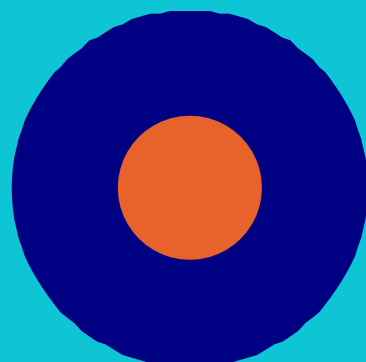


Recommendations

# EUROPEAN CITIZENS' PANEL

New European Budget



# Final recommendations of the European **Citizens'** Panel on a New European Budget fit for our ambitions

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## Introductory Statement

Over three weekends, we, the European Citizens' Panel on a new European budget fit for our ambitions, composed of 150 randomly selected citizens from the 27 EU Member States, discussed what priorities and actions funded by the EU bring the most added value to all of us. We have diverse backgrounds, yet we have shared expectations and hopes for the future of the EU. We imagine an EU that is fair and inclusive, sovereign and secure, sustainable and prosperous and deeply connected to its people. We recognise that there are challenges and trade-offs between different goals and priorities. To meet our ambitions in the long run while taking into consideration these challenges and trade-offs in the short run, we agree that our set of principles should guide choosing the right priorities for the next EU budget.

For us it is essential, that the new European budget helps to prepare for the future of the EU, its Member States, and its citizens. Strategic planning and actions that ensure long-term sustainability and resilience are crucial. This involves investing in education, innovation, security, defence, environment, infrastructure, health care and communication to build a robust foundation for future generations. For this an adequately funded EU budget should focus on:

Strengthening our shared EU values enshrined in the treaties: Promoting and reinforcing common principles and beliefs to unite the European community and safeguard the EU project.

Ensuring solidarity between Member States: Mutual support and cooperation in equitable and fair conditions among EU countries ensure that resources, knowledge, and assistance are shared to address common challenges and promote collective well-being in all areas of our societies.

Reducing inequalities: Implementing measures that address and mitigate disparities within the EU creates a more equitable and inclusive environment for all – both Member States and citizens. Special attention should be on more vulnerable groups.

Considering the environmental and climate impact: Prioritising sustainability and protecting ecosystems and their biodiversity which is important to maintain and improve our quality of life. However, environmental and climate goals need to be aligned with other values and goals such as affordability of life and competitiveness and take regional differences into account.

Strengthening the competitiveness of the economic sector of the EU and across Member States considering their diverse needs. A need-based approach enables each Member State to allocate funds according to their specific requirements without impeding others. For this, continuous investment in education is essential.

While we believe that it is important to keep an eye on the long-term impact of the EU Budget, it is important to be able to act with urgency and flexibility. Swift and decisive actions are necessary to address immediate challenges, unforeseen needs and opportunities, ensuring that the EU remains responsive and proactive. This dual approach ensures that systems and

policies are resilient in the face of risks and challenges. Maintaining this balance will help uphold the EU's autonomy and independence while fostering a dynamic and forward-looking environment.

For the future EU Budget we believe it is important to ensure transparency at all levels. Accountability about investment criteria, spending, and their impact fosters trust and prevents misspending and corruption. Decentralisation and regionalisation can be helpful to tailor actions and policies to the specific needs of different areas. Maintaining a strong and transparent centralised oversight by the EU is necessary to prevent abuse and corruption. Access to relevant information and visibility must be ensured to the public. Broad and clear communication ensures that actions, decisions, and their impact are visible and understandable to all citizens and stakeholders while fostering trust. The EU should promote its projects and wins more openly. In addition, the EU should continue to actively engage with citizens to understand their perspectives and incorporating their input into decision-making processes ensuring that the budget reflects what truly matters to the people. It is important to ensure that the needs and interests of the European Union, its Member States and its citizens are met. Internal stability and prosperity should be considered while also extending support or resources to non-EU countries. A stronger and more cohesive EU can better invest in the rest of the world. In addition to these principles, actions and projects funded by the EU budget should ensure:

**Feasibility.** Proposed actions or projects should be practical and achievable within a reasonable timeframe and given constraints, making plans realistic and implementable. Defined targets and milestones help measure if the criteria are met successfully within the budgetary lifecycle.

**Efficiency.** Achieving desired outcomes with efficient use of resources, time, and effort maximises productivity and minimises waste of money. This includes considering the short- and long-term cost-benefit ratio and ensuring that money spent has a tangible impact.

**Maximised Impact.** Implementing measures that benefit as many Member States as possible and have a direct and positive impact on the daily lives of citizens ensures widespread positive outcomes. Measures should be measurable and assessed.

Taking these principles and criteria to our hearts, we, citizens of the 27 European Union Member States, recommend putting an emphasis on the following priorities to fulfil our common ambitions.

## Recommendations

### Guiding Recommendation: Prioritising a strong future-ready EU Budget

We, the European Citizens' Panel on a new European budget fit for our ambitions, composed of 150 randomly selected citizens, from the 27 EU Member States, recommend that the new EU budget prioritises the future of all European citizens by focusing on short and long-term sustainability, strategic action, and shared values.

Over three weekends of discussions, we identified key principles to guide the next EU budget (described in the previous introductory statement). The budget must reflect the collective ambitions of a fair, inclusive, sovereign, secure, sustainable, and prosperous Europe that is deeply connected to its people. We call for a budget that is both future-oriented and responsive to immediate needs, while remaining transparent, efficient, and impactful.

