POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Of the European Student Assembly 2025

#ESA25

4th edition

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CONTENT

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01 | PROJECT

EUC VOICES

EUC VOICES (European Universities Community VOICES) is an Erasmus project which aims at giving the voice to students from European universities alliances in order to promote the European citizenship. This is achieved through 3 main activities: *European Student Assembly, Ambassadors Forum and EUC Alumni Network*; implemented by a consortium of universities: Université Grenoble Alpes (WP1) and Universitatea Tehnică din Cluj-Napoca (WP2), Szkoła Główna Handlowa w Warszawie and the European Student Network (WP3), Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (WP4), Università degli Studi di Torino and NHL Stenden Hogeschool (WP5).
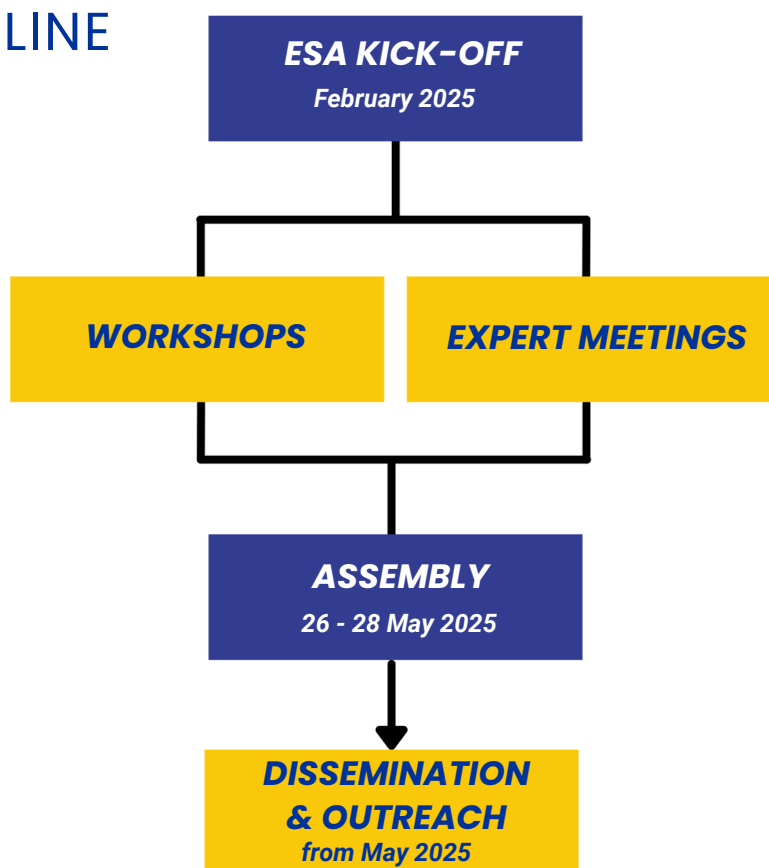
European Student Assembly

In 2022, the inaugural session of ESA took place in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. It marked the beginning of a series of assemblies that is providing an opportunity to **students from all European universities alliances** to meet, debate and express their views on the EU.

For the **fourth edition of ESA (26-28 May 2025)**, after a competitive application process and an intensive online preparation phase, a pool of **230 students** representing **50 nationalities** and coming from **190 universities** belonging to **53 European universities** alliances has been invited to come to the European Parliament in Strasbourg to meet in person. Organised in **8 panels**, they were asked to finalise up to **10 proposals** on their respective panel topic and to participate to inter-panel debates. The Assembly concluded on the voting of **76 recommendations**. 74 were adopted, while 2 were not which are presented in this report.

This ESA edition benefited from the academic and organisational support of the EUC VOICES project partners, in particular, **Technical University of Cluj-Napoca** and **NHL Stenden Hogeschool**, and the support from Université Grenoble Alpes and the Conference Unit of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Support from the European universities alliances was key to spread the information, to help in selecting students and to cover travel and accommodation costs. The event would not have occurred without the support of the **French-German University, GIS Eurolab, France Universités,** and **Uni-Italia.**

This publication of the students' Policy Recommendations reflects their state of mind, expectations and determination to have a concrete impact on their future that could lead to political responses at local, national and European level. It serves the purpose of giving a voice to students and it aims to be disseminated at a larger scale, starting within the universities' communities.

