

Reinventing Engagement Through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

National publication

FROM CITIZEN CONSULTATIONS TO BOLD TRANSFORMATIONS: FRENCH VIEWS ON A STRONGER, FAIRER AND MORE DEMOCRATIC EUROPEAN UNION

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INTRODUCTION

The REACH project – Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations – seeks to strengthen democratic culture by promoting meaningful citizen engagement in debates on key European policy issues. Against the backdrop of declining trust in representative institutions and limited participatory mechanisms, REACH fosters inclusive deliberation on three interconnected themes: the rule of law, the environment, and EU integration. The project runs from 1 July 2024 to December 2025 and is funded by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). It is implemented by a consortium of eight organisations: the European Policy Centre (CEP) as project coordinator, European Policy Centre (EPC, Brussels), Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI BH), Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), Notre Europe – Institut Jacques Delors (NE IJD), Association for Civil Society Development SMART, and Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP). By creating space for citizens — including youth and traditionally underrepresented groups — to reflect on and express their views, REACH aims to inform national and EU-level policy debates and contribute to a more participatory and future-oriented European project.

In France, this objective is all the more relevant given the deeply rooted distrust towards the EU. Over the past two decades, this distrust has manifested in the rejection of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe by referendum, and in a significant rise in support for Eurosceptic parties — with 60.97% of votes going to Eurosceptic candidates in the 2022 presidential election and 48.29% in the second round of the 2024 parliamentary elections. The demand for more direct democracy has also strongly marked public debate in recent years, as demonstrated by the Yellow Vests movement. This ambition was therefore reflected in the Jacques Delors Institute's involvement in organising three citizen consultations (two local and one national), and in producing three podcasts and two infographics capturing citizens' perspectives on the rule of law, the environment, and EU integration, considered through the lens of EU enlargement.

FROM LOCAL TO NATIONAL CONSULTATIONS – KEY INSIGHTS

In the first half of 2025, three citizen consultations were organised in France as part of the project: two local consultations — one in Bourgogne-Franche-Comté and one in Île-de-France — and a national consultation in Paris. The local events, held on 24 January and 3 March respectively, aimed to gather citizens' perspectives on EU integration/enlargement, the environment, and the rule of law from diverse territorial contexts. The national consultation, held on 26 May, brought together selected citizen delegates from the two local events alongside key stakeholders, including academics, think tankers, diplomats, journalists, high-level civil servants, and a Member of Parliament.

In total, 58 citizens aged between 18 and 93 were recruited through local networks, student groups, civil society organisations, and social media. Despite efforts to ensure balance, the group was not fully representative of the ideological spectrum of the French population, with a noticeable over-representation of pro-European voices. Nevertheless, the consultations generated strong engagement, rich deliberation, and inclusive dialogue. Though some debates were marked by initial disagreements — particularly on EU enlargement — most discussions led to areas of consensus, often anchored in shared values and concrete concerns about the EU's future.

Common ground emerged on EU integration/enlargement, and the rule of law, while environmental issues revealed sharper generational divides. Across all discussions, participants stressed the importance of embedding a strong social dimension into EU policymaking to ensure that vulnerable groups are not left behind in major transitions.

Group dynamics varied: some groups reached consensus easily, while others — where Eurosceptic voices were more present — required more facilitation to bridge disagreements. Debates on enlargement particularly crystallised these differences, with opinions ranging from cautious openness to deep scepticism about the readiness of candidate States and the risks for lower-income populations within the EU.



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A shared concern was the lack of accessible, transparent information about the EU and its actions. Many participants pointed to incoherence between institutional discourse and lived realities, calling for clearer communication and better civic education to strengthen democratic participation across Europe.

LOCAL CONSULTATIONS

1. EU INTEGRATION/ENLARGEMENT

Participants generally recognised EU enlargement as a strategic tool for securing peace, fostering geopolitical stability, and promoting democratic values. However, this recognition was often accompanied by scepticism regarding the feasibility, pace, and consequences of the process. Concerns included the economic strain on existing Member States, the difficulty of enforcing common rules in more diverse contexts, and the potential erosion of EU coherence and identity. The idea that the EU might be expanding beyond its “civilisational zone” — especially through culturally or politically divergent candidacies — was particularly prominent in some discussions, notably in Dijon.