To achieve this, we recommend that an adequately funded EU budget:

- Strengthens our shared values by promoting and reinforcing common principles and beliefs to unite the European community and safeguard the EU project.
- Ensures solidarity between Member States by fostering mutual support and cooperation to address common challenges and promote collective well-being.
- Reduces inequalities by addressing disparities within and between Member States, with special attention to more vulnerable groups.
- Considers the environmental and climate impact by prioritising sustainability and the protection of the ecosystems and their biodiversity, while taking into account the different needs of European regions.
- Strengthens competitiveness of the economic sector across Member States by allowing each Member State to allocate funds based on their specific needs.
- Enables swift and flexible action by ensuring the EU can respond quickly to urgent challenges, unforeseen needs, as well as to opportunities, while maintaining long-term focus.
- Ensures transparency and accountability on all levels by providing clear information on investment criteria, spending, and impact, to prevent corruption and misuse of EU funds.
- Promotes decentralisation with strong and transparent oversight by tailoring policies to regional needs while ensuring robust EU-level control to avoid abuse.
- Improves communication and citizen engagement by making EU actions more visible and understandable, actively involving citizens in decisions and reflecting their needs in the budget. The EU should also promote its projects and wins more openly.

- Ensuring that the needs and interests of the European Union, its Member States and its citizens are met. Internal stability and prosperity should be considered while also extending support to non-EU countries.
- Guarantees feasibility, efficiency, and maximised impact by ensuring projects are realistic, cost-effective, and benefit as many citizens and Member States as possible, with clearly defined goals and measurable outcomes.

### Working group 1

#### **01 – Ensuring environmental protection and economic success at the same time**

We recommend that the EU budget is used specifically to create conditions in which environmental protection and economic success are no longer mutually exclusive. The aim is to promote sustainable innovation and ensure that clean technologies, climate friendly mobility and environmentally friendly business models gradually gain importance and eventually become the economic norm – including for small and medium-sized enterprises, also for agriculture.

#### Justification

Environmental protection can only succeed in the long term if it is possible to protect the environment and remain economically successful at the same time. Conversely, the protection of natural resources is only possible in the long term if economic stability is also ensured.

Through joint measures, the EU can strengthen the competitiveness of its Member States and create fair conditions for sustainable business across Europe. The EU budget can act as a lever to support and accelerate environmentally friendly reforms in the Member States.

The focus should be on the clean technology sector and sustainable business models. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular need support here. People on low incomes must not be disadvantaged during the transition – the change must be socially just. The EU budget should be used specifically to promote national reforms, i.e. through tax incentives or targeted investments. The strengthening of intra-European, cross-border rail transport can only succeed if the European Union takes on a pioneering role here.

Connected actions could be:

- Significantly improving rail mobility in Europe to reduce air traffic. EU funding is needed to strengthen rail transport, particularly cross-border transport. This includes significantly expanding rail infrastructure (for both freight and passenger transport) and measures to reduce ticket prices. It is important to protect natural resources in this process.
- Promoting sustainable business practices of small and medium-sized enterprises in the EU, especially in green technologies, circular economy and resource conservation.

- Supporting environmentally friendly measures for example in the fashion and textile industry – through targeted programs for "slow fashion", second-hand concepts and the reduction of environmental impacts along the supply chain.

**02** – Encourage as many people as possible in Europe and beyond to take responsibility for protecting nature and natural resources through environmental education and other measures

The protection of nature and natural resources will only succeed if as many countries as possible – inside and outside Europe – seriously contribute. The EU should set a good example. The EU budget should be used to support the Member States in making the transition to greater sustainability in a socially just manner, to strengthen the environmental awareness of the population and to demand compliance with comparable environmental standards in international partnerships.

#### Justification

Environmental protection and nature conservation are the basis for health, quality of life and the preservation of biodiversity. People need to be motivated to behave in an environmentally conscious manner – and for this they need the necessary knowledge, support, and offers that they can afford.

In many cases, environmental protection can be organised more effectively if it is coordinated at European level. Knowledge, resources and experience can be better pooled together. Awareness-raising campaigns, environmental education, common standards or international partnerships then have a greater impact than if each country acts individually. The EU budget can be used specifically to facilitate or strengthen such transnational measures.

Environmental education should be strengthened in all Member States – i.e., through teacher training and targeted campaigns. People with low incomes should be given special support in the transition to greater sustainability. International cooperation should be linked to environmental and social standards to avoid distortions of competition.

Connected actions could be:

- Strengthening environmental education in schools and universities – through EU funding for curricula, teachers and the involvement of local associations and initiatives. We should also consider the new challenges posed by artificial intelligence;
- Linking EU funding with environmental standards in international partnerships – e.g., in development cooperation and in programs with neighbouring countries;
- Promoting awareness-raising campaigns and civic engagement for environmental protection, with a special focus on low-income households – to enable a just transition.

## Working group 2

### **03** - Reducing regional disparities through the expansion of essential infrastructure and services

Ensure that every region, particularly rural and underdeveloped areas, has reliable 24/7 access to essential services such as drinkable water, electricity, healthcare, education, and job opportunities. These basic conditions are fundamental for a decent quality of life and must be secured before addressing other development aspects. It is crucial to ensure equal access to both hard infrastructure (water, electricity, internet, transport) and soft infrastructure (healthcare, education, mobility) across all EU regions, with a focus on standardisation and harmonisation, particularly in underdeveloped or lagging areas.

#### Justification

Equal access to basic infrastructure is essential for improving quality of life, reducing regional disparities, and ensuring social inclusion across the EU. It directly supports the goals of territorial cohesion and the well-being of all citizens.

Harmonisation of basic services also reflects core EU values of equality and solidarity. Through shared standards and coordinated investment, the EU can help close development gaps and guarantee equal opportunities regardless of geographical location.