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02 | TIMELINE

```
                    ESA KICK-OFF
                    February 2025

         WORKSHOPS          EXPERT MEETINGS

                      ASSEMBLY
                    26 - 28 May 2025

                    DISSEMINATION
                     & OUTREACH
                     from May 2025
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The **230** students have been selected out of more than **2331** applications across Europe.
The selection process was based on motivation and academic excellence. It ensured the best representation of genders, ages, countries, levels and fields of study. As a result, the ESA managed to unite students from **Bachelor to PhD**, with a common interest to debate on the future of Europe.

The participant's onboarding session was held online on 18 February.
Each of the 8 Panels has met several times between February and May 2025, with the help of two panel Coordinators and a panel supervisor. Coordinators and participants have participated in **five dedicated training sessions** to help them facilitate the work of their panel.

Experts have been invited to help students identify the stakes and issues their panel had to deal with.

Online working sessions were held to let students **exchange** their ideas and work on their recommendations. During the three days spent at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, students finalised their recommendations. They eventually presented 76 recommendations (2 of which were rejected) in front of the Assembly and voted them individually.

From May 2025 onward, our main aim is to disseminate these recommendations to the largest number of students, citizens, decision makers and stakeholders at local, national and European level.

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04 | PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

PANEL 1 : Mentally (un)stable. How can the EU help young people manage mental health issues caused by overstimulation?

Executive summary

In the EU, the general population is increasingly affected by **mental health issues** driven by overstimulation, socio-digital dynamics, stigma, lack of emotional education, unequal access to care, climate anxiety, social and academic pressure - especially when it comes to vulnerable groups like youth and migrants. These policy proposals outline innovative and feasible recommendations to address the aforementioned challenges through raising awareness, addressing education reforms, early intervention plans, platform regulations, and digital literacy- aiming to create resilient mental health care systems and a safer, healthier cognitive and emotional environment for Europe's future generations.

Problem Statement

Across the EU, mental health is facing an escalating crisis. The pandemic caused an increase of **25%** in mental health issues in the EU (WHO, 2021), 1 in 2 people can experience emotional or psychological problems in one year (Flash Eurobarometer 530, 2022 - 2023 study), and over **13%** of European adolescents are affected by mental health conditions (UNICEF, 2022). However, psychotherapy remains stigmatized: only **16.5%** of individuals with depression worldwide seek help (Thornicroft et al., 2017), and more than **30%** still believe depression is caused by a weak personality (Yokoya et al., 2018). Moreover, disparities in availability, pricing, and reimbursement of mental health care persist across Member States. Apart from these core access barriers of stigma and unequal access, there are also urgent problems related to overstimulation causing mental health issues in youth and the general population, which are listed below:

1) **Social tensions and lack of emotional education.** Not only can these mental health proposals improve the general population's well-being, but they can also help address a broader social emergency. A lack of emotional education is one of the main contributing factors to violent behavior and criminal acts (Tirpák et al., 2024), and nearly half of EU member states have overcrowded prisons (Eurostat, 2023). Alarmingly, one in three women and one in five children experience abuse worldwide (WHO, 2024). Yet, preventive emotional education remains largely absent from EU school curricula, leaving future generations unprepared to face personal and social challenges;

2) **Consequences of overstimulation from social media and AI.** Young people face additional, unique psychological challenges in the digital era. Platforms like Instagram —rated the worst for youth mental health by the UK's Royal Society for Public Health— are causing issues related to low self-esteem in over 70% of users aged 14–24. Problematic use of social media among European teens rose from 7% in 2018 to 11% in 2022 (WHO, 2021–2022), especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Fast scrolling of contents floods the brain with dopamine, reinforcing compulsive behavior and task paralysis, while misleading portrayals and unqualified mental health advice further aggravate emotional distress. At the same time, the integration of generative AI tools into education and work, while bringing efficiency gains, has heightened cognitive strain. According to the recital 29 of the EU AI Act, AI-driven learning systems increase extraneous cognitive load, contributing to fatigue and reduced information retention;

3) **Academic pressure, mental health, and consequent economic burden.** Youth overstimulation and mental health issues also stem from academic pressure. One in three students reports mental health issues (EUROSTUDENT, 2024), with depression and anxiety being the most frequent (Cuppen et al., 2024). These findings raise several concerns on the future of such students: patients affected by mental health disorders face up to a threefold higher risk of absenteeism from professional environments compared to unaffected individuals, leading to a substantial loss of workdays (J. Alonso et al., 2004). Consequently, the economic burden on the EU, which currently estimated at €600 billion annually, is projected to increase drastically (Simon et al., 2023);

4) **Climate change and eco-anxiety.** Climate anxiety adds another layer of emotional burden. 75% of young people report fearing the future due to climate change, 45% experience daily distress (The Lancet, 2021). Chronic exposure to negative news further amplifies helplessness (Johnston & Davey, 1997) as people are neuro-biologically predisposed to focus on alarming content (Soroka et al., 2019). Written news, however, has been shown to cause less stress than audiovisual formats (Hwang et al., 2021);

5) **Migrants and exchange students without psychological support.** One of the groups most at risk of mental health issues is migrants, with high rates of anxiety-related disorders (43%), depression (49.5%), and PTSD (40,5%, Côté-Olijnyk et al., 2024). Despite a globalizing world, with increasing migrations and study exchange programs, mental health proposals related to this topic continue to be unaddressed.