Many citizens emphasised the need for clear, harmonised, and rigorously applied accession criteria, with stronger emphasis on democratic integrity and cultural proximity alongside economic benchmarks. The case of Ukraine was especially polarising: for some, its accession represented a geopolitical imperative; for others, a potential security and institutional risk. The debate also reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the EU’s communication strategy. Participants criticised the lack of a coherent public narrative on enlargement, the invisibility of its benefits, and the poor accessibility of information. This disconnect was seen as fuelling mistrust, disinformation, and populist rhetoric. As a remedy, many called for more transparent, step-by-step integration processes, with gradual access to EU benefits tied to demonstrable progress on reforms. Importantly, participants linked enlargement to the two other policy areas, insisting that any enlargement of the Union must reinforce, not weaken, the EU’s climate goals or democratic standards.

2. ENVIRONMENT

Environmental issues generated strong concern across groups, with climate change, pollution, biodiversity, and energy policy at the forefront. Yet many participants expressed frustration with how the EU manages the ecological transition. While the EU was viewed as a global leader in setting climate standards, its efforts were often seen as fragmented, technocratic, or disconnected from citizens’ everyday realities. Environmental challenges were consistently framed within broader social and economic structures. Participants stressed that a just transition must account for disparities between and within Member States: while the most vulnerable communities bear the brunt of environmental degradation, they are also the least equipped to shoulder the cost of change. This dynamic reinforced perceptions of inequality, particularly around the affordability of sustainable alternatives like electric vehicles or organic food.

Contradictions within EU policy were sharply criticised — especially in Paris. Citizens highlighted tensions between environmental ambitions and economic decisions — such as the negotiation of free trade agreements that contradict green goals. In this context, many called for better education, more transparent communication, and stronger alignment between rhetoric and action. The need for more visible, practical alternatives and behavioural guidance was particularly emphasised by younger participants. The link between enlargement and climate policy further complicated the discussion. While some saw it as a means to broaden EU climate leadership, others worried that integrating less committed countries could

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undermine shared goals. Most agreed that enlargement must be accompanied by fair and enforceable transition mechanisms, supported by redistribution of resources and tailored technical assistance.

3. RULE OF LAW

The rule of law was widely perceived as a cornerstone of the European project. Yet participants expressed concern about its inconsistent enforcement and citizens' limited understanding of what it entails. While the EU is widely recognised as a guardian of fundamental rights and judicial independence, it is also often perceived as distant and opaque. Participants questioned both the Union's ability to uphold European laws uniformly across Member States and citizens' capacity to understand it. The concept of EU citizenship — often invoked as a unifying identity — was also perceived as vague and unevenly experienced. Many called for stronger civic education and clearer institutional communication to rebuild trust and foster meaningful democratic participation. In this light, the prospect of enlargement sparked concern: could expanding the Union further, without strengthening internal safeguards, weaken its normative core? Participants voiced mixed views on how to uphold European values, particularly in this context. Some favoured strict conditionality and sanctions, while others advocated for more supportive, capacity-building approaches to prevent alienation and resentment. These tensions reflected broader anxieties about the democratic legitimacy of EU governance. While the EU was praised for providing a stable legal framework that transcends national divisions, its institutions — particularly the European Commission — were frequently seen as opaque, bureaucratic, and too heavily influenced by lobbying.

Underlying much of the discussion was a paradox: the EU is simultaneously seen as a shield against authoritarianism and as an overly bureaucratic entity disconnected from citizens' daily lives. European law, though intended to harmonise standards and ensure protections, is often experienced as complex and intrusive. This disconnect is compounded by poor communication and media coverage, leading many to struggle with understanding how EU norms are created, implemented, or even why they matter. Participants insisted that any future enlargement must strengthen, not dilute, the rule of law and environmental protection within the Union. They expressed concern that the integration of candidate States with weaker democratic institutions could undermine both legal and climate commitments within the Union. At the same time, enlargement was seen as an opportunity to extend EU standards, provided the process is gradual, transparent, and backed by adequate support for institutional reform.

NATIONAL CONSULTATION

The national consultation differed significantly from the two local ones in both purpose and format. Its objective was to refine and finalise the recommendations developed by citizens in the earlier stages, ensuring they were accurate, within the scope of EU competences, and practically applicable. To achieve this, the national session brought together a balanced group of citizen delegates and stakeholders — including academics, think tank representatives, diplomats, journalists, high-level civil servants, and a Member of Parliament. While most stakeholders' contributions were highly appreciated for helping clarify, enrich, and ground the proposals, the participation of the MP received criticism due to perceived politicisation and agenda-driven input. Its participation may have proved counterproductive, as it fueled polarisation among citizens where little had previously existed.