Efforts must prioritise underdeveloped and rural areas, where infrastructure is often lacking. A balance must be struck between respecting national specificities and applying EU-wide standards. Risk of one-size-fits-all approaches should be managed carefully, and proximity to services should be ensured in both rural and urban contexts.

Connected actions could be:

- Introducing a European crisis management system to ensure water supply in emergency situations, as well as European coordination in the use of natural resources in border regions to prevent negative impacts on neighbouring countries (e.g., in the event of floods, but also regarding well drilling or groundwater extraction).
- Improving the electricity and internet networks to prevent overload. Implementing a stress test for the electricity and internet infrastructure to identify and eliminate faults accordingly.
- Harmonising railway networks and introducing common standards to ensure smooth train operations not only between major cities but especially to connect rural areas across national borders. This also enables the shift of freight transport to rail, even in rural areas, helping to protect the environment and stimulate the economy.

### **04** – A Future in the countryside: Combating rural exodus through education, jobs, and housing



We recommend preventing rural exodus of young people and skilled workers, qualified educational opportunities and access to jobs as well as affordable housing are needed. A lack of affordable housing is not just a rural problem, but also a challenge in cities. These would be relieved if more people stayed in the countryside.

#### Justification

The rural exodus is not a problem of individual countries, but a European problem, which is why it should also be solved at European level.

This recommendation supports reducing regional disparities and ensuring territorial cohesion—core EU values. Equal access to education helps people build meaningful careers without needing to migrate to urban centres or other countries. Affordable housing prevents exclusion and displacement and is necessary to support social stability. Education and housing are both vital to enabling balanced regional development and preventing rural decline.

National efforts have often proven insufficient or outdated. EU action can bring faster and more harmonised solutions, such as coordinated rules to avoid rent speculation, including the introduction of rent ceilings or standardised rent calculation methods inspired by best practices (e.g. former Italian legislation). EU-level programmes can also support cross-border educational exchanges and help replicate initiatives beyond major cities, ensuring all regions benefit.

Implementation requires strong coordination between EU and national governments. Special attention should be given to underdeveloped and rural areas, where access to education and housing is often limited. Member States must commit to developing and expanding educational and housing programmes beyond large urban centre. Risks include resistance to rent regulation and market liberalisation trends; therefore, clear frameworks and a merit-based, data-driven approach are needed to balance market flexibility with social protection.

Connected actions could be:

- Providing financial support for the mobility of students and skilled workers to ensure they can access universities and workplaces without needing to relocate to urban areas;
- Promoting and support digital education initiatives to enhance access to high- quality learning opportunities in rural regions;
- Establishing a dedicated committee to design and propose effective rent regulation measures.

#### Working group 3

### **05 – Meaningful and sustainable inclusion of migrants and refugees for a stronger Europe**

We recommend that the EU Budget helps Member States invest more in migrant and refugee inclusion, with a robust mechanism to monitor these actions. Inclusion must build on mutual respect. This means that migrants and refugees receive access to language learning, socio-professional opportunities, and targeted protection and psychological support for vulnerable groups. Host communities should be supported to provide information about their legal system, including human rights and legal rights of women and children, promote tolerance and intercultural understanding through education and community initiatives (e.g., sports and peer-learning activities). Additionally, to increase awareness among host communities, they should implement anti-discrimination and intercultural understanding through the education systems, public awareness campaigns and social media. Beyond legal or emergency aid, the focus should be on long-term community resilience. Additional resources should support Member States facing greater challenges and embrace the solidarity principle. The EU must also secure its external borders and create a fair, coordinated system for reception and distribution, ensuring balanced responsibility and solidarity across the Union.

### Justification

Migration has the potential to enrich European societies socially, culturally, and economically. It should be met with preparedness, guided by a clear vision, and supported by a strategic, shared, inclusive, and sustained approach to inclusion. Yet many migrants and refugees face systemic barriers: language difficulties, blocked access to jobs, the scars of trauma and violence, discrimination, and the risk of exploitation, challenges that are particularly acute for women, girls, and children. These realities not only violate human rights and obstruct their full participation in society but also deprive European societies of the energy, skills, and perspectives that migrants bring. At the same time, prejudice and fear of the 'foreign' continue to drive exclusion across the EU, denying migrants their full rights and reducing the host societies' ability to benefit from their potential. Additionally, the unequal distribution of the responsibility for hosting and including refugees among Member States threatens cohesion and solidarity, increases tensions and limits the effectiveness of EU-wide responses.

Visionary and united EU action can make migration a catalyst for a stronger and more resilient Europe. One that lives up to its values and where everyone can contribute, belong, and thrive.

The EU plays a key role in ensuring a coordinated, inclusive, and rights-based approach to migration and asylum policy. It can harmonise policies across Member States, reduce disparities in responsibility-sharing, and provide targeted funding to most affected regions. The EU can support inclusion programmes for civil society, local authorities, and businesses that help foster social cohesion, mobility, reduce inequalities, and enable migrants to contribute fully to their host communities. By acting at the EU level, Member States can share expertise, reduce inefficiencies, and increase solidarity, while building a more resilient and socially cohesive Europe. Investment in inclusion also enhances the Union's social and economic sustainability, ensuring that all residents, including migrants and asylum seekers can actively contribute to Europe's future.

