



Making Sense of the Connecting Europe Network

1. Introduction

1.1. About Connecting Europe

Connecting Europe is a project of the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels, in close cooperation with the German foundation Stiftung Mercator. Its objective is twofold: to connect civil society organisations with EU decision-makers and to transnationalise EU policy debates.

Since its inception in 2017, Connecting Europe has grown into a network of 45 organisations in 13 EU member states, which includes a broad range of research institutes, NGOs, think tanks, network projects and fellowship programmes working across Europe. Connecting Europe has worked with approx. 40 projects, which are sometimes carried out by one organisation in the network, sometimes by two or three organisations cooperating together. Connecting Europe covers topics both relevant to the EU policy community as well as to the partner organisations: Rule of Law & Democracy, Youth & Education, EU Foreign Policy, as well as Climate Change and the Digital Transformation.

Connecting Europe fosters an open, constructive dialogue between actors in the member states and decision-makers in Brussels through several activities. The project team organises workshops, policy dialogues and roundtables, coordinates study trips to Brussels and joint publications with partner organisations. It also proposes tailor-made advice to its network members on EU policy news and how to best reach EU decision-makers.



1.2. About this report

After over five years of building and consolidating the Connecting Europe network, the team decided to assess the development of the network. After two years of pandemic and multiple crises at EU level, it was time to take stock of the work done, and to analyse the network in more depth.

To do so, we partnered with [Unity Effect](#), a German organisation based in Bonn, focusing on data analysis and organisational development. Unity Effect analysed Connecting Europe's activity reports from 2017-2022. The network analysis focuses on three aspects: (1) providing a clearer picture on the partner organisations involved; (2) analysing the network activities and how partners interacted; (3) the topics that dominated Connecting Europe's agenda over the years.

2. Executive Summary

From 2017-2022, the Connecting Europe network considerably expanded, with new partner organisations joining the network. In 2017, the network included around 15 organisations. In 2022, Connecting Europe counts 45 partners from 13 countries. In addition to the partners, Connecting Europe also collaborated with organisations on approx. 40 projects, which are carried out by one or more network partners.

In the past five years, Connecting Europe managed over 350 activities, reaching over 6800 participants, mostly through joint events with the network partners. At the same time, the relations with existing partners were consolidated through longer-term collaborations, such as the 'Project Presidency' project, in 2020 during the German Council Presidency.

The main findings of the network analysis in a nutshell:

A CONVENING PLATFORM TO DISCUSS EU AFFAIRS

Connecting Europe established itself as a platform to discuss EU developments among network members with EU decision-makers and the broader Brussels policy community. Connecting Europe organised over 350 activities in the past years, including 115 events. 2020 was a peak year: Connecting Europe organised a total of 84 activities, from which 32 were events.

ACTIVITIES COVERED SEVERAL TOPICS, REFLECTING SHIFTS IN THE EU'S PRIORITIES

Connecting Europe covered several topics over the years, trying to find a balance between the topics of the partners in the network and the priorities at EU level. While between 2017 and 2022 "Democracy & Rule of Law" and "Youth & Education" continued to stay at the centre stage of our work (with a total of around 50 events), there was a shift away from migration policy due to funding changes at Stiftung Mercator. Instead, EU foreign policy, climate change and the digital transformation became more important topics over the years, which made up the topics for around 35 of our events.

HIGH ENGAGEMENT THROUGH JOINT ACTIVITIES

Connecting Europe conducted over 350 activities over the past five years, with over 45 partner organisations involved, as well as 18 external organisations. The cooperation with partners mostly took place through joint events, with over 115 events organised over the years. Many organisations (77% of the total 45 partners) co-organised at least two or more events with Connecting Europe while 47 % of the partners even co-organised 7 or more activities with Connecting Europe.

NETWORK PARTNERS USED VARIOUS FORMATS

Most partner organisations interacted with Connecting Europe on a regular basis. On average, every network partner conducted two activities per year. While many partner organisations asked for exchanges (145) and tailor-made advice (70), events such as policy dialogues (35) and roundtables (29) were the most popular formats, followed by workshops (15) and webinars (11). Furthermore, the Connecting Europe team published a total of 29 publications, of which 11 were co-authored with partners.

3. Main findings

The report is divided into three main parts.