In this complex landscape, evidence-based and inclusive policymaking at the EU level is crucial to prevent long-term consequences and create resilient support systems for future generations.

Recommendations

1.1 Breaking the Mental Health Stigma: Youth-Driven Advocacy and Early Intervention. To effectively address the stigma surrounding mental health, this policy proposal encourages open dialogue and normalization of the topic through two key strategies:

1) Campaigns led by young people on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, or in metro stations and on the streets, can help normalize seeking psychological support by sharing real stories. Ministries and NGOs can collaborate with content creators and align their efforts with awareness days, leveraging the high social impact and technical feasibility of such actions. While health policy remains primarily a national responsibility, the EU plays an important supporting role by encouraging cooperation between member states and promoting initiatives that can be scaled up. Choosing social media is not about increasing overstimulation, but about using the tools young people already engage with to deliver messages that benefit everyone—not just youth.

2) Integrating mental health screenings into routine school health checks can support early identification and help reduce stigma. These screenings could include standardized questionnaires and one-on-one conversations, implemented at the national or local level. Complementary mental health education for parents—through workshops or community programs—can also empower them to better understand and support their children's well-being. While the organization of health and education systems falls under national competence, the EU can encourage such practices by promoting knowledge exchange, supporting pilot initiatives, and providing guidance on best practices. This approach has high social and technical feasibility, as many parents are actively seeking tools to navigate youth mental health.

1.2 Mental Health Care Equity: Improved Access and Innovation for Waiting Times, Medications and Youth Programs

Focusing on prevention and promotion through youth programs and activities, like art, music, dance, and storytelling, can serve as vital early support tools. The EU should:
1) Help facilitate these to be freely available in schools, community hubs, and youth centers;
2) Encourage all Member States to systematically collect and share data on waiting times, costs, and the availability of mental health care services;
3) Establish a centralized Mental Health Medicines Access Policy, setting minimum standards for psychiatric drug availability and agreeing on maximum price limits.
Research must support AI-driven, personalized psychiatric treatments, while open science models drive innovation.

1.3 Digital Wellness by Design: Protecting Young Europeans from Social Media Overstimulation

The EU should require major social media platforms to adopt "digital-wellness by design" standards to address declining attention spans among youth. These changes empower users to manage their digital habits without disrupting platform business models:

Firstly, major social-media platforms must improve the visibility of real-time usage dashboards and daily limit settings to make it easily accessible such as placing them in main navigation instead of placing them in hidden menus.

Secondly, social media users should be given the chance to choose whether they want the algorithm to shape their feed or not and at the same time they should be able to edit the app's settings in order to set direct messages in a more central position.

Moreover, there's a need for a supplementary document to the EU Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027 (COM(2020) 624) that will deal specifically with attention management and digital self regulation lessons at schools.

