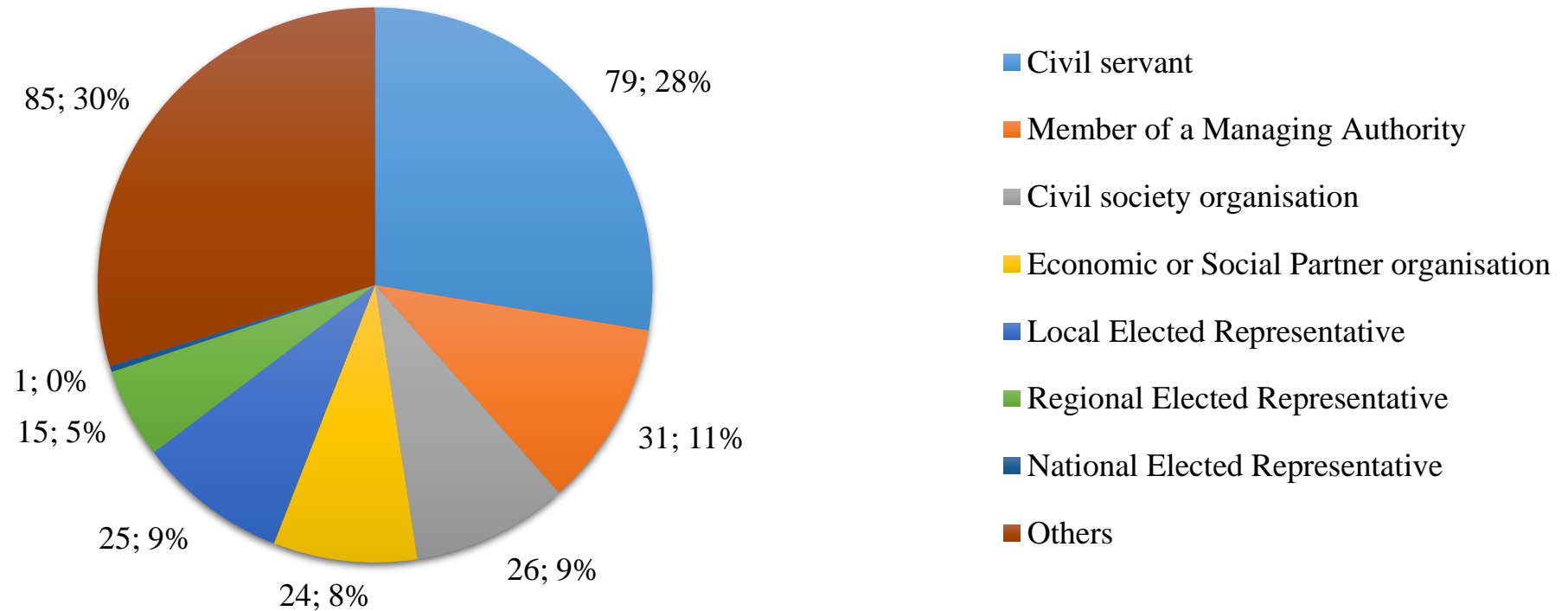
- The research was based on a questionnaire consisting of **10 questions**, including **nine closed-ended** questions (both multiple choice and single choice) and **one final open-ended** question on how to improve Cohesion Policy in the future.
- When reading the results, note that in the presence of a **pie chart**, the question only allowed for **one possible answer**.
- On the contrary, in the case of **horizontal bars charts**, the question allowed a **multiple choice**. Therefore, the total number of the answer may be bigger than the total number of respondents.

# Countries represented



The survey involved a sample of **286 respondents** representing 25 Member States, with the exception of Malta and Estonia.

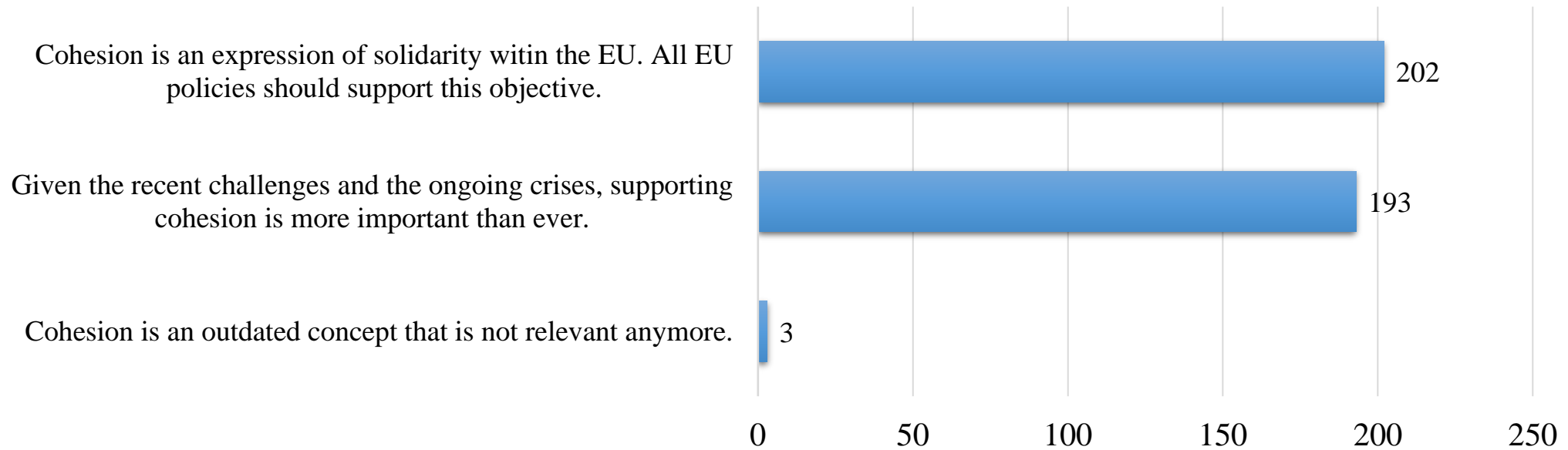
# Categories of participants



A very large majority of **practitioners of Cohesion Policy** is included in the categories of Civil servant, Member of a Managing Authority and Others. Some contributions to the survey were also provided by more than 40 **politicians**, representative of **National, Regional and Local levels**.