The section "Network Partners" provides an overview of the engagement of Connecting Europe with its partners, analysing the nature of the organisations and topics the network partners worked on.

The section "Network Activities" investigates the types of activities that were carried out, as well as the topics covered in the projects. This section gives an overview of the developments and trends over the years 2017-2022, reflecting both the policy priorities at EU level and the focus areas of our partners. For 2022, only half of the year was counted, as the network analysis was concluded in the summer.

Finally, the section "Topics" reflects upon the thematic areas that Connecting Europe has touched upon. This section focuses on the topics of both the partners and the activities within the network. It also provides an overview of the most used words for event titles.

3.1. Network partners

What kind of organisations can we find in the Connecting Europe network? This was the first question we asked ourselves in the framework of the network analysis. In total, Connecting Europe counts 45 network partners active in 13 EU member states. The partner organisations count five types of organisations: think tanks (23), NGOs (11), research institutes (10), network organisations (8) and foundations (2). The types of projects by those organisations vary too. We divided those into four categories: network projects (14), research projects (12), advocacy projects (4) and fellowship projects (2). Finally, the network partners cover six broad topics: Democracy & Rule of Law; Youth & Education; Migration; EU Foreign Policy; Climate Change; Digital Transformation; and general EU Policy.

Chart 1

Connecting Europe partner organisations and projects

[Details of the Kumu map here](#)

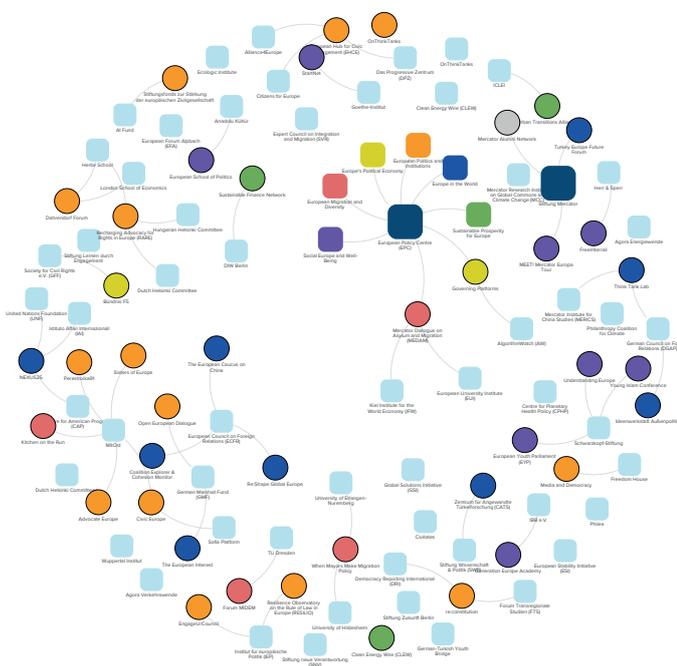
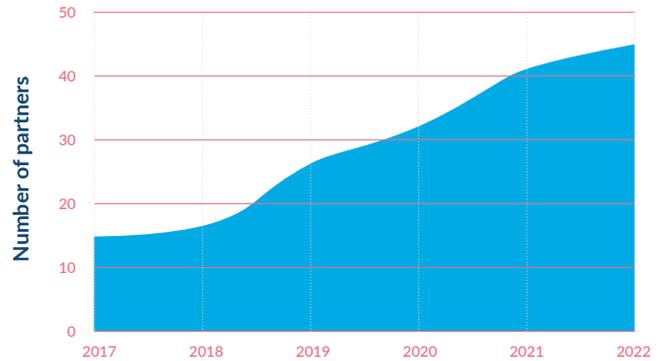


Chart 2

Number of active network partners between 2017 and 2022

The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022



The main findings in a nutshell:

THE NETWORK EXPANDED CONSIDERABLY

Starting with 15 active network partners in its first year, the Connecting Europe network expanded to 45 network members in 2022. This increase of network partners of 200% in five years reflects the need for EU policy advice from civil society organisations and the team's efforts to expand the network. At the same time, the network consolidated during the years, as older partners stayed on board and few of them left (only 8, mostly due to funding shifts or policy issues being hardly covered in Brussels).