As conditions of success, we believe that the EU should ensure that migrants understand and respect the host country's culture and core values, especially human rights, legal rights of women and children and gender equality. This must also include information campaigns to educate men who are often the cause of abuse. They also should ensure fair distribution of responsibilities across Member States, proportional to the size of each Member State, with additional support to countries receiving a higher number of migrants and recognise the right to work for legally residing refugees and facilitate the recognition of qualifications from countries of origin. The EU should also embed intercultural understanding and anti-discrimination in education systems, public communication and social media education and establish monitoring mechanisms to track the effectiveness and fairness of inclusion policies and budget allocations. Finally, the EU should pay special attention to the most vulnerable people in migration, such as women and children who suffer specific violence and abuse and ensure greater flexibility to access and distribution of the fund responding to the emergencies and constant crises.

Connected actions could be:

- Facilitating inclusive education and language learning for migrants: inclusive education paths, peer-to-peer learning programmes and early intercultural education to foster mutual understanding and inclusion, especially for women, children and youth. This should also support teachers through targeted training and structural improvements;
- Developing socio-professional inclusion pathways, including recognition of foreign qualifications and skills, and supporting migrants and refugees in sectors where their skills are most needed. It should also support targeted programmes for women and girls affected by violence;
- Supporting the effective implementation of a coordinated European system for the reception of migrants and refugees, ensuring safe, appropriately sized, and dignified reception centres. There must be an equitable and proportional distribution among Member States. Providing age- and trauma-sensitive psychological support, especially for children, women, and survivors of sexual violence or trafficking.

#### Working group 4

### **06 – Budget support for equal access to healthcare, medicine production, and cross-border care in the EU**

We recommend that the EU budget supports investments in healthcare, digitalisation of medical systems, significant funding for research initiatives, projects increasing medicine transparency and affordability, and strategic autonomy in pharmaceutical production. This includes financing cross-border healthcare cooperation through a common European health card and supporting telemedicine with extended service hours.

Justification

This is important because significant disparities in healthcare access and high medicine prices create barriers for EU citizens. Supporting EU medicine production increases strategic autonomy and can potentially lower medicine costs. A coordinated approach to cross-border healthcare enables citizens to access specialist care regardless of their location and strengthens the EU's resilience during health crises.

Cross-border cooperation in healthcare and joint medicine procurement requires EU- level coordination. EU funds can support pilot projects and research that individual countries would struggle to finance alone.

To be successful, we think that the following actors should be impacted in the first place: regions with weaker healthcare infrastructure, pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity within the EU, healthcare information systems.

The EU should aim at finding balance between supporting EU pharmaceutical production and ensuring competitive pricing; and coordination with existing healthcare competences of member states. There is a need to ensure that pharmaceutical companies receiving EU funding maintain fair pricing practices. Finally, more coordination between EU research programmes on innovative medical devices and treatments that may reduce long-term costs is necessary.

Connected actions could be:

- Financing the modernisation of healthcare infrastructure and digital healthcare systems in underserved regions, while allocating budget for the development of a European health card system that eliminates administrative barriers to cross- border healthcare and providing targeted funding for advanced medical equipment in hospitals, particularly surgical robots and other high-technology solutions;
- Funding companies and public research centres across the EU that develop and produce essential pharmaceutical ingredients and raw materials within the Union, support strategic autonomy in the medicine supply chain, provide conditional grants tied to fair pricing agreements, and allocate resources for coordinated wholesale medicine procurement based on member states' ongoing needs;
- Allocating increased financial resources to programs supporting telemedicine projects with extended service hours and fund targeted research on innovative medical technologies and early detection devices that can deliver long-term cost savings.

## **07 – Supporting mental health for all age groups through integrated EU budget actions**

We recommend that the EU budget finances comprehensive mental health programs targeting all age groups and including research, prevention initiatives, treatment support, and awareness campaigns to reduce stigma. Particular attention should be paid to go beyond existing programs, improving data collection systems, and supporting knowledge exchange between healthcare professionals.

## Justification

Mental health challenges affect citizens of all ages across Europe, from children and youth to working adults and the elderly. Rising rates of mental health issues, including suicide, demand both targeted interventions for specific groups (such as youth and the elderly) and improvements to overall mental healthcare systems. Early intervention and destigmatisation can significantly improve outcomes and reduce long-term costs.

EU-level coordination enables better understanding of cross-border mental health trends through standardised data collection and reporting. Pan-European campaigns can more effectively combat stigma, while knowledge exchange through specialist committees and networks accelerates implementation of effective solutions and therapies across Member States.

Connected actions could be:

- Significantly increasing overall funding allocations for programs supporting standardised mental health data collection systems across member states and finance international research consortia focusing on evidence-based interventions for all age groups, with substantial growth compared to previous budget periods;
- Investing in innovative solutions such as online platforms to facilitate reporting of mental health concerns. Establish dedicated financial resources for specialized services addressing conditions including autism, ADHD, and dementia, while increasing the current budgetary allocation for comprehensive mental health integration across the EU;
- Substantially increasing funding for comprehensive prevention and awareness programs that combine digital approaches with traditional high-visibility media campaigns including billboards and TV/radio advertisements to reduce stigma, while supporting regular specialist congresses and establishing accountability measures for social media and online platforms that impact mental health.

## Working group 5

### **08** - A strong and secure EU against digital threats

We recommend that the EU Budget focuses on increasing European capacities in cybersecurity, to better defend the Union against digital threats.

## Justification

As digitalisation continues to accelerate across Europe, every citizen, business and organisation faces increasing exposure to cyberattacks. Every aspect of our daily lives – from how we make payments to our transportation systems – is vulnerable to these digital threats. These attacks target our personal data and can potentially disrupt critical services that we all depend upon daily. By improving cybersecurity through targeted EU budget allocations, we can better protect the functioning of our states and their critical infrastructure, as well as our economy. This investment would ensure that the personal data of ordinary citizens, as well as

sensitive information held by businesses and public organisations, receives proper protection against increasingly sophisticated threats.

