

# Samaritan International

Social resilience needs to become a priority



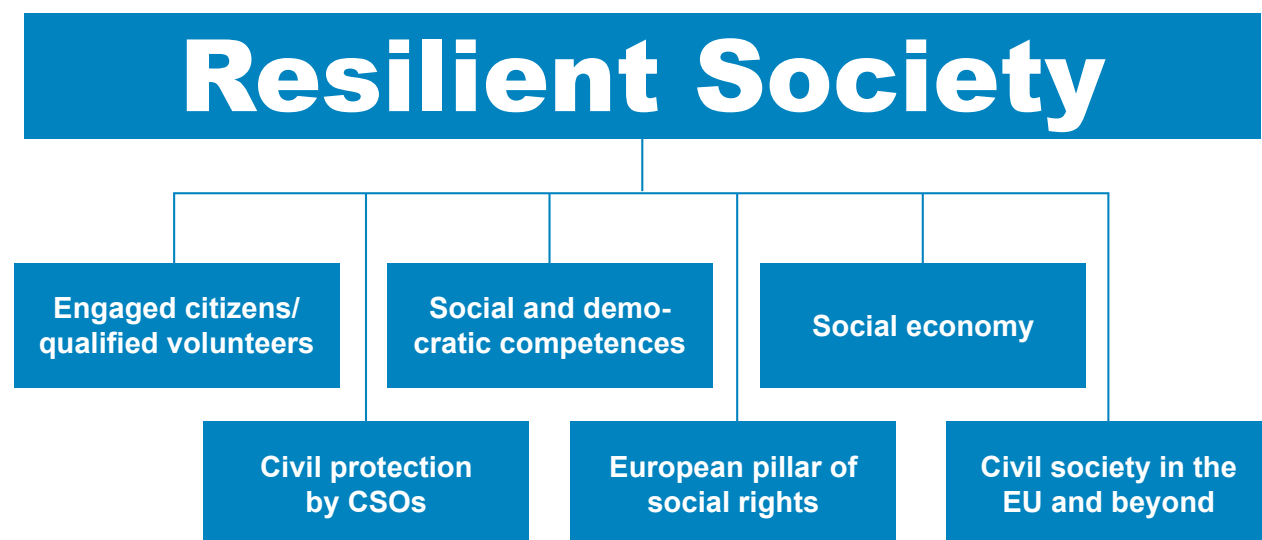
## 2024 European Elections Memorandum – Social resilience needs to become a priority

The upcoming elections of the European Parliament will take place during a time, where uncertainty has reached unprecedented levels: Climate change is posing a serious threat to the future of our planet, COVID-19 has revealed vulnerabilities in our health systems, demographic change is impacting the labour market and increasing the need for (already insufficiently staffed) care services and the energy crisis has put many Europeans under serious financial stress. In addition, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought back war to European soil and the consequences of the escalated Israel-Gaza conflict are heavily felt in Europe, polarising society and increasing both antisemitism and islamophobia.

These crises risk to increase already persisting social inequalities and to place the heaviest burden on the most vulnerable. The European Union has to ensure a socially just and inclusive green and digital transition to avoid the erosion of social cohesion and solidarity. More so, social rights, equality, cohesion and civic engagement have to be put front and center of any policy in order to protect and promote the values that form the foundation of the European Union.

Against the backdrop of these high levels of uncertainty, Samaritan International strongly believes that we can only successfully manage these difficult times by reinforcing social cohesion and increasing social resilience. Engaged citizens are crucial, not only for the functioning of our democracies, but also for steering through the diverse crises we are facing. As both manmade and natural disasters are increasing in frequency, actively engaged citizens will be indispensable in the response to such disasters.

**SAM.I. therefore calls for a stronger focus of the European Parliament and the European Commission on building up social resilience through increased support to both, organized civil society and civic engagement of the individual. Actively engaged citizens are not only essential to complement shortcomings of our social and care systems, or for responding to natural disasters, they also actively live and promote European democratic values and foster solidarity and social cohesion.**



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## Europe needs engaged citizens and qualified volunteers

Our democratic societies depend on their citizens. Yet, voter turnout has been low across recent elections almost everywhere in Europe. It is a clear sign that the EU and its Member States need to step up to deliver responses to people's needs, but also that a stronger focus needs to be put on fostering civic engagement, in order to increase the representative legitimacy of those in power.

Structured and qualified volunteering, as enabled by civic volunteering organisations, is an important form of civic engagement and an indicator for societies' resilience and social cohesion. Volunteers do not only receive important qualifications that are useful to them well beyond their specific voluntary engagement. They also have the opportunity to participate in initiatives, services and work for citizens by citizens, thereby giving them a direct stake and a participatory sense of responsibility for the democratic society and civic space which they live in.