NETWORK MEMBERS ENGAGED FREQUENTLY WITH CONNECTING EUROPE

All of the partner organisations engaged with the Connecting Europe project through one activity or more, for instance by organising joint events, engaging in thematic exchanges, or working on joint publications. While 18 partners are linked to one or two activities and 6 partners are linked to 3 to 6 activities per year, 21 partner organisations can be linked to 7 activities or more, which shows a frequent engagement with Connecting Europe.

NETWORK MEMBERS USED ALL AVAILABLE ENGAGEMENT FORMATS

Different forms of collaborations were pursued over the years: exchanges (145), advice (70), events (115) and joint publications (29). These numbers indicate the use of Connecting Europe to provide different forms of engagement for partner organisations, tailored to their individual needs.

A FIRST ENGAGEMENT OFTEN LED TO FURTHER COOPERATION

Connecting Europe organised at least two events with around 35 partner organisations (77%). This showcases that the collaborations with Connecting Europe were fruitful and led to further cooperations.

THINK TANKS USED CONNECTING EUROPE THE MOST

Out of the total of 359 activities carried out with network partners over the years, most activities can be linked to think tanks (165 activities, or 46%), followed by network organisations (60 activities, 17%), NGOs (54 activities, 15%), foundations (41 activities, 11%), and research institutes (38 activities, 11%).

NGOS PREFERRED PUBLIC EVENTS, THINK TANKS BILATERAL EXCHANGES

NGOs preferred to carry out policy dialogues with Connecting Europe (67% of all events co-organised with NGOs), in order to gain visibility for their messages. Research institutes and foundations preferred roundtables (50% of events co-organised with research institutes and foundations) to discuss their findings with a target audience. Network organisations focussed on community events and workshops (46% of total events by network organisations) and think tanks on bilateral exchanges (29% of all activities conducted with think tanks). Due to the large diversity of organisations in the network, Connecting Europe benefits from offering a large range of formats from which the partners can pick and choose from.

Chart 3

Number of activities per organisational type over the years (2017-2022)

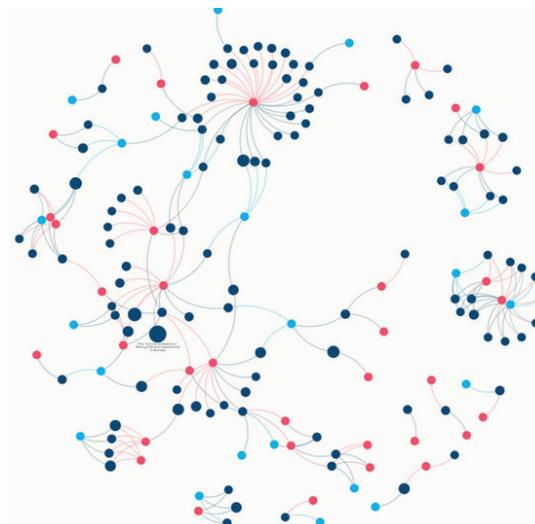
The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022

	Foundation	Network organisation	NGO	Research institute	Think Tank
Total Activities	41	60	54	38	165
Community Event		4	1		2
Conference		1	1		
Internal Event	1			1	4
Network Event					4
Policy Dialogue			12	3	20
Roundtable	4		3	6	18
Study Trip	1	2	1	1	1
Webinar				1	10
Workshop	1	6	2		7
Publication	7			2	28
Advice	11	16	6	6	22
Exchange	16	31	28	18	48

Chart 4

Connecting Europe's events linked to partner organisations

Details of the Kumu map [here](#)