During the consultation, participants were presented with 16 trade-offs and synergies drawn from the local consultations. These reflected the dilemmas and priority areas citizens had identified as needing further exploration to develop meaningful recommendations. Using the Slido platform, participants collectively ranked these items, narrowing the list to ten priority

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topics — those deemed most important for focused group discussion and final deliberation (bolded proposals represent the 10 recommendations upvoted by the national consultation group):

- **Ambition for climate action & competitiveness**
- **Ambition for climate action & social justice**
- Climate scepticism & environmental protection
- Complexity of the EU & the rule of law
- **Democratic legitimacy of the EU & the rule of law**
- Enlargement & environmental protection
- Enlargement & protection of the rule of law
- **Euroscepticism & enlargement**
- **EU unity and identity (borders, culture, religion) & enlargement**
- **Feeling of detachment between Member & candidate States**
- **Feeling of detachment from the EU & acceptance of European standards**
- Lack of communication / inaccessibility of the EU & the rule of law
- Lack of transparency in the EU & the rule of law
- **Populism & the rule of law**
- **Sense of belonging & enlargement**
- **Sovereignty & harmonisation of standards**

Participants were divided into three working groups, each composed of four citizen delegates and five experts. Citizens selected from the local consultations were randomly distributed to ensure equal representation from both cities in each group, while experts were assigned based on their thematic expertise. This structure ensured that each group was well-equipped to engage meaningfully with the selected trade-offs and synergies. Working in these balanced sub-groups, participants collaboratively developed a set of concrete policy recommendations. These proposals were then presented in a final plenary session, during which all participants voted via the slido platform to select and prioritise the top ten recommendations. This approach allowed the group to highlight shared priorities without relying on consensus, thereby reducing the risk of deadlock or conflict.

Participants overwhelmingly described the consultations as a positive and enriching experience. They valued the respectful, open atmosphere and appreciated the opportunity to express their views on complex, often overlooked topics such as EU enlargement and the rule of law. Many acknowledged entering the discussions with limited prior knowledge, and left with a deeper understanding and a reshaped perspective.

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The presence of experts was widely appreciated for providing context and clarity, although some participants pointed to an imbalance between expert input and citizen voice. Despite differing opinions, the tone remained constructive, and many felt genuinely listened to. Several areas for improvement were identified to enhance future consultations: more preparation time and longer discussions; clearer and more focused themes; and greater diversity among participants — particularly in terms of political views and geographical representation, with a strong call to include more people from rural areas and smaller towns. Above all, the consultations sparked a renewed appetite for civic dialogue. Participants expressed strong interest in repeating the experience and called for more inclusive, accessible spaces for meaningful citizen engagement on European issues.

PRESENTING TEN POLICY PROPOSALS

Discussions revealed a strong desire to reconnect the European Union with its citizens by rethinking its foundations, institutions, and identity. Enlargement was seen not just as a geopolitical necessity, but as an opportunity to revive the European project, provided that the current institutional framework, perceived as too rigid and opaque, undergoes substantial reform. Participants stressed that without such reform, further integration risks political paralysis and public disillusionment. The opportunity to voice their views on EU-related matters, combined with the perceived geopolitical pressure facing the EU and rising Euroscepticism at home, steered citizens towards policy proposals focused on these concerns. As a result, issues more closely tied to their everyday lives, such as the environment and the rule of law, were sidelined, leaning to the overrepresentation of proposals addressing the EU's challenges.

There was broad support for a renewed European narrative, one rooted in tangible, everyday experiences — such as the euro, mobility, public services, and shared infrastructure — and complemented by stronger civic education, especially in schools. This narrative should reflect the EU's diversity, include popular culture, and foster a sense of multiple, complementary identities rather than replace national ones. A weakened sense of European belonging, especially among socially and geographically marginalised groups, was linked to poor communication, lack of visibility, and limited access to European opportunities.

Citizens emphasised the need to give substance to European citizenship, through symbolic and practical tools like transnational electoral lists and expanded civic initiatives. Establishing European citizens' convention was also proposed, on the condition that it be inclusive, well-structured, and lead to real institutional impact.