The member organisations of Samaritan International cannot perform their services without the contribution of their 150.000 volunteers in addition to the employed staff across all areas of activity: social services, first aid training or civil protection. While volunteers offer their time and engagement for free, the organisations themselves have to invest a lot of resources into the attraction, training and retention of volunteers. This investment is necessary to be able to provide a comprehensive service offer, in terms of the different services offered, the geographical coverage and availability at all times.

In times where tight public budgets and demographic change put our social systems to the test, the work of non-profit civil society organisations (CSOs) to provide social services in addition and complementary to the public offer is a necessity across Europe. The provision of comprehensive social services would not be possible without the help of committed and structurally engaged volunteers. In the care sector, for example, the approach has shifted from institutionalised care to person-centered care and home care, allowing the individual in need of care an autonomous and self-determined life as long as possible. This approach can only be implemented with the help of volunteers, who do not replace social service staff, but enable a coverage that would not be possible with staff alone.

In the field of civil protection, it is impossible to constantly employ the personnel needed for the peak demand during disaster response. Committed and well-trained volunteers thus play a crucial role in enabling a quantitative and qualitative disaster response and facilitate community engagement and preparedness.

These activities and services, which would not be possible without the work of CSOs and volunteers in addition to staff, contribute substantially to social cohesion and social resilience of the local community and society at large.

☆ **SAM.I. calls for more support to civil society organisations, who offer structured and qualified volunteering to build socially resilient societies, based in active and engaged citizenship.**

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## Civil society organisations are essential for successful civil protection

In the field of civil protection, the EU assumes a supporting role, coordinating pre-committed assistance from countries participating in the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). As natural and manmade disasters increase in magnitude and frequency, European cooperation and coordination will become even more important. While civil protection is first and foremost a public responsibility, successful disaster preparedness and response is not possible without the complementary engagement of civil society organisations, based on volunteer commitment.

Especially in the area of disaster preparedness and response, SAM.I. members are not able to fulfil their role without the help of qualified and long-term engaged volunteers. In addition to forming a pool of qualified responders in times of crisis, they are also an important means to root crisis preparedness in the local community.

Public institutions and CSOs active in the field need to work closely together, as the challenges can only be overcome through collaboration and efficient resource management, not only regionally and nationally but also cross-border. On the European level, in addition to the UCPM, civil society networks that facilitate exchange and establish direct links between organisations working in the field of civil protection should be further supported. The members of Samaritan International have frequently experienced the importance of direct contacts on the ground, as for example in the case of our Ukrainian member SSU, as well as the importance of bi-lateral unbureaucratic assistance, when rapid response is needed.

☆ **SAM.I. highlights the importance of European civil society networks for comprehensive cross-border civil protection. The EU-level involvement of and support to these networks should be strengthened in order for them to increase bottom-up resilience.**

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### Important competences beyond the labour market

While Samaritan International fully supports the EU's skills agenda, we believe that competences and skills not directly linked to labour market needs have to be equally recognised and supported. In general, structurally engaged and qualified volunteers acquire not only competences and skills specific to the tasks they are going to carry out, but also learn or strengthen unique social competences and democratic participation. Civil society organisations that offer structured volunteering strengthen the Union thus both by fostering social cohesion and resilience through the services they offer and through equipping their volunteers with competences and values that are indispensable for a resilient and cohesive Europe.

One area in which SAM.I. has been pushing for European recognition is First Aid training. While First Aid is a competence that can be relevant for work safety, it is often pursued unrelated to labour market objectives. SAM.I. has been continuously calling for a European First Aid Certificate, which would increase the attractiveness of the qualification, by enabling application across borders and avoiding unnecessary duplication or administrative burden. Citizens who demonstrate the readiness to help in case of emergency through their First Aid training contribute substantially to public safety and a resilient society.

☆ **SAM.I. calls for the adequate recognition of competences, which are indispensable for the democratic and social future of the European Union.**

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### Swift implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights

In 2017, the European Commission set out the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). It enshrines 20 principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems in Europe. In the light of the recent crises, the effective implementation of the EPSR is now more important than ever. While it first and foremost depends on the action of Member States, who primarily hold responsibility for employment, skills and social policies, the European Union needs to promote,

enable and monitor the implementation of the EPSR Action Plan.

To achieve the targets set out in the Action Plan and to implement the various initiatives funding remains key. The Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility has been set up as the main financial instrument to mitigate the economic and social impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. While 'Social and Territorial Cohesion' is one of the Facility's 6 pillars, only about EUR 13.4 billion out of the total EUR 723.8 billion are linked to 'social protection and inclusion' across all Member States, with Italy almost accounting for half of the amount, according to the Commission's Recovery and Resilience Scoreboard (April 2022).