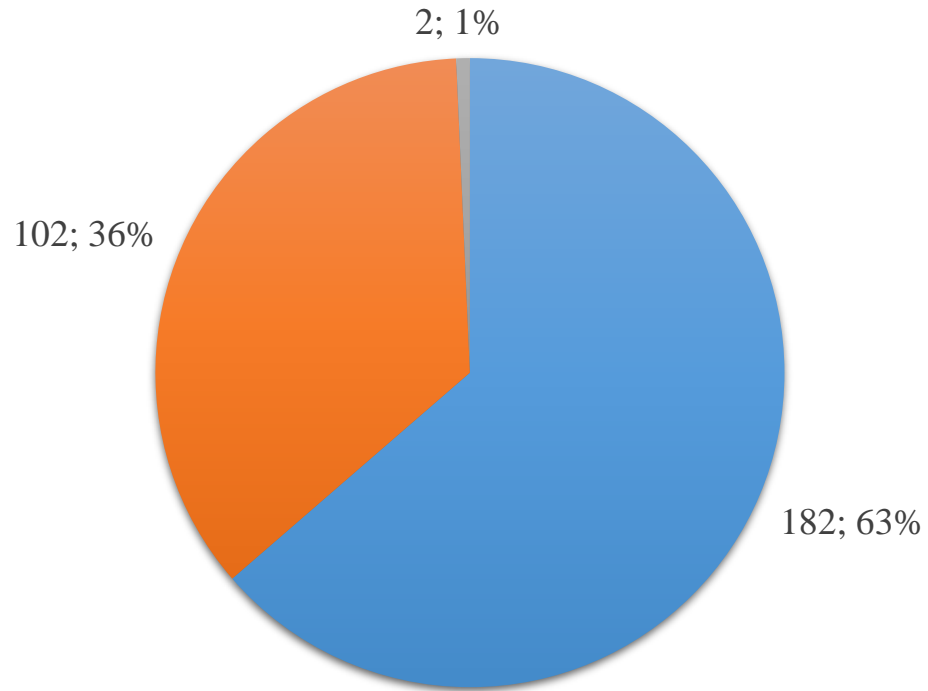
# Question 1 : Cohesion as an overall objective of the EU

The promotion of social, economic, and territorial cohesion is a **cross-cutting objective** of the European Union aiming to improve the quality of life of all citizens and to offer every citizen and every region the chance of reaping the benefits of the European Single Market. With which of the following statements do you agree:



## Question 2 : Do no harm to Cohesion Principle

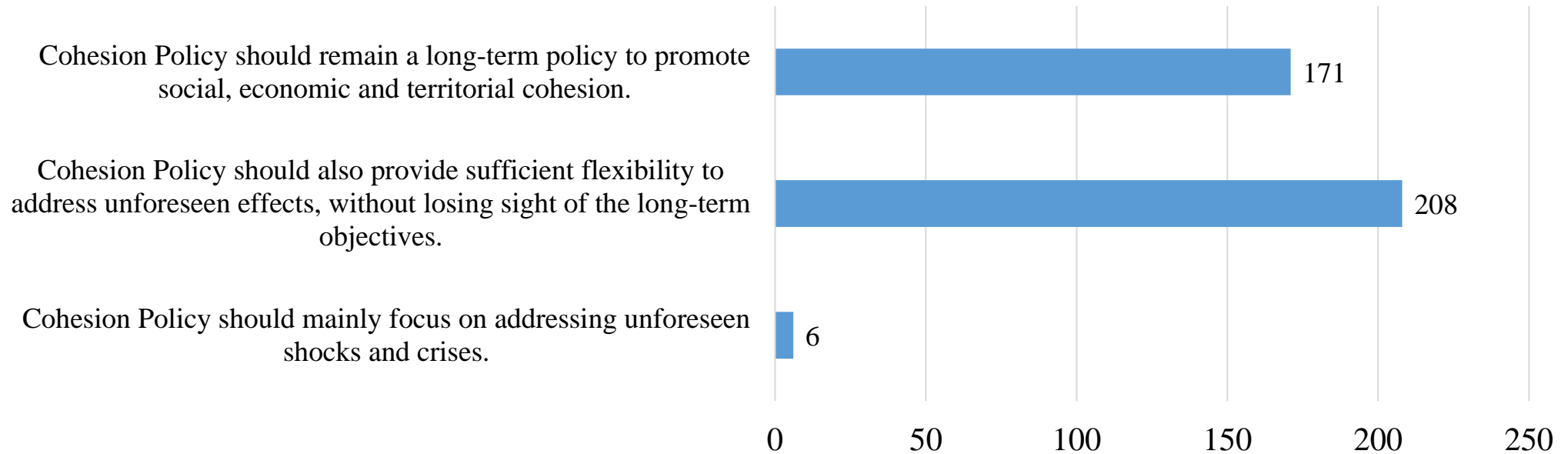
With which of the following statement do you agree:



- The European Commission should provide territorial impact assessments for all relevant EU policy proposals to avoid negative effects on Europe's municipalities and regions.
- Each EU Policy should make sure that it does not hamper cohesion.
- Territorial impacts cannot be assessed and the obligation should be ignored.