At the heart of the debate was the call to align enlargement with democratic legitimacy, ecological transition, and social justice. While gradual integration was seen as a pragmatic path forward, it raised concerns about ambiguous membership statuses. Participants insisted that new accessions must go hand in hand with strengthened governance, transparency, and cohesion.

Ultimately, participants envisioned a more credible, accessible, and democratic EU, one capable of fostering shared belonging, enabling fair transitions, and grounding its vision in the realities of its citizens' daily lives. These considerations have translated into the following policy proposals:

#	Policy Proposal	Addressed To	Area
1	Enhance awareness about the European Union by promoting civic initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and civic service	EU institutions / French institutions	EU integration/enlargement

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2	Improve rail network and public transport to ensure social justice, housing access, and climate action (e.g. suburbs to city centers)	EU institutions / French institutions	Environment
3	Establish European citizens' conventions, offering a deliberative democratic space for dialogue and proposals, especially on climate and citizenship	EU institutions	EU integration/enlargement & environment
4	Introduce transnational electoral lists for the European Parliament to foster a shared political space	EU institutions	EU integration/enlargement
5	Enhance education about the EU by improving the teaching of its history, and organising school activities dedicated to discovering Member and candidate States	French institutions	EU integration/enlargement
6	Reform the EU's decision-making and enlargement processes by expanding qualified majority voting and limiting veto powers, in order to reduce blockages	EU institutions	EU integration/enlargement
7	Enhance the visibility of EU funding and financed projects, e.g. by highlighting "Funded by the EU" mentions	EU institutions / French institutions	EU integration/enlargement
8	Provide EU-focused training for elected officials	EU institutions / French institutions	EU integration/enlargement
9	Carry out an inquiry into the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements	EU institutions	EU integration/enlargement
10	Implement a gradual EU accession process	EU institutions	EU integration/enlargement

POLICY PROPOSAL 1: ENHANCE AWARENESS ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION BY PROMOTING CIVIC INITIATIVES SUCH AS THE EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS AND CIVIC SERVICE

This proposal addresses participants' concerns about the EU being perceived as distant, opaque, and overly bureaucratic, with its laws often seen as complex and intrusive. The lack of accessible and transparent information about the EU fuels misconceptions and detachment from its actions. In response, enhancing awareness about the EU through civic actions, particularly by extending the age limit for participation in the European Solidarity Corps and civic service programs, can bridge this gap.

These programs offer young people hands-on experiences that connect them to EU values, policies, and actions. Participants gain a direct understanding of how the EU works in practice by volunteering or working in a different EU country, engaging in projects that promote social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and human rights. This exposure not only fosters cross-cultural understanding but also educates participants about the role of EU institutions and policies. These programs empower young people to become ambassadors for the EU in their communities. By promoting a sense of European solidarity, democracy, and shared identity, these initiatives can help French citizens better understand the EU's impact on their daily lives, encouraging greater engagement and awareness of the Union's role in shaping their future.

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Nevertheless, as this proposal is directed at both EU and French institutions, it may face budgetary constraints given competing priorities.

POLICY PROPOSAL 2: IMPROVE RAIL NETWORK AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO ENSURE SOCIAL JUSTICE, HOUSING ACCESS, AND CLIMATE ACTION (E.G. SUBURBS TO CITY CENTERS)

Participants highlighted the need to better reconcile greater awareness of EU action with the Union's core priorities — namely, mobility, industrial competitiveness, social justice, and environmental ambition. One concrete proposal directed at both EU and French institutions was increased investment in a more accessible, better-connected, and affordable European rail network to encourage sustainable mobility across the continent. Enhancing the visibility of EU action was seen as essential, particularly through tangible benefits such as access to funding, support for local projects, and improved public services that directly impact citizens' daily lives.

While initiatives such as the Interrail Pass, youth and senior discounts, Germany's 9-euro ticket, and high-speed rail networks like the TGV have made train travel more accessible, much remains to be done to strengthen cross-border connectivity, simplify ticketing, and align national systems. Participants called for greater EU investment in affordable and integrated rail infrastructure, with more consistent subsidies, targeted promotions, and public awareness campaigns highlighting the environmental and social benefits of rail over air travel. Revitalising train stations as multi-use public hubs and aligning rail with local transport systems were seen as practical ways to improve accessibility and user experience. Despite strong public interest and the ecological relevance of train travel, challenges persist — notably the high cost of infrastructure development, coordination between Member States, and competition from carbon-intensive sectors like aviation and road transport. Sustaining affordability will require long-term financial commitment and closer cooperation between EU institutions, national governments, and private operators.