1.4 ClimateSpark: Empowering Youth from Eco-Paralysis to Self-Efficacy through Psycho-Ecological Projects in the EU

The EU should help young people regain a sense of self-efficacy through psycho-ecological projects that foster emotional processing of environmental crises. Engagement in environmental action projects can make youth feel in control, hopeful and resilient (Ojala, 2012). On this basis, the EU program ClimateSpark fosters the establishment of psycho-ecological projects which offer co-benefits in mental health and climate action. Municipalities receive funding for citizen-led ClimateSpark projects that suit their community's ecological and social context (e.g. beach cleanups, urban gardening), and center emotional health holistically. A model project is the "Climate Café": Informal gatherings where citizens exchange thoughts/feelings related to /Climate Change with the guidance of psychologists and educators. Climate Cafés are to be offered regularly within existing institutions, including mental health facilities, libraries, and university campuses. The positive effects of ClimateSpark projects can be amplified through a publicity campaign showcasing successful environmental projects and re-empowered youth.

1.5 A Modern and Balanced Cross-Border News Platform to Reshape Media Consumption Supporting Mental Health

We propose the creation of an independent European news platform, developed through collaboration among international journalists. While the platform would operate autonomously, its development could be supported or facilitated by the EU, particularly in terms of funding, coordination, and promoting best practices.

All articles should be written and fact-checked by at least one journalist from another country to ensure cross-border accuracy and transparency. To counter misinformation, frequent and verified attempts to spread false information could be reviewed by an independent oversight board.

Additionally, we recommend the platform adopt a 3-to-1 ratio of negative to positive (or constructive) news, as suggested by VanderWeele and Brooks (2023), to promote mental well-being and foster European cohesion.

To limit the "filter bubble" effect, the platform should avoid personalized content feeds. Instead, articles should be grouped under shared topics, with contributions from diverse journalists and organizations offering multiple perspectives. Journalists contributing to the platform could be offered free advanced training on the psychological and societal effects of news consumption.

1.6 Mental Health Care Day: Building a Safer and Healthier Society Through Preventative Emotional Education Workshops in Schools

We recommend that Member States introduce a monthly Mental Health Care Day across all educational stages and in social service institutions reaching vulnerable groups. This initiative could be supported by the EU through funding, coordination, and the development of expert-informed materials.

The day would consist of workshops on key topics such as consent, managing overstimulation, communication, setting personal boundaries, and recognizing abuse delivered by trained professionals. Emotional education has demonstrated benefits, including increased empathy, reduced bullying, and improved mental well-being (OECD, 2021). Unlike one-off campaigns, this recurring program fosters structured, long-term learning and early intervention, contributing to students' mental resilience and potentially reducing future absenteeism due to mental health issues.

It equips students with tools to navigate academic pressure, build supportive peer networks, and manage emotional stress. This recommendation aligns with existing EU initiatives, such as the Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Education Area. While implementation would be led by national education ministries and child protection services, EU support could enhance reach and consistency across member states.

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1.7 Regulating The Impact of Influencer Culture on Mental Health through Education and Platform Moderation

To address the negative impact of unrealistic social media content and unqualified mental health advice on social media, we propose a few key steps: 1) AI-generated and manipulated visual content should be clearly labeled by platforms to prevent users from comparing themselves to fabricated ideals. 2) Influencers discussing mental health should inform users about their background and expertise. Content from non-professionals should be flagged, while qualified expert content can be highlighted. 3) Platforms should also collaborate with mental health professionals to design viral awareness campaigns and promote healthy online behaviors. 4) Additional tools such as hashtags (e.g., #fakebody) and AI tools to detect harmful content can further protect users.

1.8 MentalHealthEDU+: Transforming Academic Pressure Norms into Well-Being Centred Education

Normative proposal entails:
1) Implementing psychological and professional mentorship at universities, offering alternative creative pathways using AI through the Digital Europe Programme.
2) A standards-based grading system has shown potential to better support 70% of neglected neurodivergent students (Ntu.ac.uk, 2024). 61% of students reported higher motivation through this. While the EU cannot impose national evaluation systems, it can recommend the exploration and sharing of such practices among Member States.
3) Leveraging technology and gamification for students' emotional and cognitive engagement.
4) Increasing PISA scores and tackling absenteeism and drop-out through extrapolating SI-PASS collaborative learning.
5) Reducing hospitalized students' burden through asynchronous learning and teachers trained on trauma-informed care.
6) Using third spaces for inclusive learning through group-oriented activities grounded on control-value theory.
This approach aligns with UN SDG targets 4.1 and 4.5, supporting equitable and quality education centered on eudaimonia and minimising academic pressure (United Nations, 2022).
The intended systemic change can take place thanks to multiple stakeholders synergizing with the European Education Area.