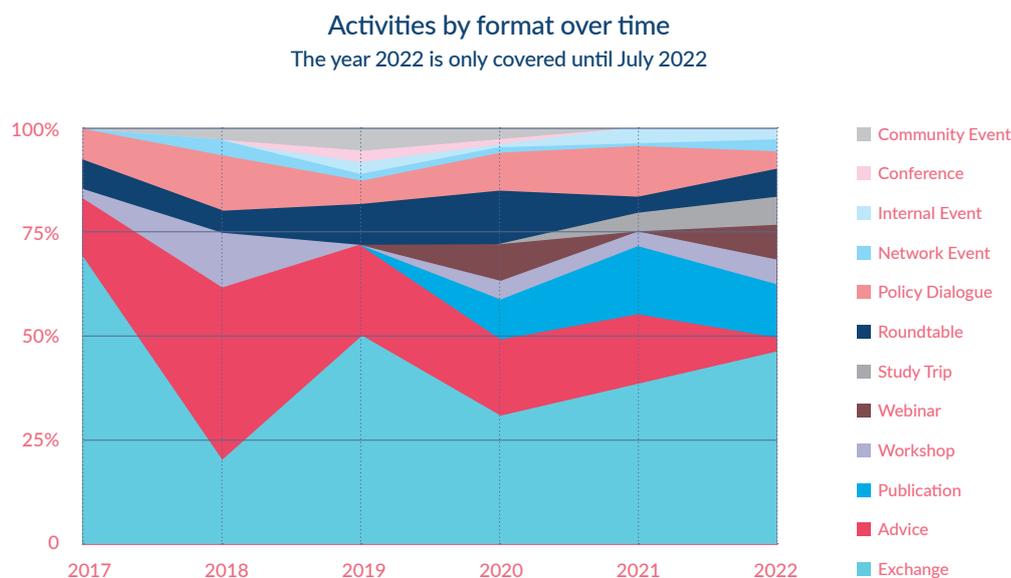
3.2. Network activities

How do network partners engage with Connecting Europe? To find out, the network analysis looked at the frequency, formats of cooperation covered in activities. The total amount of activities carried out in the framework of Connecting Europe between 2017 and 2022 range from exchanges (145) and tailor-made advice (70), events (115) and publications (29). The number of activities conducted reached its peak in 2020 and stayed stable overall, with 60 activities per year on average. Partners mostly interacted with Connecting Europe through bilateral exchanges; for events, the format of 'policy dialogues' open to a broad public in Brussels ranked first.

CONNECTING EUROPE DIVERSIFIED ITS NETWORK ACTIVITIES OVER TIME

In 2017, exchanges represented over 65% of all activities conducted within Connecting Europe. Over the years, other forms of activities (events, publications, study trips) took over, reaching at least 50% of activities per year since 2018. This trend reflects the process of network building: while the initial phase required a higher number of exchanges with partners, the consolidation of the network paved the way for a further diversification of the activities.

Chart 5



PEAK YEAR 2020

While the team carried out a continuous number of activities over the years (with an average of 60 activities per year), Connecting Europe conducted 84 activities in 2020 alone - with 25 exchanges, 11 publications and 32 events - gathering more than 2200 participants. This is likely due to the increased demand from partners in the first year of a global pandemic, as well as the fact that most events and activities could take place online, requiring less logistics from the organising team.

EU POLICY EXPERTISE IS A PRIORITY FOR PARTNERS

Connecting Europe continued to be used primarily for tailor-made advice and exchanges on EU policy fields, with a total of 145 exchanges over the years and almost 70 further advisory meetings. This showcases the relevance of having a “contact point” in Brussels for the network partners as well as for Stiftung Mercator, able to provide tailor-made information and expertise on relevant EU policy fields.

POLICY DIALOGUES AND ROUNDTABLES WERE THE MOST USED EVENT FORMATS

Between 2017 and 2022, network partners preferred policy dialogues (35) and roundtables (29) for their events in cooperation with Connecting Europe and the EPC. Conferences (2), internal events (6) and study trips (5) were used more sparsely, also because they require a longer preparation time. However, the number of internal events and study trips has increased considerably in the last two years (2020-2022), showcasing the continuous need for in-person exchanges in Brussels.

MORE PUBLICATIONS IN THE PAST YEARS

Connecting Europe started publishing joint publications with partner organisations in 2020. The team at the EPC also became more active in getting out relevant research findings on the topics of interest to the network, with 23 out of 29 publications (79%) over the past years. 17 publications were published exclusively with the EPC (59%) while 6 out of 29 were published for Stiftung Mercator’s AufRuhr Magazine (21%).