These digital challenges concern all Member States equally, yet they all lack sufficient expertise and technology to counter them effectively on their own. Thus, there is a clear need for exchange and coordination among EU Member States, in order to pool resources and expertise at the European level and thus develop more effective defences that benefit everyone.

Crucially, people's data security should be enhanced without constraining their personal liberties or privacy.

Connected actions could be:

- Financing the further development of the European Cybersecurity Agency. This would serve as a competence centre, a central hub connecting national agencies and centres across member states, allowing them to share their experiences and coordinate their efforts more effectively. The centre would provide essential training for staff from different countries, helping to boost their cybersecurity skills and expertise. By pooling resources for cybersecurity research, we can avoid duplication of efforts and get more out of the invested money;
- Supporting the development of Europe's own satellite navigation and communication systems. This would reduce our dependence on satellite networks owned by other countries or private companies outside Europe. Having our own satellite infrastructure would give us greater control over our digital security.

## OG - A more independent EU in the field of defence

We recommend that the European Union allocates budget funding to strengthen defence capacities across Member States and promote military harmonisation within the EU.

### Justification

Enhancing our defence independence is essential because it allows the EU to protect its citizens without being overly reliant on external powers (e.g. the US) who may be unable or unwilling to assist.

Addressing defence needs at the EU level offers significant added value: By aligning military equipment and munitions across Member States, we can reduce overall costs while increasing the interoperability of our national armies.

Connected actions could be:

- Supporting the development of critical infrastructure across Europe that serves both military and civilian purposes ("dual use infrastructure"). This includes but is not limited to transport systems, power grids, and satellite navigation networks. However, we should not rule out funding infrastructure with primarily military applications, such as

armament factories. These investments should be guided by an EU-wide needs assessment to ensure that Member States receive support for developing the infrastructure most critical to them;

- Supporting research on improving the defence capacities in the EU, including how to improve these capacities in a way that also benefits civilians. Moreover, funds should foster cooperation within the EU scientific community working on these issues and its cooperation with industry;
- Investing in the development of European military production such as ammunition and equipment, next to other types of defence targeting digital threats, terrorism, etc.

#### Working group 6

### **10 – Ensure that all young people have the opportunity to enter the labour market under fair and decent working conditions**

We recommend that the EU actively supports access to quality and secure employment for all young people. Regardless of their level of education – whether from schools or universities – young people across the EU should be supported in finding their place in the labour market. To do so, they need access to information about in-demand sectors, networking opportunities, professional experience, and practical pathways to employment.

#### Justification

Unemployment is a major issue both at the individual and national level. For individuals, it creates significant disadvantages and can lead to psychological distress. At national level, unemployed individuals do not contribute to the economy and often require financial support from the state. Facilitating access to quality employment for young people will also contribute to the development of the EU and the well-being of its citizens. The EU should complement and support the efforts of Member States through coordinated action. To make sure that young people can access the labour market they need support in securing internships, increased awareness of existing programmes and platforms, as well as more knowledge of available opportunities.

Connected actions could be:

- Complementing Member States' subsidies by financing work placements and internships for young people without experience, while promoting harmonised and improved working conditions across all EU Member States. This could be achieved through the adaptation or strengthening of existing EU programmes;
- Financing the development of partnerships between retired persons and companies to train the youth who is just starting into their working life;
- Creating a single, EU-wide platform to connect unemployed individuals with job opportunities, particularly in high-demand sectors, and ensuring strong awareness of its existence. This platform should also be extended to universities and secondary schools to better prepare young people for the labour market.

## **11 – Support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups**

We recommend that the EU invests in the development of a more resilient and equitable economic structure across the EU that enables small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups to thrive alongside multinationals.

### **Justification**

We think that, historically, the EU's single market has primarily benefited large corporations, which have acquired more and more power. We should support SMEs that better fulfil the needs of citizens. Many small businesses have disappeared, replaced by larger companies.

Addressing this issue at the EU level enables a broader, unified vision and helps prevent harmful competition between Member States. Expanding the internal market contributes to job creation, reduces unemployment, and enhances product quality.

Connected actions could be:

- Developing specific subsidies to SMEs and start-ups which are producing in Europe to help them become more competitive;
- Creating incentives to help those SMEs which need it to reduce their energy costs and consumption, making them more competitive and alleviating their burdens;
- Reducing administrative burden, enhancing communication and clarifying rules for SMEs to ensure a much easier access to EU funds.

### **Working group 7**

## **12 – Strengthen the food system by making large food companies more sustainable and support small producers**

We recommend that the EU uses its budget to help building a stronger and more independent food system. This means two things: first, making big food companies use more sustainable methods. Second, giving more support to small farmers who really need it. Both are important, if we want to increase food security and have better, safer food and more jobs in local areas.

### **Justification**

Strengthening these pillars will increase food independence. However, the growth in food production must ensure that the food produced is of high quality and sustainable. By making large companies more sustainable, the EU can reach the necessary scale for transformation. The EU should focus on supporting small farmers and ensure continuity among generations, as there is a bigger need here. By supporting small farmers, the EU will create more jobs and be more resilient for future shocks. Local production should be promoted even if these local products might entail higher costs, as they are often of higher quality. This includes not only the nutrition



of the food itself that is consumed but that the production is sustainable and meets high environmental standards.

The EU can make a big difference by bringing countries together, sharing good ideas, and using its budget to help farmers big and small. When the EU acts, it can make sure rules are fair and that no country is left behind. This helps to make sure that more food is produced in the EU and that our food is safe and of high quality everywhere in Europe.