POLICY PROPOSAL 3: ESTABLISH EUROPEAN CITIZENS' CONVENTIONS, OFFERING A DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC SPACE FOR DIALOGUE AND PROPOSALS, ESPECIALLY ON CLIMATE AND CITIZENSHIP

While participants recognised the EU's role in defending democracy, they raised concerns about its ability to uphold democratic values consistently across Member States and the capacity of citizens to fully grasp its functioning. These concerns reflected broader doubts about the democratic legitimacy of EU governance. The idea of EU citizenship was in itself seen as vague and inconsistently experienced. Although the EU was acknowledged as a global leader in setting climate standards, its efforts in this area were likewise perceived as disconnected from the daily lives of its citizens. Many called for a more meaningful and inclusive democratic participation, one that would ground the EU's vision in the realities of its citizens' lives and involve them more directly in discussions with experts and decision-makers.

A potential solution could be for the EU to establish citizens' conventions across the EU, bringing together citizens of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities to reflect on the Europe they desire and to voice their concerns to EU decision-makers, supported by stakeholders. These conventions could also produce deliberative proposals that reflect the common interests of the participants. Special attention should be given to two particularly contentious topics, the environment and EU citizenship, given their importance and widespread misunderstanding. While this idea is relevant at the EU level, previous initiatives, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe, saw limited public engagement, raising concerns about the effectiveness of such processes unless they are better publicised and rooted in national contexts.

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POLICY PROPOSAL 4: INTRODUCE TRANSNATIONAL ELECTORAL LISTS FOR THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT TO FOSTER A SHARED POLITICAL SPACE

Echoing participants' concerns about the EU's democratic legitimacy and the low awareness of its actions among the broader population — due to the division between national contexts — transnational lists were seen as part of the solution to address these issues and strengthen the EU's integration. These lists would serve as a foundation for developing a more cohesive European political system and promoting the emergence of true European political players, as current European political groups are mainly coalitions of national parties.

European elections often reflect national dynamics, or, at best, a debate on foreign policy. In this context, broadening the debate to a European level, transcending national borders, emerged among advocates of deeper European integration, as the European Parliament is primarily organised by political affiliation rather than nationality. Yet, there are legal challenges and political opposition to this idea. Some EU parties and prominent political figures, especially with the rise of Eurosceptic groups and leaders in both the European Parliament and the EU Council, argue that representatives elected on these lists would be disconnected from grassroots issues and local realities. Others believe that transnational lists would deepen the divide between citizens and their representatives, making them vulnerable to exploitation by populists.

POLICY PROPOSAL 5: ENHANCE EDUCATION ABOUT THE EU BY IMPROVING THE TEACHING OF ITS HISTORY, AND ORGANISING SCHOOL ACTIVITIES DEDICATED TO DISCOVERING MEMBER AND CANDIDATE STATES

Participants highlighted the persistent lack of public awareness and the limited accessible, transparent information concerning the EU and its actions. It was agreed that this challenge should be addressed from an early age and sustained throughout life, by ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to engage in meaningful civic education, both within and beyond their professional contexts.

To this end, EU-related education should be systematically integrated into school curricula from the primary level onwards. A harmonised approach to European studies across all Member States was recommended, supported by more accessible and interactive educational programmes. French institutions, alongside all Member States, should place emphasis on shared European symbols and values, with the aim of reinforcing a collective identity and a sense of belonging among citizens. In parallel, it was stressed that teachers must be equipped with enhanced training in European affairs, enabling them to deliver this content in an engaging, relevant, and practical manner. Furthermore, lifelong learning opportunities in this area should be made widely available to workers across all sectors, ensuring continuous access to civic education throughout the life course.

Such coordination between Member States nevertheless remains an ambitious objective given the rise of nationalist and anti-EU narratives in national debates. France could take a leading role by first implementing these programmes domestically and subsequently promoting their replication across other Member States.