## Question 3 : Cohesion Policy objectives

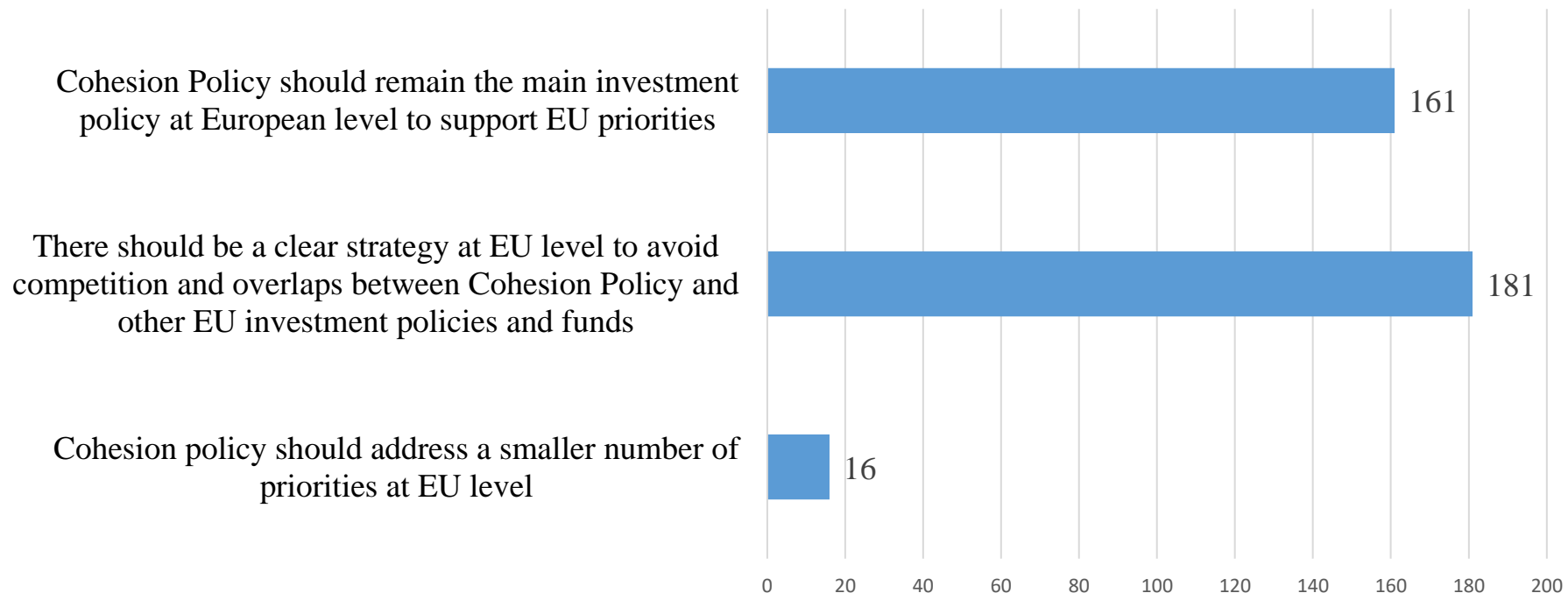
Cohesion Policy currently supports long-term investments supporting sustainable development, economic progress, job creation, and business competitiveness in all EU regions and cities. With which of the following statements do you agree?





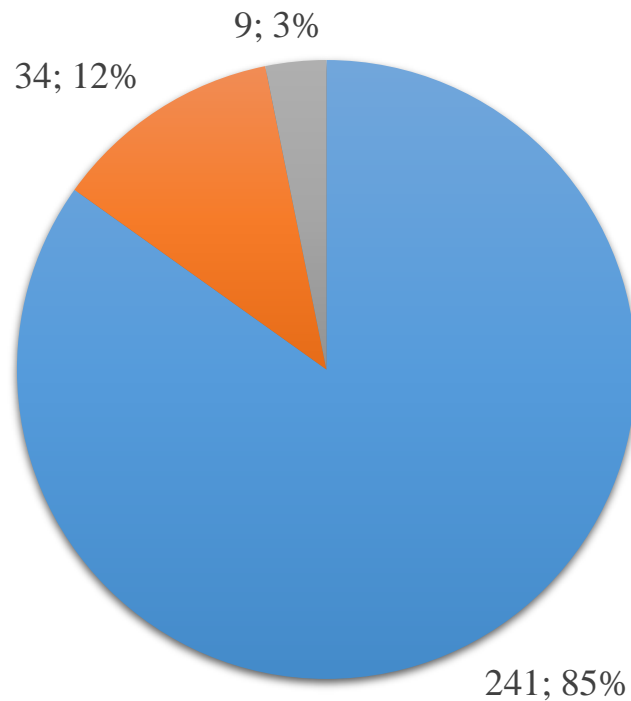
## Question 4 : Cohesion Policy role at EU level

Cohesion policy is currently the **EU's main investment policy** supporting the priorities of the EU, notably the European Green Deal, the digital agenda and the European Pillar of Social Rights. With which of the following statements do you agree?