To make this work, we need to find the right balance. The EU must help both small farmers and big companies increase productivity and move toward greener farming. But we also have to make sure food does not become too expensive, especially for families with lower incomes. It is important that not only well-off citizens get access to better but higher cost products. This can be mitigated by reaching scaling effects or financing food programmes.

There is a tension between competitiveness of the agricultural sector and stepping up sustainability. The EU budget should take this tension into consideration and could diffuse it by investing in more research and targeted subsidy programs.

There could be conflicting goals if the EU wants to increase food sovereignty and also promote renewable energy. These goals need to be taken into consideration when making an investment decision. Fertile land should preferably be used for food production.

If the EU imports food from other countries, it needs to ensure that the products meet the same standards as for the farmers within the EU.

Connected actions could be:

- Investing in communication efforts to make the existing and future EU-wide campaigns more visible to show people why food made in the EU is good for their health, the planet, and local jobs, and help people recognise EU food labels (such as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and the EU organic logo). The campaigns should also raise awareness about the context why higher food prices could be justified;
- Investing more in research (including studies) to help farmers grow more food in ways that are better for nature, ensure animal welfare, use fewer chemicals and plastics, and improve biodiversity;
- Ensuring the direct payments in the agricultural sector to support small farmers and couple the payments of all producers with sustainability criteria.

## Working group 8

### **13 – Empower people in using digital technologies, including AI**

We recommend that the EU budget focuses on making acquiring digital skills accessible for all citizens. The goal is to provide autonomy, confidence, and security to all EU citizen in an increasingly digitalised world.

Justification

It is essential to bridge the digital gap across the European Union. It needs a strong and coordinated action at the EU level for ensure that the society stays inclusive, across EU, aligned with solidarity and cohesion principles.

The development and deployment of digital technologies should be done in a way that preserves people's personal integrity (data protection, without undermining our intellectual capacities and free will), and customised in a way that protects younger users, as excessive exposure to digital environments can negatively impact children's cognitive development.

Connected actions could be:

- Supporting actions to empower daily life use of digital technologies to help citizen use new technologies, tackling fake news, navigating disinformation and learn cybersecurity practices by practicable workshops;
- Investing in the necessary technical and digital infrastructure to enable high- quality connection for people living in rural or isolated areas, ensuring that geographical location does not limit access to lifelong learning resources and to professional development opportunities;
- Supporting the deployment of targeted education programs and learning programs for diverse groups such as older adults, people with disabilities, and those in remote areas. This deployment should be guided by EU-level guidelines to ensure consistency and direction for Member States in implementation.

## **14 – Sovereignty of the EU in digital technologies**

We recommend that the EU budget supports and develops digital innovations to strengthen digital sovereignty of the EU (software, hardware and recycling).

### **Justification**

We need to ensure a greater technology independence, resilience and security in an economy that is increasingly based on the digital sphere. This strategic issue requires more cooperation, coordination and solidarity between countries to combine the strengths of Member States and to ensure that they all progress equally fast in their digital development.

We should address the environmental impact and the ethical issues for a sustainable and conscious development of digital technologies, especially Artificial Intelligence. We should strengthen research in a coordinated way across the EU to be more effective.

Connected actions could be:

- Investing in the development of software and hardware in EU to be more autonomous in the digital transition;
- Investing in research to promote digital development with a positive environmental impact, while taking into account ethical matters. The EU should create a centre or hub to

coordinate the work of research institutes and universities, private actors and businesses across Member States and to share real-time information of research results as well as to promote joint research capacities and knowledge- sharing;

- Investing in the development of methods for recycling materials and in circular economy practices to be more resilient, autonomous and counterbalance import of rare materials.

## Working group 6

### **15 – Promote inclusive, high-quality education for all through targeted EU support**

We recommend that the EU prioritises inclusive, high-quality education in its next budget by expanding funding and enhancing coordination and mobility across Member States. This includes broadening access to existing programs which focus on educational mobility, supporting all educational levels (from preschool to lifelong learning), and ensuring educational inclusion for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disability and learning difficulties who can be included, with support, in typical education systems. EU action should complement national educational systems and focus on the capacity building and support of educators, as well as in areas where cross-border cooperation, inclusion, and mobility bring added value.

#### Justification

Education is fundamental to economic resilience, democratic values, and social cohesion. Tackling inequality in education helps address major EU challenges such as brain drain, demographic shifts, youth unemployment, and regional disparities.

The EU is uniquely positioned to address cross-border educational mobility, regional disparities, and inclusion gaps that national systems alone struggle to solve. It can support harmonized quality standards, fund transnational programs, and provide additional resources to less-developed regions. The EU also fosters shared values (e.g., equality, anti-discrimination) through collaborative education programs.

We believe certain conditions of success are necessary to consider. EU programs should complement national efforts, especially in underserved regions and sectors. Funding must prioritize inclusivity (e.g., disadvantaged groups, rural students, learners with disabilities). Finally, transparent criteria and cooperation with national ministries will help ensure uptake and impact.

Connected actions could be:

- Providing EU-level funding and incentives to reinforce national education support systems for educators aimed at expanding their capacity to ensure equal access of high-quality education for all students, including for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, remote areas, migration backgrounds and with learning difficulties or disabilities. Such support is (also) crucial for the capacity of institutions to receive such students from abroad,

as part of the mobility program expansions described below in Action 2;

- Broadening and enhancing educational mobility programs to reach more students – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, remote areas, migration backgrounds and with learning difficulties or disabilities — ensuring equity in access. Educators should be adequately supported, and admission procedures should be simplified to make sure that these programs are more accessible for more students across primary, secondary and tertiary education as well as in vocational training. The EU should make sure that there is adequate dissemination of information on such programs for students, educators and families, through for example roadshows and online;
- Strengthening vocational training and lifelong learning opportunities in member States, with additional support funding and incentives, including enhanced career guidance in schools and support for upskilling opportunities – especially for unemployed citizens and citizens from disadvantaged backgrounds.