POLICY PROPOSAL 6: REFORM THE EU'S DECISION-MAKING AND ENLARGEMENT PROCESSES BY EXPANDING QUALIFIED MAJORITY VOTING AND LIMITING VETO POWERS, IN ORDER TO REDUCE BLOCKAGES

While participants recognised EU enlargement as a strategic instrument for promoting peace and stability, many expressed concerns regarding the pace and consequences of the process. Citizens emphasised the importance of clear, harmonised,

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and consistently applied accession criteria, particularly in light of the enlargement process's complexity and the unexpected obstruction faced by some candidate States due to domestic political considerations within certain member states. These concerns, combined with the perceived uneven enforcement of EU law, were viewed as undermining the Union's credibility. Member States, following the lead of Germany and Slovenia, which secured the support of nearly two-thirds of Member States, should promptly activate these clauses. However, concerns among some countries about losing leverage within the EU's decision-making process make this unlikely in the short term.

In response, participants called for a more transparent and respectful approach to enlargement, grounded in measurable reform progress and not tied to unanimity voting. Such a merit-based system based on qualified majority voting would enhance clarity and predictability, thereby reinforcing public trust in the process and its legitimacy, while facilitating progress for most candidate countries. Although this debate is not new and has also been raised by the independent Franco-German group of experts on EU reforms, it continues to face significant resistance within the EU Council. Nevertheless, the potential use of "passerelle" clauses within the Treaties should be pointed out, which could allow for advancing this reform in common foreign and security policy or fiscal matters.

POLICY PROPOSAL 7: ENHANCE THE VISIBILITY OF EU FUNDING AND FINANCED PROJECTS, E.G. BY HIGHLIGHTING "FUNDED BY THE EU" MENTIONS

This proposal seeks to address the perceived lack of visibility surrounding EU funding and, more broadly, the limited public awareness of EU actions. Participants observed that signs indicating EU financial support are often too small, poorly placed, or overshadowed by references to national or regional contributions. As a result, one of the EU's most tangible benefits for citizens remains largely unnoticed.

To counter this, the proposal calls for a more prominent and consistent display of EU involvement in funded projects. It is essential that local communities are able to clearly identify and appreciate the advantages and opportunities brought about by EU integration. At the same time, national and regional governments must be held accountable for visibly and transparently communicating the EU's role in these initiatives. The enhanced visibility of such mentions should be required by the EU, with national and local institutions made responsible for their implementation. A potential challenge, however, lies in the possibility that these institutions may seek to downplay the EU's role in order to highlight their own actions to their constituents.

POLICY PROPOSAL 8: PROVIDE EU-FOCUSED TRAINING FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Participants noted that the perceived lack of democratic legitimacy and the weak sense of belonging to a broader European community are compounded by the distance that even elected officials often feel from EU institutions. This disconnect, in turn, reinforces similar sentiments among citizens. Tackling this issue at its root may prove essential in re-establishing a meaningful connection between EU institutions and the public.

To that end, it was proposed that elected representatives — whether at the national or local level — should receive mandatory, dedicated training on EU affairs. Such training, delivered either by the Ministry of Interior or by the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, would enhance their understanding of EU dynamics, enabling them to communicate more effectively with their constituents about the Union's role and relevance. This training could be supported through EU and national funding, ensuring accessibility and consistency across Member States. However, the effective participation of these officials should be closely monitored to prevent non-compliance. For instance, their allowance could be made conditional on their participation in order to ensure attendance.

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POLICY PROPOSAL 9: CARRY OUT AN INQUIRY INTO THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF PAST AND FUTURE ENLARGEMENTS

While participants widely acknowledged EU enlargement as a valuable geopolitical instrument, apprehensions were raised about the potential economic burden on existing Member States, the already difficult enforcement of common rules, and the possible erosion of the EU's coherence and identity. A recurrent theme in the discussion was the perception that the Union risks expanding beyond its traditional "civilisational zone", potentially hindering further political and institutional deepening. The case of Ukraine emerged as particularly divisive, with some viewing its accession as carrying significant security and institutional risks. There was also notable criticism of the lack of a coherent public narrative surrounding enlargement, the limited visibility of its tangible benefits, and the general inaccessibility of reliable information. This perceived disconnect was considered to be a contributing factor to growing public mistrust, the spread of disinformation, and the rise of populist discourse.

To address these challenges, participants advocated for greater transparency, particularly in relation to the actual implications of enlargement. A formal inquiry, commissioned by the European Commission, inclusive of relevant stakeholders and designed to ensure a balanced representation of interests, was proposed as a means of fostering a more informed and open debate. Although various studies have previously been undertaken, many have originated solely from civil society actors and thus offer a broader perspective that may not be fully reflected within institutional assessments. Conversely, studies commissioned by the EU Council have often been referenced but not made publicly available, raising concerns that this lack of transparency may further undermine public confidence in the Union.