## Question 5 : Coverage

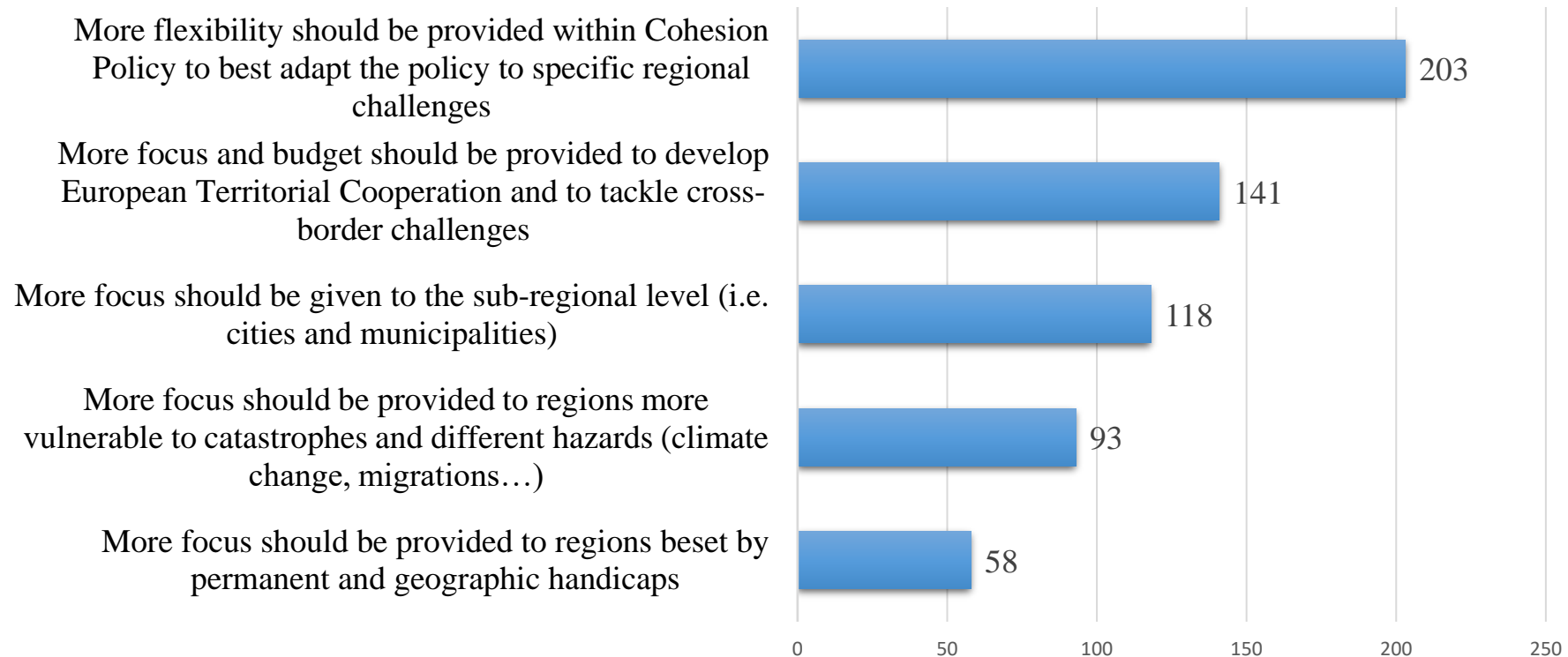
Cohesion Policy currently covers all regions and cities in the European Union. With which of the following statement do you agree:



- Cohesion Policy should continue to support all regions in Europe, and the biggest support should be given to those lagging behind.
- Cohesion Policy should be limited to those regions lagging behind. More developed regions should not receive any support from Cohesion Policy.
- Cohesion Policy should only focus on the Member States lagging behind (Lagging behind regions in more developed Member State should be supported by respective Member State).