## **16 - Foster a common European identity through education and awareness**

We recommend that the EU prioritises educational initiatives that promote a shared European culture, an appreciation of the cultural diversity at the core of our shared EU identity and **raise citizens' awareness** of the EU institutions and their roles. This includes information campaigns delivered through different communication channels, the development of educational material on the EU for use in schools, the provision of free language learning programmes, as well as promoting interactive and experiential programmes that connect citizens to European values and institutions.

### **Justification**

A stronger and more unified Europe depends on citizens who understand and feel connected to European institutions and values, and who understand the strength in EU's cultural diversity. However, many people are unaware of the EU's role in their lives and of the cultural richness of other Member States. Enhancing cultural understanding is important to foster solidarity, encourage democratic engagement, and build resilience against misinformation or fragmentation.

The EU can coordinate and fund cross-border cultural and educational initiatives that individual Member State couldn't implement alone. By providing a consistent, high- quality EU-related for inclusion in educational curricula, the EU can foster programmes that build shared identity and engagement in the understanding of intercultural diversity.

For such programmes to be effective, they must be inclusive, age-appropriate, and accessible across all Member States. In collaboration with national education authorities, national curricula can be enriched with freely available educational material provided by the EU. Moreover, interactive tools should be engaging and modern, appealing to younger

audiences. European Schools and exchange programmes should emphasise unity in diversity and democratic participation.

Connected actions could be:

- Developing interactive platforms (also in digital form) that educate about the EU in schools and universities and promote European identity and intercultural awareness programmes to promote widespread student exchanges to build shared cultural experiences;
- Developing and enhancing existing educational material on EU identity, the Europe Day and EU institutions for use in national curricula and establish European Schools in key capitals which focus on EU education. Raising awareness about the EU outside the EU is also important to be considered;
- Providing access to free, EU-wide language lessons as well as introducing a TV and online channel focused on education about European institutions.

#### Working group 10

##### **17 – Smart Europe: 'click and get it done'**

We recommend that the EU budget is used to support the simplification, harmonization and digitalisation of administrative procedures across Member States. The protection of personal and sensitive data must be a core element of all digitalization processes.

##### Justification

Simplified and harmonized administrative procedures across the EU make citizens' lives easier and foster smoother cooperation among Member States. These reforms also create a more favourable environment for investment, contributing to technological progress, competitiveness and EU growth.

While most administrative reforms are implemented at national level, the EU budget can play a key supporting role by funding the necessary tools—such as digital infrastructure, platforms and training—that facilitate national-level reforms.

This measure should be a service for all, targeted not only at citizens but also for enterprises, society and other bodies beyond public administration: accessibility of this service is a key feature for all users.

Possible risks to consider include the inaccessibility of data if digital services are not functioning, which could lead to service disruptions. Additionally, the digitization of personal data may result in the abuse of sensitive information. Another concern is the risk of hacking of important documents such as ID cards, bank cards, and other sensitive materials.

Connected actions could be:

- Identifying, harmonizing and adopting best practices for simplification and digitalization of administrative procedures across Member States, with financial support of the EU;
- Incentivizing the education and training of citizens to become autonomous in accessing digital public services;
- Funding the development at EU level of a secure and user-friendly digital platform for managing administrative procedures, which can be used by Member States to reduce duplication and minimize cyber security risks.

## **18 – Understand. Trust. Participate - Building stronger connections between citizens and EU for a better tomorrow**

We recommend that the EU budget focuses on fostering stronger connections between citizens and EU institutions by improving transparency, accessibility to reliable information, accountability, communication and citizens' engagement. It should also support educational and outreach initiatives that help citizens better understand the EU and its functioning.

### **Justification**

It is important to invest in closer and more transparent EU institutions to help build trust between citizens and institutions and strengthen the unity of the EU.

The EU budget can support the adaptation and improvement of existing information and engagement platforms to better meet citizens' needs for accessible information. It can also back educational and outreach initiatives that increase understanding and engagement across Member States.

The target audience for these actions should include both individuals and businesses and other entities, with a special focus on young people and students.

A key risk to address is the spread of misinformation at all levels.

Connected actions could be:

- Supporting coordination actions among Member States with the aim to introduce systematic EU education and communication on EU history and functioning, targeting all age groups via diverse communication channels including schools, interactive exhibitions, dedicated days and other kind of engagement initiatives;
- Adapting, expanding and enhancing EU communication across different channels, such as existing EU websites (e.g., europa.eu and Citizens Engagement Platform) to provide simple, user-friendly access to information on EU directives and institutional activities. In addition to this, supporting Member States to enhance their own websites and communication channels, social media communication, ensure that EU information is made more visible and produce a "wow effect" through memorable and accessible communication. For example, the annual keynote speech (state of

the Union) could be promoted, along with similar initiatives, adopting and amplifying successful examples;

- Supporting Member States to develop collaborative and coordinated strategies to curb fake news and promote dissemination of accurate information.

## Working group 11

### 1G – Develop renewable energy to secure our energy sovereignty

We recommend that the European Union prioritizes a comprehensive and gradual transition towards renewable energy sources (e.g., solar, wind, water, hydrogen, geothermal) as much as possible, while simultaneously investing in research and development in next-generation technologies, notably to move from nuclear to fusion energy in the long term. The energy transition must ensure that renewable energy remains affordable and accessible to both residential consumers, public institutions and industries alike. The strategy should include robust infrastructure development, consumer incentives, and research funding to position the EU as a global leader in the field of sustainable energy production, storage, consumption and recycling.