1.9 AI and Mental Health: Building a Safer Psycho-Cognitive Environment

To address the mental health risks associated with AI use, we propose the following key measures:

1) Psychological Resilience Programs for AI-Exposed Workers: the European Labour Authority, in coordination with the EU AI Office, should promote psychological resilience programs for workers exposed to AI systems in high-demand environments. Employers in sectors such as content moderation, customer service or gig economy platforms should be required to implement mental health risk assessments and offer support training to reduce burnout and algorithm-induced stress;

2) Cognitive Assessments in High-Risk AI Monitoring: National AI Supervisory Authorities, under guidance from the EU AI Office, should integrate neuropsychological indicators into conformity assessments for high-risk AI systems in areas such as education, healthcare, and recruitment;

3) EU Observatory on AI and Mental Health: DG SANTE, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and the EU AI Office should establish a centralized observatory to monitor AI's long-term psychological effects, publish annual reports, and issue evidence-based policy recommendations.

1.10 MovingMinds EU: Ensuring Mental Health Support for Migrants Through Orientation, Therapy Access and Multilingual Services

The EU is responsible for taking a comprehensive approach to tackle the issues regarding the mental health of immigrants and international students. Holding educational sessions informing migrants and exchange students about available mental health services and treatment options is necessary. Adding multilingual 24/7 helplines and chat services to provide immediate support for mental health crises would ensure an inclusive and responsible care system for all. Universities and official international student organizations such as ESN (Erasmus Student Network) can offer intercultural peer mentorship programs to support emotional well-being and establish partnerships to provide discounts to international students on psychological services. Subsidized or free therapy made accessible for low-income immigrants helps remove the financial burdens of care, this being one of the main obstacles preventing people from seeking help. Lastly, mental health literacy should be embedded into integration and language courses, empowering migrants with emotional regulation and help-seeking strategies.

PANEL 2 : Greener Tomorrow. What is the role of climate and environmental policies in higher education and energy?

Executive summary

Young people across Europe are ready to take the lead in shaping a more sustainable future. Despite clear policy frameworks at the EU level, such as the Green Deal and the Sustainable Development Goals, implementation often falls short at the level of daily academic life, student mobility and local entrepreneurship. Several practical ideas can address this gap: engaging students in real-world sustainability consultancy, promoting climate- conscious travel, embedding green practices in universities and cultivating green skills.These initiatives combine environmental ambition with educational innovation and democratic participation. Together, they offer a pathway toward a Europe where every step in a student'sacademic, personal and professional journey, contribute to ecological resilience and social responsibility.

Problem Statement

Europe faces an intensifying environmental crisis, with climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution already reshaping ecosystems and economies. Policy frameworks such as the European Green Deal, the Climate Law and the European Education Area have laid solid foundations, yet a consistent and effective translation of goals into action remains a challenge. Educational institutions, which hold enormous transformative potential, often lack the resources, structures or incentives to function as agents of ecological change. Many universities still do not have sustainability offices, integrated green curricula or visible climate action plans. At the same time, students rarely have access to hands-on opportunities for engaging with sustainability beyond classroom theory. In the domain of student mobility, fewer than one in four Erasmus+ participants travel using low-emission means of transport, due in part to cost, time and lack of meaningful incentives. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), vital to Europe's economy, face difficulties preparing for upcoming environmental reporting obligations under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. Many of these businesses lack access to affordable expertise in sustainability, especially in local contexts. On the democratic front, young citizens frequently express a sense of distance from EU policy-making processes, despite their strong support for climate action. Bridging these gaps requires direct investment in youth-led sustainability action, stronger connections between education and the green economy, and more inclusive frameworks for democratic engagement. Environmental responsibility must be embedded not only in policy documents but in the lived experiences of students, educators and entrepreneurs across the Union.

Recommendations

2.1 Empowering businesses for a greener future: Student-led sustainability consulting under the EU Green Deal

This proposal advocates EU and national funding for student-led university consulting groups to help Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) adopt sustainable practices. Unlike large corporations with sustainability departments, SMEs often lack the resources to develop green strategies. Focusing on SMEs enables impact across multiple companies while building community resilience. Programs are small and flexible, not full internships, making them easier for SMEs to host. Students gain real-world experience through short-term programs supported by training and mentorship. We conducted a survey that showed strong student support for this initiative, and our research confirmed alignment with the European Green Deal. Funding would provide subsidies for SMEs to cover student compensation, onboarding, and training, and for universities to support program coordination, promotion, and educational materials development.