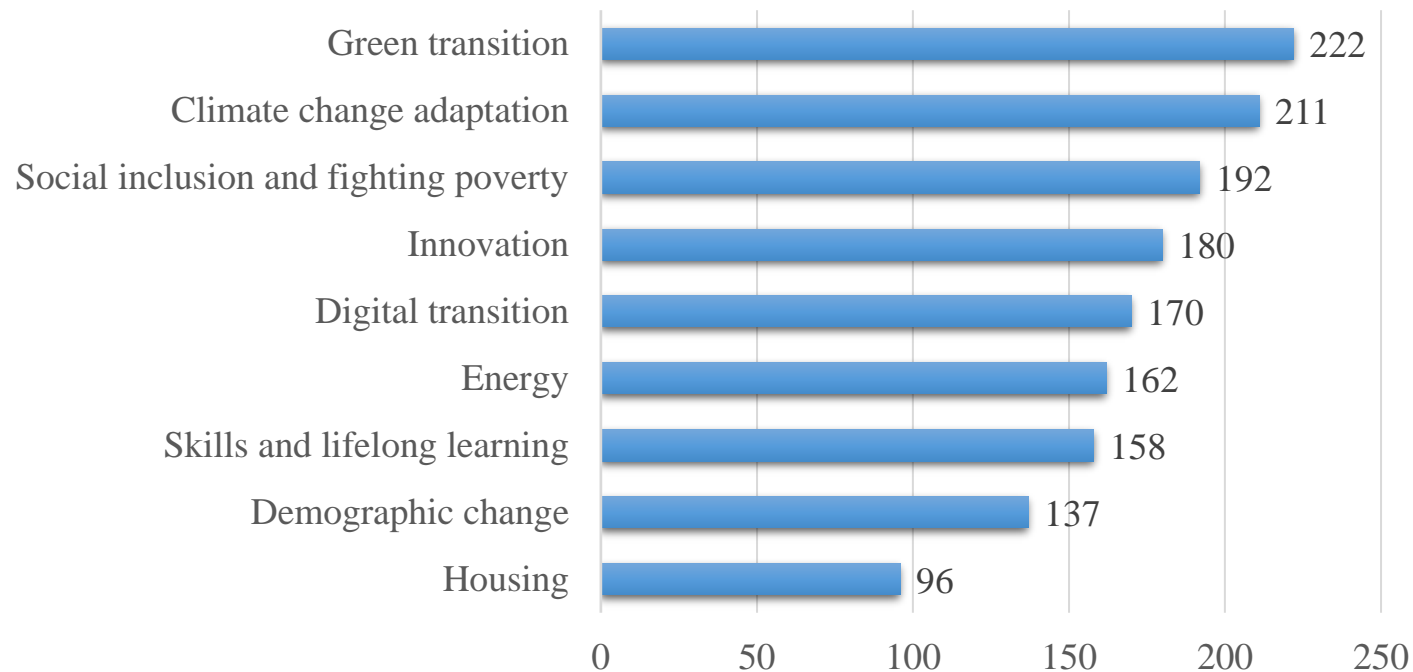
## Question 6 : Territorial focus

Cohesion Policy includes specific provisions to address the territorial diversity within the European Union. With which of the following statement do you agree:



## Question 7 : Area of focus

Cohesion Policy is all about providing structural change to help municipalities and regions address challenges such as the climate crisis and the green transition, demographic change or digitalisation. Which of the following challenges should Cohesion Policy address in the future?



## Question 8 : Partnership and multi-level governance

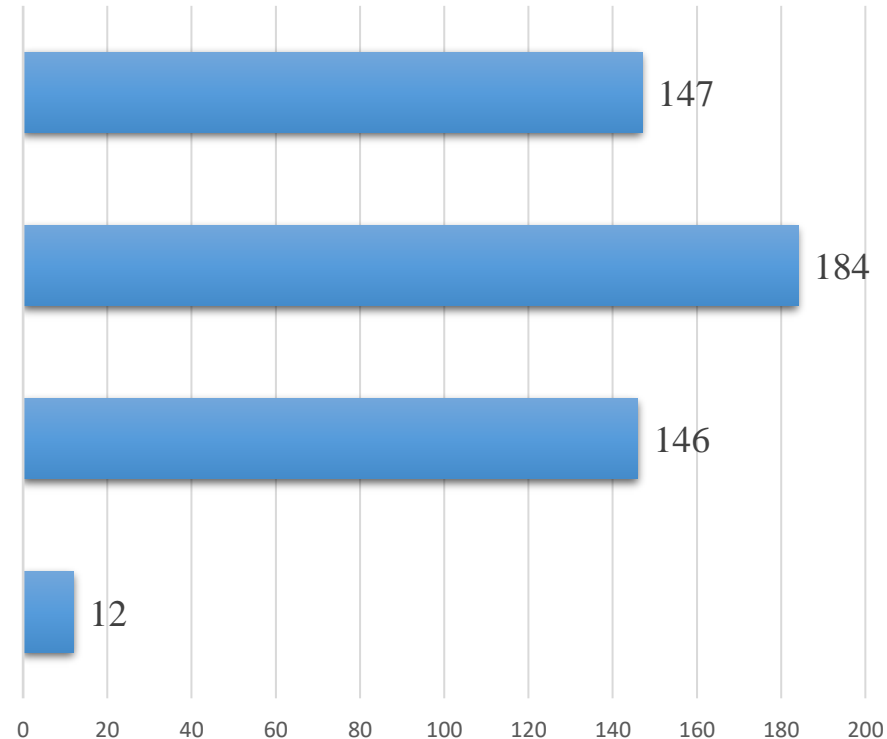
Cohesion policy is the only EU policy where the principles of partnership and multi-level governance are essential elements of the policy. This means that local and regional authorities as well as social partners and civic society are involved in the preparation and implementation of the policy. Which of the following statements do you agree:

The principles of partnership and multi-level governance have proved to be key elements to ensure the ownership of the policy by local and regional authorities, social partners and civil society.

The principles of partnership and multi-level governance should be strengthened in the future so that the policy can focus better on addressing local and regional needs.