Chart 6

Events formats conducted with partner organisations from 2017-2022
The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022

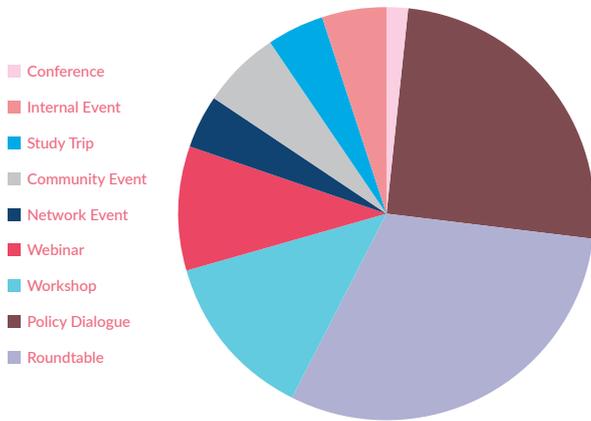
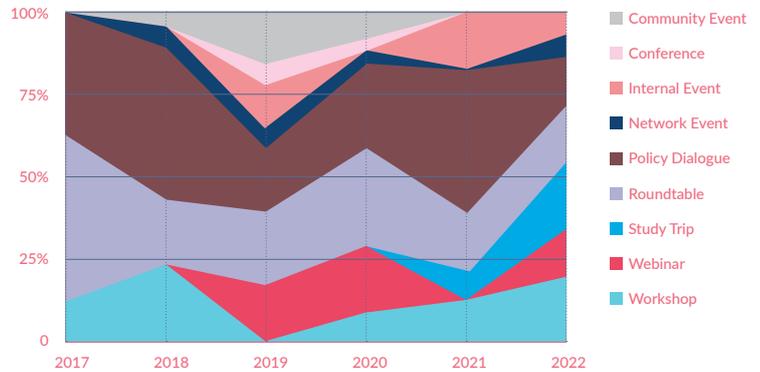


Chart 7

Events by format over time
The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022



3.3. Topics

Connecting Europe is a network with partners working on a wide range of topics, all covering different aspects of EU policy: Democracy & Rule of Law, Youth & Education, Climate Change, Digital Transformation, EU Foreign Policy and Migration. Since the launch of the network in 2017, there have been further topics that came on top: important EU and national elections, a global pandemic starting in 2020, as well as the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine in 2022 with its consequences for a variety of policy fields.

Key findings on the topics in a nutshell:

MOST PARTNERS WORK ON DEMOCRACY & RULE OF LAW

Democracy and the rule of law were the main priority of partner organisations within Connecting Europe, with 20 organisations working on these topics, followed by those working on Climate Change (9), Youth & Education (5), EU Foreign Policy (5), the Digital Transformation (5) and Migration (4). The network also includes four partners that have no predominant thematic focus, working on a diverse range of topics related to general EU affairs.

MOST PROJECTS OF PARTNERS FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY & RULE OF LAW, EU FOREIGN POLICY AND YOUTH AND EDUCATION

When it comes to the projects conducted by the partner organisations, most focus on Democracy & Rule of Law (14 projects) followed by EU Foreign Policy (9) and Youth & Education (8). Lastly, four projects of the network partners focus on Migration and three on Climate Change.

A MORE DIVERSIFIED NETWORK OVER TIME

Connecting Europe kept including partners in the network working on a diverse set of topics. Besides “Democracy & Rule of Law” (+9 partners since 2017), new partner organisations joining the network worked in the field of “EU Foreign Policy” (+7), “Digital Transformation” (+4), “Youth & Education” (+4), “Climate Change” (+2) and “Migration” (+3). This broadened the scope of topics covered by Connecting Europe over time.

MOST CONNECTING EUROPE ACTIVITIES ON DEMOCRACY & RULE OF LAW AND YOUTH & EDUCATION

In absolute terms, the most network activities conducted between 2017 and 2022 can be linked to Democracy & Rule of Law (87), followed by Youth & Education (72), Climate Change (55), Migration (51), Digital Transformation (47) and EU Foreign Policy (36).