2.2 Board the Green Erasmus+ Train: Interrail for sustainable mobility

High travel costs and long journeys continue to push most citizens towards air travel. To align Erasmus+ with the EU's Green Deal there's an urgent need for more effective and inclusive incentives. Only 22% of Erasmus participants currently travel to their host universities using green transportation options, despite the existing Green Travel top-up. As a cost-covering, appealing solution for Europeans we imagine Interrail, a European Train-Pass, to be given out instead of the current top-up for Green Travel. Financial resources available from the previous green top-up and Erasmus+, enable participants to complete their on- and outgoing journeys by using green transportation. The fundamental non-green Travel Grant remains untouched and compensates green travellers for necessary seat reservations. By implementing this policy, we expect demand for and, therefore, supply of more cross-border long distance and night trains to increase. Furthermore, the travel pass shall be complemented by a participatory digital map for reporting areas for improvement in infrastructure. Overall, this initiative empowers Europeans in Erasmus+ to shape a more connected, climate-conscious Europe.

2.3 Universities as example: Sustainability funding for green campus, sustainable research and ecological projects

This proposal is aimed at those universities facing financial barriers to implement sustainable projects on their campuses in the context of the current environmental crisis. Two key barriers are identified: first, not all universities have a green office; and second, there is a question of how to monetize sustainable projects as agents of change on campus.

We recommend establishing sustainability offices at EU universities, tailored to each institution's needs. These offices could involve students, supervised by senior staff, integrating thesis work and internships to strengthen institutional autonomy as well as collaborations between universities and alliances to combine expertise in green subjects.

Once such EU-recognised sustainability offices are in place, universities could be eligible to access the Green-Funds-For-Campus program by InvestEU, which offers funding based on the total amount of reduced emissions and the potential of planned projects/research.

The Directorate-General for Climate Action (DG CLIMA) could oversee reporting, determining the percentage of debt that can be converted into funds, using as a metric the percentage of debt exchanged per ton of CO_2eq mitigated and potentially mitigable.

We suggest launching a policy pilot in 2026 with universities that already have a sustainability office.

2.4 Positive climate communication programme at European universities

Despite the EU's strong climate policy framework, communication of higher education institutions about climate change emphasizes mostly catastrophic outcomes more than practical solutions. While raising awareness is essential, the way we frame and communicate climate issues is equally important. Many universities lack structured strategies to engage students and the public, missing opportunities to foster climate literacy and civic action. To address this problem, we propose an EU Positive Climate Communication Programme at European Universities. The programme will promote wellbeing and engagement through a range of measures. These could include funding student-led environmental initiatives, supporting Sustainability Days and campaigns against misinformation. Universities might also adopt visible sustainability practices, such as climate-conscious cafeterias (i.e. offer planetary health diets) and green university gardens. We suggest a programme pilot phase with one to three universities per EU member state serving as examples for effective sustainability communication. For monitoring and funding these programmes, we suggest using the beforehand mentioned reporting system proposed by Policy 3 through including each university's Sustainability Office. This proposal aligns with key EU strategies such as the EU Green Deal, GreenComp and the EU Youth Strategy. Moreover, it aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3,4,13 ,11).

2.5 Plant a tree with every degree: Growing a greener Europe

"Green Start, Green Finish" is an ambitious environmental initiative that integrates tree planting into key academic milestones by encouraging students across the EU to plant a tree upon university enrollment and again at graduation. This transforms education into a powerful act of climate responsibility. Supported by EU programs like Erasmus+, LIFE and the Green Deal, the initiative proposes designated green zones on campuses, digital tree tracking via QR code and incentives such as eco-certificates. As an alternative funding model, instead of paying an application fee, accepted students could plant a tree, turning administrative processes into climate-positive actions. Universities will partner with NGOs and local governments to run awareness campaigns and provide annual progress reports. If implemented, this program could lead to the planting of millions of trees, fostering biodiversity and strengthening Europe's green transition. If space on campuses is limited, tree planting can take place in nearby parks or reforestation areas or be represented through digital tracking. Native tree species will be chosen to support local ecosystems. Monitoring will be shared among universities, NGOs, and local authorities, ensuring transparency and impact.