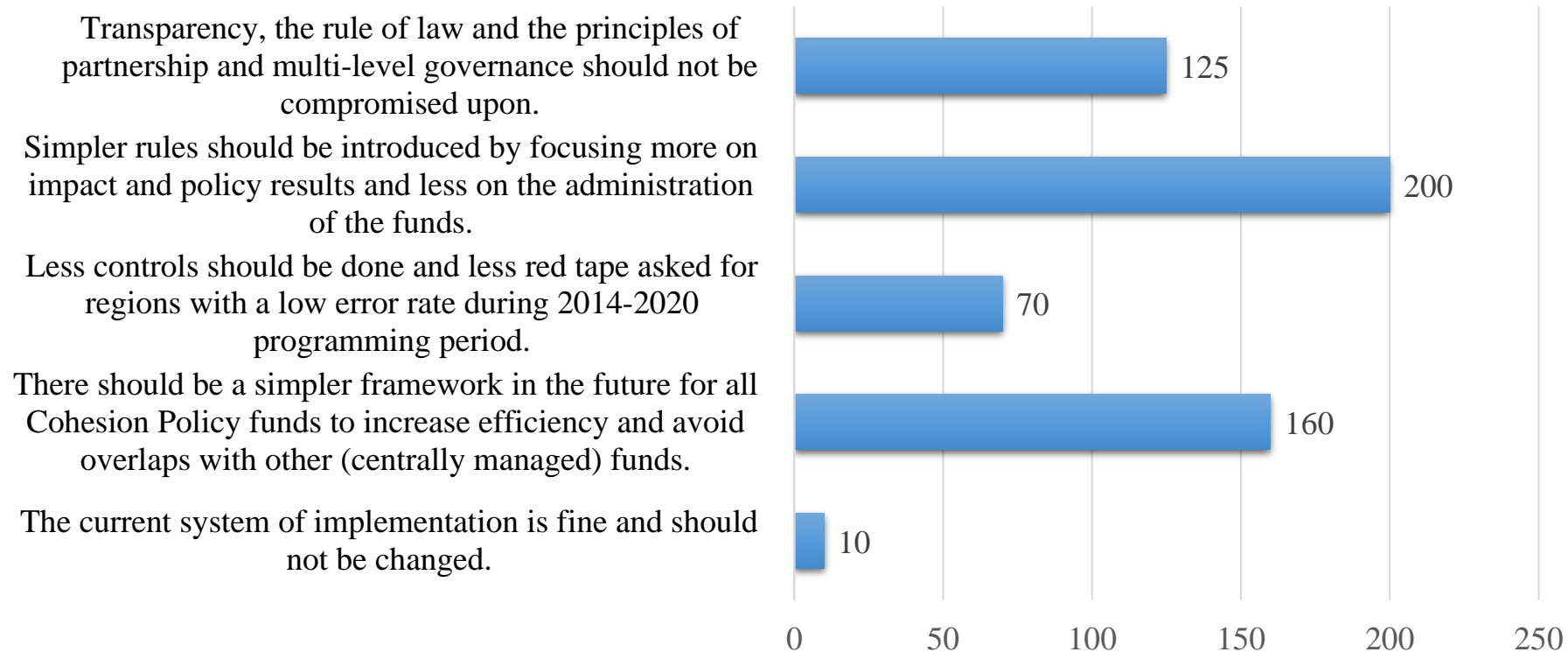
Other EU policies and funding facilities should also apply the principles of partnership and multi-level governance particularly when they address local/regional needs.

Partnership and multi-level governance make implementation of Cohesion Policy more complicated without much added value and should be scrapped.



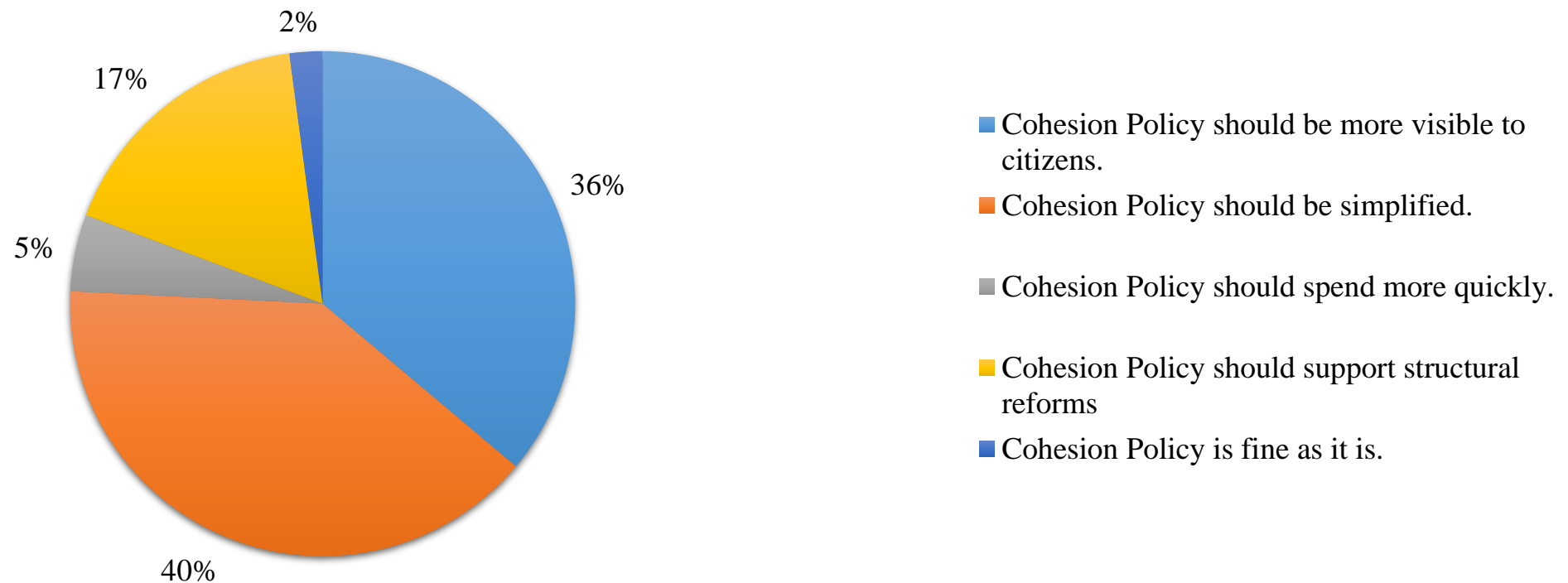
## Question 9 : Implementation of Cohesion Policy

Cohesion policy is often criticised for being too complicated from an administrative point of view and too slow to respond to territorial needs. Which of the following statements do you agree?



## Question 10: Reform ideas

Out of the following list, please pick the most important issue to change Cohesion policy in the future:



# Question 11 : Implementation of Cohesion Policy

Now it is your turn to tell us, how do you think the Cohesion Policy should be improved. The word cloud reflects the ideas expressed by respondents to provide a **snapshot at a glance**. A **qualitative analysis of the responses can be found in the appendix**.