This clearly shows that Civil Society Organisations will be indispensable to making the principles become reality, especially in the area of 'social protection and inclusion'. In view of the many challenges posed by demographic change, limited public budgets, unattractive working conditions and a lack of skilled work force, CSOs play an important complementary role to public welfare systems and provide essential social services to vulnerable groups. To fulfil this role, civil society organisations need favourable framework conditions for their non-profit activities, including more funding opportunities.

The Commission's communication on the European care strategy and the Council Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care are an important first step to address the sector's many challenges. It will be crucial, that the Recommendation will be followed-up by Member States' actions, in particular the timely communication of the measures taken or planned to be implemented, as well as the involvement of relevant stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, social economy actors, care recipients and other stakeholders, at national, regional and local levels in the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of long-term care policies.

Despite Social Policy being mostly a Member State competence, the Union nevertheless plays an important enabling role. The establishment of the EPSR and its Action Plan has been an important first step, but more support to and streamlining of social principles is necessary to reach the targets and make accessible, affordable, and high-quality social services a reality everywhere.

☆ **SAM.I. is committed to promote the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights within and beyond its network and calls for political prioritisation of and adequate funding for the EPSR implementation, including the necessary support to civil society organisations.**

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## Social Economy needs to become the new normal

Samaritan International welcomes that the European Commission has made a proposal in June 2023 for Council Recommendations to develop social economy framework conditions. In addition, policy initiatives to achieve a just green and digital transition, as well as the recognition that our economic considerations need to go "beyond growth" to be sustainable, are all steps in the right direction.

It is crucial that Member States will deliver on the agreed Council Recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions by rolling out comprehensive strategies that recognise and stimulate the social economy, by enabling access to funding and public procurement and by closely involving social economy entities in the design and implementation of such strategies.

SAM.I. believes that a real mindset shift needs to take place and that deliberations on economic matters and competitiveness need to be intrinsically linked to social economy, rather than, as currently mostly the case, to be treated as two different matters. Economies that put people before profit need to become a reality, in order to reduce existing inequalities and to increase social cohesion.

To develop the social economy further, SAM.I. considers that not only the continuous promotion of a mindset shift is necessary, but also the use of all available tools on European and national level to set up favourable framework conditions.

Non-profit civil society organisations need to be considered as a corner stone of the social economy, closing the gap between public service provision and economic activities motivated by private interests. These organisations provide services even in unprofitable areas of the social sector in the public interest, which go beyond the coverage the state is able to provide.

The European Parliament recognises the importance of non-profit organisations and the need for a harmonised public benefit status in its resolution on a statute for European cross-border associations and non-profit organisations. In order to provide a favourable framework for such organisations, it is important to define and recognise public benefit status at European level, facilitating supportive national financial and tax treatment or relief measures, as well as cross-border donations.

☆ **SAM.I. calls for the development of a true social economy, which prioritises people over profit and with non-profit organisations as a major pillar, including the definition of public benefit status at EU level.**

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### Facilitating civil society beyond EU borders

The Samaritan International network brings together civil society organisations from the EU with civil society organisations from accession countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood. Experience has shown that social policies are not sufficiently addressed during the preparations and negotiations of the EU membership process. Therefore, it is even more important and in the Union's interest to strengthen and develop civil society beyond the EU borders.

SAM.I. member organisations from within and outside the EU have been successfully exchanging best practices and expertise both bi- and multilaterally in joint projects. In particular, our Ukrainian member SSU has been a focal point for aid deliveries and the implementation of projects on the ground. Civil society organisations play a major role in delivering social services in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood but often struggle to receive adequate political and financial support.

Against the backdrop of wide-spread targeted use of disinformation to influence political processes and influence public opinion, it has become even more important to strengthen people-to-people contacts between EU citizens and citizens in the Western Balkans and neighbouring countries. Cross-border civil society organisations bear a unique potential to reach the population effectively and to establish ties, by exchanging best practices and delivering tangible bottom-up results. Successful cooperation at civil society level is thus a key element to continuously promote a pro-European stance within the population of the Western Balkans and the EU Neighbourhood.

Especially in the light of the countries' accession perspective, it is crucial to strengthen the support to cross-border civil society initiatives and networks, to increase the direct support to civil society organisations in the accession and neighbouring countries and to give social policies a higher priority during the preparation for EU accession.

☆ **SAM.I. calls for more support to further develop and strengthen civil society in the EU accession and neighbourhood countries, including pan-European networks and initiatives pursuing such objective.**

## ABOUT SAMARITAN INTERNATIONAL

SAMARITAN INTERNATIONAL is a European network of 21 non-profit civil society organisations from 19 European countries. We are politically and religiously unaffiliated and cooperate across borders within our network, on a regional, bilateral, and multilateral basis. Our members are active in the areas of social services, first aid and rescue services, civil protection, humanitarian aid, youth work, and volunteer management. Our work is conducted with the support of about three million individual members and almost 150.000 volunteers.