2.6 From knowledge to action: Green skills initiative for sustainable future in Higher Education

To combat climate change and other sustainability-related problems, the EU proposes to integrate a sustainable commitment component during each student's curriculum, following the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4, 7, 10 and 13, Green COMP, EU Green Deal and Council of the EU recommendation (2022/C 243/01). In the EU, 93% of citizens agree that climate change is a serious problem (Eurobarometer 2021). As the next generation of leaders, students need to be given the right tools to adapt to this transition. Each person studying in a higher education institution in the EU should be encouraged to complete at least one non-profit, sustainability-related activity during their curriculum. This will be a condition for graduation, and is not restricted to any specific activity, as long as it has a local or global impact and encourages students to develop green skills. Students can choose these activities according to their interests and career goals, e.g. volunteering for a local NGO, food banks, engaging in a sustainability student association etc. Higher education institutions should be the linking point between local stakeholders and students and are encouraged to put in place opportunities for students to fulfill this requirement and engage in sustainability activities. Every faculty should have at least one supervisor to mentor the students during their activities. A pilot phase will be conducted for an academic year in one higher education institution of each member state, based on a volunteering selection process, followed by an evaluation before implementation. The green skills initiative will empower students to turn knowledge into action, and responsibility into impact.

2.7 Facilitating SME preparedness for CRSD Compliance through education partnerships

The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) mandates large EU-based companies to disclose comprehensive environmental, social, and governance (ESG) data. While SMEs are not yet directly subjected to the CSRD many are indirectly impacted as larger companies demand ESG data from their suppliers to fulfill their own obligations. This poses significant challenges for SMEs which often lack the necessary expertise and resources. This policy proposes facilitating SME readiness for CSRD compliance through partnerships with higher education institutions. Universities and applied sciences institutions would be funded and tasked with developing SME-focused ESG reporting toolkits, integrating CSRD content into academic curricula, and creating student-led consulting initiatives to support local SMEs. Additionally, the policy calls for the creation of regional CSRD Support Hubs to provide technical assistance, faster collaboration between SMEs and large enterprises, and offer digital tools that simplify ESG reporting. Expected outcomes include enhanced SME preparedness, reduced compliance risks in supply chains, strengthened education-industry collaboration, and accelerated progress toward Europe's green and digital transition. Ultimately, the policy ensures that SMEs are not left behind, supporting a more inclusive and resilient approach to sustainable development across the EU.

2.8 From idea to institution: a multi-level pathway for students to shape real policy through parliamentary simulations

According to the European Commission 2024 Eurobarometer survey, 49% of EU citizens feel that their voice does not count in the EU. This proposal suggests practical ways to improve democratic participation and rebuild trust in EU institutions. This policy aims to involve students directly in EU policy-making by creating or relying on a network of EU-Parliament simulations at various levels (local or university level, national level and EU-level). Institutions at any level can either rely on already existing simulations organized by NGOs to organize these simulations, or they should create them if they do not exist already. During each of these steps, all policies worked on will be submitted to a vote, which will determine whether they are selected to go to the next simulation level. In between each simulation, students will work in teams on their policy, with the mentorship of a national and an EU official. They will be able to communicate and get feedback through a digital platform, where they can submit their drafts for citizens and other officials to discuss and comment. In the end, selected policies at the EU-level simulations will have been worked on by students from all around the EU, but also by officials from the EU Commission and national officials, and validated in three voting rounds. All policies voted in favour during the EU-level simulation must be examined by the EU Commission and voted during a plenary session in the EU Parliament. Both institutions have to collaborate with the students who brought the idea to make it a real policy. These steps aim to encourage greater involvement, improve policy-making skills among young people, and strengthen trust in the EU while making it more accessible to students than other existing direct democracy processes.