## **Appendix: Qualitative analysis of the responses to the Cohesion Alliance survey**

### **1. Introduction**

Cohesion Policy is the main EU investment policy to implement the Treaty objective of strengthening the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the EU and reducing the disparities between the levels of development of the various regions. With its unique features of partnership and multi-level governance, as well as its place-based approach, cohesion policy is the flagship EU policy that is putting the local and regional level in its centre making cohesion a fundamental value of the EU.

The reflections on the future of cohesion policy post-2027 were triggered by the publication of the 8th Cohesion Report in spring 2022. In order to contribute to the development of a joint position of the Cohesion Alliance on the future of Cohesion Policy ahead of the publication of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report and the European elections in early 2024, the Cohesion Alliance invited local and regional authorities, Member States, social partners, civil society organisations and citizens to take part in a wide-ranging consultation exercise aimed at gathering a multiplicity of stakeholder views and developing a comprehensive understanding of Cohesion Policy.

The survey was launched via EU Survey during the Cohesion Alliance high level event on 16 March 2023 and remained open until 30 June 2023.

### **2. Results**

The survey received feedback from 286 respondents in total, representing almost all EU Member States and gathered the views of different segments of society (public administration, Managing Authorities, civil society, economic and social organisations and local and regional politicians).

In general, respondents acknowledged that Cohesion Policy is the most important EU investment policy. Cohesion Policy is considered a cornerstone of the European Union in its efforts to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion among Member States by investing in infrastructure, innovation, education and job creation.

However, the survey also highlighted important challenges and criticisms that need to be addressed in order to better meet the needs of EU citizens.

Respondents identified the necessity to simplify administrative and bureaucratic processes, alongside the need for increased flexibility to enhance the efficiency of Cohesion Policy. Moreover, there was an emphasis on reinforcing the partnership principle and redefining the functional regions that Cohesion Policy should target. Several participants stressed the importance of enhancing communication related to Cohesion Policy with the general public to foster closer proximity with European citizens.

Finally, respondents focused on the role of Cohesion Policy in addressing the crises tackled by the Union, in particular the need to create new instruments and redefine funding priorities in light of the future challenges for European regions. The following sections provide a more detailed overview on the proposals that emerged from the survey.

## **2.1. Territorial scope**

The survey indicated that a key requirement for improving Cohesion Policy would be to take even greater account of the territorial dimension. Europe's diversity is reflected in its different geographical characteristics: urban and rural areas, border, mountain regions and coastal areas. All these areas have different social, economic and environmental characteristics and needs. They therefore need to be addressed in a differentiated way.

Respondents also underlined the importance of Cohesion Policy remaining an EU policy for all regions and not only for those lagging behind: EU structural support is important to respond to the specific cohesion problems of territories (even the most advanced ones), to encourage innovative and proactive investment and development strategies, and to make all EU citizens aware of how the EU supports their territories.

Notwithstanding the need for flexibility in order to better adapt Cohesion Policy to regional specificities, the survey revealed a willingness to maintain the category of “transition regions” and to strengthen the Just Transition Fund through an approach that includes other policy areas and new territories.

Furthermore, taking into account the specificities of the regions should be an essential element of Cohesion Policy, such as the situation of regions in a “development trap”, the territorial and the urban dimension.

Respondents also highlighted the need to define flexibility mechanisms to allow for specific interventions to address challenges that may arise during the programming period, such as natural disasters, health challenges, economic and social issues.

There is also a need to reaffirm the urban-rural link in Cohesion Policy, to strengthen the integrated territorial development approach and the territorial instruments (such as ITI, CLLD), and to give greater support and importance to small and medium-sized European cities.

Most of the replies paid attention to the issue of strengthening and developing European territorial cooperation, stating that the EU must be anchored locally and regionally in order to have a lasting positive impact on people's lives and to consolidate its democratic legitimacy.

Cross-border regions reveal divergences, but also possible convergences for the benefit of all: shared services, adaptation of standards to ensure interoperability, cross-border transport or energy infrastructure, cross-border clusters, creative management of a common environment, even the emergence of cross-border and European citizenship. The border is a place of competition, but also of cooperation, where the movement of people, goods, capital, services

and ideas generates innovation and wealth. In this context, respondents considered Interreg as an instrument that needed to be strengthened.

Particular attention was also paid to the Outermost Regions. Respondents underlined that European policies must be designed and implemented taking into account the specific situation of the territories concerned, in particular those with geographical characteristics that have an impact on the development of their economies and the way in which their citizens participate in the internal market. This calls for tailored and differentiated responses and greater flexibility.

The smaller economic structures and transportation challenges in the Outermost Regions should also be considered. This should allow for longer deadlines to be set, in order to appropriately address the unique characteristics of these areas with regard to financial resources and available methods of transportation. It is a matter of social justice to avoid treating different situations in the same way. This is the only way to make European policies, instruments and initiatives effective.

## **2.2. Partnership principle and multilevel governance**

The survey highlighted the need for Cohesion Policy to further strengthen the partnership principle. More emphasis needs to be placed on the involvement of local actors - cities, municipalities and regions. The different needs of these local communities must be taken into account and their voices must be heard when reviewing programmes and allocating resources.

Hence, collaboration in project design, management and monitoring must be strengthened between the various Managing Authorities and the local level, including beneficiaries.

Respondents also considered the role of local authorities in the design of programmes as still very weak and indicated that programmes do not necessarily reflect the needs of local authorities, which are the level of government closest and most sensitive to the needs of citizens and local actors.

According to the survey results, Cohesion Policy could be improved by making the framework easier to understand for stakeholders, including civil society, and by simplifying the rules of engagement to create a public-private partnership approach to building an innovation ecosystem that meets the needs of different regions.