Chart 8

Network partners (45) and their areas of engagement with Connecting Europe

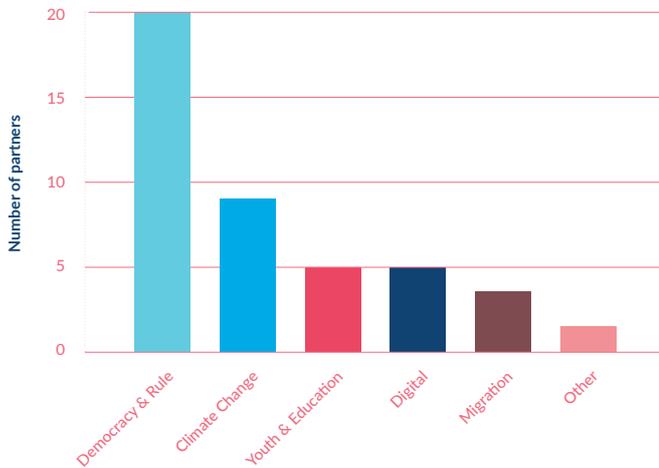
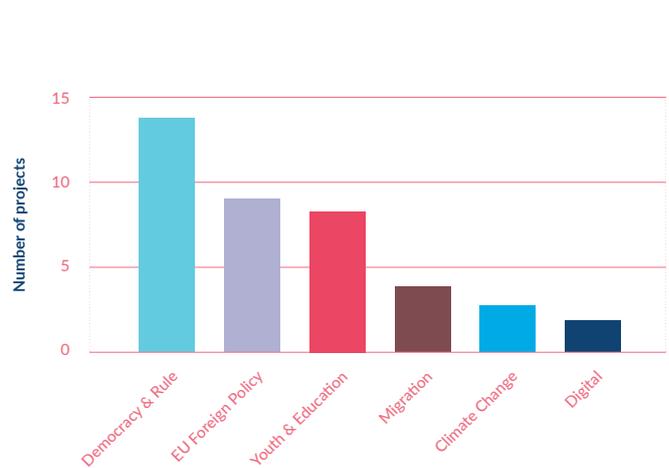


Chart 9

Projects (40) conducted by network partners and their areas of engagement with Connecting Europe



A CONTINUOUS AND REGULAR COVERAGE OF ALL TOPICS OVER TIME

The topics reflect the focus areas of partner organisations as well as the current news in Brussels. Democracy & Rule of Law accounted for around 40-50% of activities across the years; Youth & Education was also a well-covered topic. More fluctuation occurred within the field of EU Foreign Policy, Climate Change and the Digital Transformation (ranging from 5-25% depending on the year).

MORE FOCUS ON ACTIVITIES RELATED TO EU FOREIGN POLICY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Topics such as EU Foreign Policy and Climate Change, gained traction and were covered in more activities over the years. This is likely due to new projects focusing on those issues, but also the policy fields becoming more important at EU level due to the Green Deal plans of the European Commission and the changed security situation since the Russia’s aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

LESS FOCUS ON GENERAL NEWS AND MIGRATION OVER THE YEARS

Migration policy was less covered over the years due to a shift in the composition of the network, with less partner organisations working on the topic (from 27% of activities in 2019 to 2% in 2022). General EU Policy also became less relevant as the partners required more specific policy advice (from 12% in 2021 to 2% in 2022).

Chart 10

Number of network partners over time and their predominant thematic focus from 2017-2022

The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022

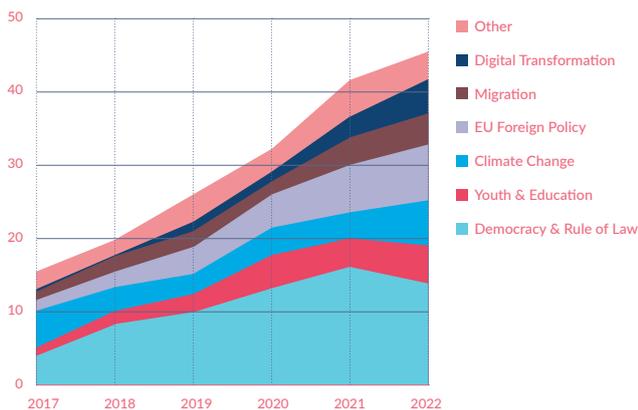
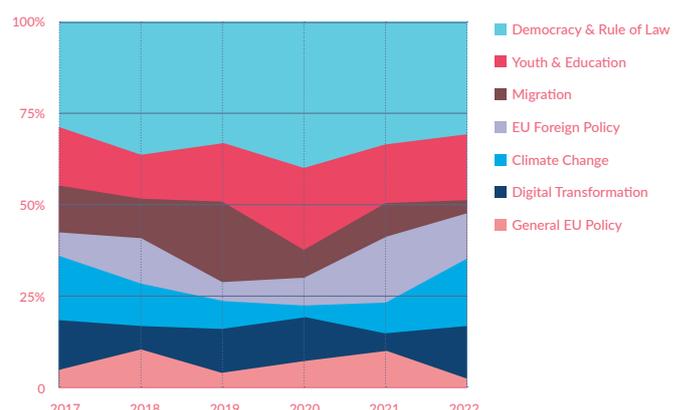