#### Justification

The energy transition towards renewable is a strategic priority which supports 1) the competitiveness of European industry and job creations, 2) our independence from external suppliers, and notably Russia, thus ensuring our energy security and 3) the fight against climate change and biodiversity loss.

Connected actions could be:

- Identifying the specific and unique features of each European region for the production of a type of green energy at the EU level to ensure a coherent and complementary approach, and invest in the local production of the said energy (e.g., areas with long periods of sun exposure should invest in solar energy, others in wind turbines or waterpower, geothermal waters, etc.) to encourage local economic development and job creation;
- Funding the modernisation and interconnection of electricity grids at the EU level, to support energy transfer from one Member State to another and ensure that there is energy solidarity across Member States;
- Supporting both individual consumers, households and communities to install their own green energy production and storage systems (especially for those consumers who are not connected to energy grids), and the establishment of local recycling points for materials that have completed their use cycle.

### 20 – Strategic strength: Europe's industrial response to global disruption

We recommend that the EU supports investments in innovative and sustainable technological solutions and raw materials. These are essential for our digital and green

transformation (e.g., semiconductors, batteries, rare earths, solar panels, hydrogen technologies) and to safeguard the resilience and independence of European industry.

#### Justification

The European industry is heavily dependent on imports from third countries, especially China, the USA, and South Korea (e.g. raw materials, semiconductors). This dependency poses a risk of supply chain disruptions, loss of competitiveness, and vulnerability in crisis situations (e.g., pandemics, geopolitical tensions). In addition, many of the manufactured goods we are importing do not meet EU environmental and social standards, despite mechanisms included in trade agreements with third parties (e.g. cars, textiles, medicines). Investing at EU level in critical technological and material goods can increase the resilience of the European industry to global shocks and our competitiveness in the global market, shorten supply chains and reduce CO2 emissions, contribute to job creation in high-tech sectors.

Connected actions could be:

- Creating European alliances: support the cooperation of member states, research institutions, and industry and projects in the field of technologies (e.g. notably batteries, chips, cloud technology);
- Investing in mining and recycling of strategic raw materials in the EU. This includes identifying and coordinating European deposits of rare earths (e.g., in Sweden, Portugal), supporting ecological mining and recycling technologies and creating strategic reserves;
- Increasing funding for research and development. This includes the expansion of research and development programmes like and the establishment of technology hubs and centres of excellence to support the development of European alternatives to Chinese and American technologies.

#### Working group 12

##### 21 – Strengthening EU diplomatic alignment via shared values

We recommend a more robust budget support to EU diplomacy, to strengthen alignment in external diplomatic positions, based on a regularly updated set of EU core values and norms.

#### Justification

European values form, despite their diversity, or in part because of it, an important cultural body that defines us and that should not be lost. They are also an important tool in our dealings with third parties – be it refugees, business partners, other sovereign states, groups and institutions and so on – while respecting the sovereignty and cultural differences between all parties involved when dealing with external partners. This common foundation also works as an anchor for a position that all Member States can defend, including on such matters like migration and asylum, development aid to third countries, diplomatic relations with partners and third countries. This common position in turn considerably strengthens the stance of the



EU in the world. In particular, a stronger position in matters of development aid may help to defuse, prevent or mitigate conflicts, for example by reducing migration pressure or avoiding militaristic action.

The evaluation and improvement of an EU charter of norms and values, the design of a common position and its coordinated implementation can only be achieved at European level.

Decisions cannot be dominated by a country or a group of countries. They have to be balanced, otherwise there is a very high risk of weakening the common position of the EU during negotiations and other actions by non-aligned Member-States.

Ensuring the proper distribution and functioning of the European embassies in non-European countries (in addition to those of the member states) allows for specialized points of contact with the policies and procedures of the EU. Not having these actively weakens the reach of all measures that the EU promotes outside, in particular as they do not have the same mandates as the MS's embassies.

The difficulty in identifying who speaks for the EU weakens the EU's position in negotiations. Ensuring that the diplomatic voice of Europe has more visibility and clearer identification, regardless of it being a person or a group of people, would address this risk.

Connected actions could be:

- Investing strongly into dialogue between Member States to reinforce a common position defended by all;
- Supporting actions aimed at improving the charter of the European values, as well as mapping its evolution, so that this can be used as a compass in enlargement, bilateral contracts, migration and other matters where integration is key;
- Addressing the root causes of migration via development and humanitarian aid focusing on Africa and conflict-affected countries.

## 22 – A holistic diplomatic EU plan

We recommend that the EU budget supports and invests in areas like democracy, internal security, defence as a deterrent method, independence from external actors, economic power, technological development and cultural influence to strengthen diplomacy.

### Justification

The position of the EU in the world and its diplomatic power is very much connected to "soft factors", and these are essential in maintaining a position that is unique and valuable. By investing in the quality of its democracy, its quality of life, peace inside its borders, innovation and culture, and the synergies between them, while at the same time maintaining a defence capability that acts as a deterrent measure, we ensure the best possible diplomatic position in negotiations and all other dealings with external actors.

Without coordination and concerted effort at the EU level, it is not possible to address unbalanced conditions and very discrepant levels in such matters inside the EU. Based on the concept of stronger inside, stronger on the outside.

Connected actions could be:

- Supporting security and defence as an important dimension of, and conducting to, democracy, including research on innovative solutions and reinforced cooperation with countries who are interested in them;
- Supporting the harmonized implementation of rules and practices on immigration treatment, and an effective coordination centre.