Another request was that Cohesion Policy Monitoring Committees should meet more often at national and regional level and go beyond information sessions and online questionnaires to give their members a more active role.

As regards the system of distributing funds through “calls”, respondents indicated that it is not always beneficial since it only incentivises those capable of taking part in the calls for proposals. Therefore, it was suggested to consider another distribution method (e.g. through regional coordination) or to set up a technical support system for actors with lower administrative capacity.

Calls should be scheduled at the start of the programming period to prevent them from accumulating at the eleventh hour, so that no time is wasted during the implementation stage, and to streamline planning and enable local authorities to commence work beforehand.

EU funds should also be monitored in terms of their real impact on capacity building and knowledge transfer, and on the implementation of transformative actions in EU territories.

The control system should be more proportionate to the size of the budget. Often there is the same control system for both small and large projects, which discourages public administrations from designing small, tailor-made projects that could be more effective.

Last, but not least, respondents also called for a system for measuring the medium-term impact of Cohesion Policy on territories at local level, so that citizens can have a direct perception of the impact of funds at the local level.

### **2.3. Visibility**

Many respondents raised the issue that the communication of Cohesion Policy to European citizens needed to be improved for them to acknowledge its direct influence on their daily lives and to enable them to access available funding.

The dissemination of results should also be improved in order to achieve greater visibility and to involve citizens in the policy and its objectives. To achieve this goal, respondents suggested to promote the engagement of local authority networks, especially in programmes like URBACT or Interreg Europe that facilitate the exchange of expertise. Local authority networks can also serve as channels for the dissemination of findings and best practices.

### **2.4. Consideration of new challenges**

The survey consistently highlighted the need to update the funding headings of Cohesion Policy in relation to changing EU priorities. To address new challenges posed by the European Green Deal, the Sustainable Development Goals, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and digital transformation, the scope of Cohesion Policy ought to be broadened. This will better align the policy with the overall objectives of the European Union and ensure that all regions are equipped to tackle these complex issues.

Respondents underlined the role of Cohesion Policy in providing support to those who may be disadvantaged by EU decarbonisation processes. This could be achieved through the strengthening of the Just Transition Mechanism and by supporting digital transformation, especially for the most vulnerable regions and citizens.

Additionally, significant focus was given to climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, the funding of innovation-led policies, and the promotion of research and development activities.

## **2.5. Crisis response**

The survey also prompted respondents to reflect on the impact of recent crises on Cohesion Policy. While acknowledging the policy's proven ability to respond promptly and efficiently during crises, many emphasized the necessity of maintaining a strategic, long-term focus on convergence and the reduction of regional disparities.

According to respondents, the dispersion of funds and the amendment of the 2014-20 Regulations had a negative impact on managing and intermediate authorities. In this respect, they considered that Cohesion Policy should focus on long-term investments with sufficient flexibility to adapt to the needs of each territory, but that other ad hoc funds should be created to deal with unforeseen shocks and crises.

In other words, Cohesion Policy should remain a policy focused on its core objective of reducing socio-economic and territorial disparities between all EU regions in order to ensure convergence in Europe.

## **2.6. Simplification and flexibility**

Respondents considered that, despite the European Commission's efforts to simplify the implementation of Cohesion Policy in recent years, further simplification should remain a priority to reduce the complexity of management, audit and control rules.

Respondents also stressed that improving Cohesion Policy in Europe requires a comprehensive approach. Firstly, they suggested to improve the accessibility of funds by streamlining administrative procedures and reducing bureaucracy. Simplified application processes, clearer guidelines, and less paperwork would facilitate access. Furthermore, respondents emphasized the need for simpler rules in terms of administrative burden and simplified cost options, the need to avoid overlaps with other EU policies, and the need to rely on the expertise of Managing Authorities.

It was also stated that a clear and straightforward legal framework would be the key to the success of a sound implementation of programmes. In particular, it emerged that the simplification of Cohesion Policy could be achieved by removing it from the state aid regime like other EU funding, by alleviating the decommitment rules that have forced managing authorities to fund more ongoing projects than structural and innovative projects, and by favouring a results-based approach.

Some concerns were raised about the rules that govern financial management of projects. Respondents suggested that these regulations should be streamlined, with EC-funded programmes serving as a reference for the development of a new operational framework. Indeed, regarding European Territorial Cooperation programmes (i.e. Interreg), respondents indicated that the financial regulations appear disproportionately intricate and labour-intensive, dissuading applications from inexperienced public institutions.

Therefore, simplifying and introducing more straightforward rules for Interreg Programmes could encourage the involvement of a greater variety of actors. Specifically, the regulations governing Interreg should take better account of the realities of border regions and introduce new rules on staff costs that facilitate the conditions for setting up cooperation projects. In addition, it has been emphasised that the impact assessment of European (and national) legislation should also cover cross-border regions and the effects on cross-border areas.

Simplification was also called for with regard to ERDF implementation. Respondents highlighted the growing complexity of meeting ex-ante Regulation criteria for ERDF projects and programmes. Additionally, ERDF prefinancing conditions may inadvertently result in liquidity problems for SME beneficiaries. The survey also stressed that ERDF audit and payment procedures needed to be more effective in order to reduce the time between expenditure and receipt of funds, thus avoiding funding problems. Additionally, the ERDF's audit and justification system should be proportional, including sanctions.

Some respondents also stressed the importance of increasing flexibility in the Cohesion Policy's closure mechanisms while reallocating funds and expanding support towards sectors experiencing the most significant impact from the current socio-economic challenges.

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