Chart 11

Connecting Europe activities by topic over the years

The year 2022 is only covered until July 2022



MORE CROSS-CUTTING TOPICS

Connecting Europe's activities are often linked to several topics at once, showcasing the increasing interconnectivity of EU policy issues. For instance, education and digital transformation were often discussed in relation to democracy; migration in relation to youth; or climate change in relation to foreign policy. The Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine had repercussions on almost all policy fields covered by Connecting Europe.

REFLECTING THE CRISIS-DRIVEN POLITICAL REALITIES

While the team tried to cover the topics of network members, the crisis environment of the past years had a clear impact on the topics of interest and is reflected in the priorities set by Connecting Europe. Unsurprisingly, 2019 focused on the European elections and the new European Commission, while Covid-19 dominated in 2020 and 2021. Since 2022, the war in Ukraine and the EU's response to the Russian aggression became the priority interest for network members.

Chart 12

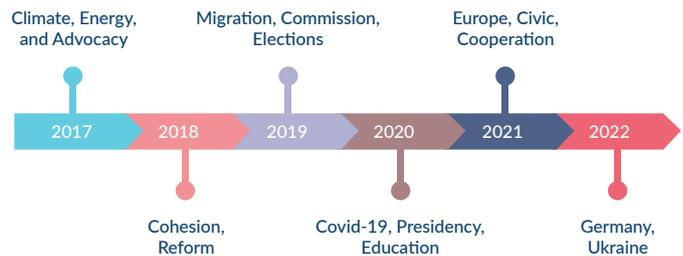
Keywords used by Connecting Europe for its network activities (2017-2022)

The bigger a word appears, the more it has been used in our activities



Chart 13

Words most used in titles of network activities over the years



4. Conclusion & Outlook

Over the years, Connecting Europe has grown into a network of 45 partner organisations, covering various policy areas. While some partners left the network due to changes in their projects and focus areas, other organisations joined Connecting Europe, requiring EU policy advice and/or looking for visibility with EU decision-makers. The growth rate of 200% between 2017 and 2022 shows that Connecting Europe managed to consolidate its network while expanding it. If think tanks represent the greatest share of partners, network organisations (17%) and NGOs (15%) are also relying on Connecting Europe for insights into EU policymaking and gaining visibility with decision-makers.

With over 350 activities conducted in the past five years, Connecting Europe has established itself as a steady fixture for civil society organisations in Brussels. The team organised 115 events, ranging from public events to roundtables, and coordinated roughly 30 publications in the past two years. Connecting Europe also offered tailor-made formats, such as study trips, workshops, and network meetings, in addition to more than 200 bilateral exchanges with partner organisations, either to inform them about the latest EU policies or to advise them on contacts and advocacy in Brussels.

While the six topics of the network were continuously covered, major political developments also influenced the work of Connecting Europe: the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the agenda in 2020 and 2021; Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine was the focus in 2022. Commission priorities, such as the twin climate and digital transitions, as well as election cycles (the European elections in 2019, the German elections 2021 and the French and Italian elections in 2022) also were widely discussed topics among the network partners. Adapting to current developments proved helpful, as partners continuously engaged with Connecting Europe, the European Policy Centre, and the wider Brussels community.

Looking forward, Connecting Europe will build upon the findings of these reports and continue to bring together a broad range of civil society organisations with EU policy makers and the Brussels policy community. As the EU is going through a 'permacrisis' and short-term decision-making becomes the main mode of functioning, giving civil society visibility and a spot at the table of EU policymaking, as well as ensuring stronger links between national capitals and Brussels, will continue to be top priorities for Connecting Europe.

5. Get in touch!

Connecting Europe

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