POLICY PROPOSAL 10: IMPLEMENT A GRADUAL EU ACCESSION PROCESS

As previously noted, scepticism persists regarding the feasibility, pace, and consequences of EU enlargement. A range of concerns were expressed, including economic, political, institutional, and security risks — particularly in relation to the union's absorption capacity. The case of Ukraine was frequently cited in this context. In response, participants advocated for a more transparent, step-by-step approach to integration, with gradual access to EU benefits linked explicitly to demonstrable progress on reforms. To avoid repeating the challenges associated with the 2004 "big bang" enlargement, participants recommended a model of progressive integration. This would involve transitional periods tailored to each candidate State, with a phased allocation of funds — particularly those supporting the implementation of environmental and rule of law standards defined in the accession criteria. Priority should be given to integration into the single market.

The concept of gradual integration has already gained traction within EU institutions, supported by various expert contributions. Candidate States are currently participating in several EU programmes, such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, signalling increasingly close ties. However, these initiatives remain technical and largely invisible to the general public, limiting their effectiveness in generating popular support. To address this, participants called for the use of powerful symbolic measures to create genuine political momentum and public engagement. One such proposal could be the introduction by the EU of an "Associated State" status, granting candidate states at least partial representation within EU institutions — offering a tangible "quick win" that could strengthen public trust and political will on both sides. Nevertheless, Member States should ensure that this is not perceived as creating a second-tier membership, and should reaffirm that the ultimate objective remains the full accession of all candidate States.

CONCLUSIONS



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The European Union must reconsider and revitalise its narrative to make it more engaging, positive, and comprehensible for its citizens. Key themes such as enlargement, the ecological transition, and the rule of law should be framed not as abstract or restrictive challenges, but as shared opportunities for progress and collective resilience. Education, strategic communication, and local-level engagement were identified by the participants as essential instruments for making the EU more tangible and for reinforcing public support for the European project.

Participants advocated for a model of gradual integration that reflects the specific circumstances of candidate States, ensuring that ecological and democratic transitions are both realistic and effective. To inspire trust and support, the EU must present itself as a protective and stabilising force, while remaining faithful to its founding principles.

In parallel, strengthening public awareness and democratic legitimacy requires practical, visible initiatives that bring Europe closer to its citizens. Civic programmes such as the European Solidarity Corps and civic service were highlighted as valuable tools for fostering direct engagement with the EU's core values. Similarly, enhancing EU-related education — from improving the teaching of its history to organising school activities that explore Member and candidate States — can instil a deeper understanding of European identity from an early age.

Efforts to increase civic participation should also include the establishment of European Citizens' Conventions: deliberative democratic forums where citizens from across the Union can engage in meaningful dialogue and develop proposals, particularly on pressing topics such as climate action and EU citizenship. Such conventions would complement existing institutional structures and help strengthen the sense of a shared European public sphere.

Creating a stronger and more connected Europe also means addressing social and environmental justice through infrastructure. Improving public transport and rail networks, especially those linking suburbs to urban centres, would not only support social inclusion and access to housing but also contribute directly to the EU's climate goals. These tangible improvements are critical for demonstrating the EU's capacity to deliver on the ground.

From a political standpoint, several institutional reforms were discussed as essential for the future viability and efficiency of the EU. Introducing transnational electoral lists for European Parliament elections was proposed as a way to foster a genuinely European political space, moving beyond nationally confined debates. Similarly, reforming the EU's decision-making processes — particularly by expanding the use of qualified majority voting and limiting national veto powers — was seen as necessary to prevent blockages and enable more timely, coherent action, especially in the context of enlargement.

Transparency remains a cornerstone of public trust. Enhancing the visibility of EU funding through clearer and more prominent labelling of projects financed by the Union was identified as a simple but effective way to reconnect citizens with the benefits of EU membership. A comprehensive inquiry into the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements was also suggested, offering a fact-based foundation for public debate and institutional decision-making.

Ultimately, the vision articulated by participants is one of a more accessible, more coherent, and more ambitious European Union — one that embraces gradual, reform-driven accession processes tailored to each candidate State's context. By coupling this with improved communication, democratic innovation, and inclusive policy-making, the EU can transform today's challenges into shared opportunities and build a future rooted in unity, resilience, and collective progress.

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