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2.9 Common European University Sustainability Reporting Standard

The implementation gap between ambitious European sustainability policies and actual university practices stems largely from the absence of standardized measurement and incentive systems. While the European Green Deal and related frameworks establish clear environmental objectives, universities lack consistent methods to demonstrate their sustainability performance or receive proportional recognition for their efforts. Current sustainability initiatives in higher education remain fragmented across member states, with varying quality standards and limited comparability between institutions. This creates a fundamental misalignment where universities investing in sustainability cannot effectively communicate their achievements to policymakers, funding bodies, or prospective students. Moreover, the absence of standardized reporting prevents the EU from accurately assessing progress toward its educational sustainability goals and identifying best practices for wider adoption. This proposal advocates for establishing a Common European University Sustainability Reporting Standard that would create objective, comparable metrics for measuring university sustainability performance across all EU member states. The framework would begin as a voluntary system, allowing universities to demonstrate their environmental leadership while building institutional capacity for comprehensive sustainability reporting. Universities achieving specific sustainability scores would gain access to enhanced EU funding opportunities, creating powerful financial incentives for widespread adoption of sustainable practices. The standard would encompass multiple sustainability dimensions including energy efficiency, waste management, sustainable transportation, curriculum integration, community engagement, and campus biodiversity. By linking sustainability performance directly to funding eligibility and allocation formulas, this system transforms environmental responsibility from a cost center into a competitive advantage for universities.

PANEL 3 : AI, European democracy and civic engagement. How can the EU benefit from Artificial Intelligence in its mission of promoting democracy?

Executive summary

The EU faces a critical challenge in harnessing Artificial Intelligence (AI) to strengthen democracy while mitigating risks such as disinformation, surveillance, electoral manipulation and erosion of public trust. The current EU legal scaffolding, including the Artificial Intelligence Act, may lack robust safeguards for fundamental rights, transparency in AI-generated content (and in AI models themselves) and accountability in electoral systems. In this regard, this policy brief develops a number of policy proposalsto address the relevant challenges.

Problem Statement

AI's increasing integration into European societypresents complex challenges to democracy and civic engagement. The EU's AI Act, while a pioneering regulatory effort, prioritises risk management over fundamental rights, creating important gaps in protecting civic freedoms.

Biometric surveillance and predictive profiling in migration management remain unregulated under broad national securityexemptions, disproportionately harmingmarginalised groups, where the lack of transparency and oversight on the development, acquisition and use of biometric technologies can lead to discrimination and erosion of trust.

Similarly, the proliferation of AI-generated content, including deepfakes, poses severe threats to information integrity and public discourse. Platforms increasingly host synthetic images and videos without transparency. A 2,137% rise in deepfake-related fraud over the past three years (Breugem, E., 2025) shows how easily AI can be used to manipulate publicopinion. Although Article50 of the AI Act mandates transparency, it failsto ensure that users can meaningfully understand or contest the origin and context of AI-generated content, especially when editorial review is involved. This complicates things even more since in elections, AI systems for voter authentication and polling stationmonitoring are not classifiedas high-risk under the AI Act, leavingelectoral integrity vulnerable.

Regarding AI in electoral processes, from voter authentication to fraud detection, it has introduced risks of algorithmic bias, cyber manipulation or attacks, and loss of electoraltransparency. Current EU law, as per Annexe III of the AI Act, only classifies AI tools as high-risk if they attempt to directly influence voter decisions. This narrow scope ignores the operational vulnerabilities of AI-powered voting infrastructure. Without clearer definitions, audits, and safeguards, such systems may inadvertently exclude minority voters or enable electoral fraud.

Moreover, these risksare compounded by existing regulatory fragmentation at the national level.While some Member States, such as Spain, have begun enforcing AI content labelling, others lag behind or adopt divergent standards, threatening the harmonisation needed for cross-border civic trust.

In conclusion, the EU must close these regulatory gaps by creating robust institutional oversight, mandating transparency in AI-generated media, and applying stringent safeguards to all electoral AI applications. Thus, we prepared the following.

Recommendations

3.1 Strengthening the EU AI-Office by adding an independent Committee for reviewing the Fundamental Rights Impact Assessments of the AI Act (Art.27)

To reinforce a coherent, rights-based AI governance framework, the EU should strengthen the European AI Office, specifically its Regulation and Compliance Unit (RCU), to play a central role in the Fundamental Rights Impact Assessment (FRIA) process. Beyond national-level assessments, the RCU should conduct structured, independent reviews of FRIAs for AI systems. In order to do so, it should organise and steer a committee composed of civil society organisations with special regard to AI-impacted communities that should be represented. This second-layer scrutiny would ensure methodological consistency, detect systemic risks, promote higher compliance standards across the EU and ensure that the FRIAs process is transparent to citizens.

To embed democratic accountability in AI governance, the committee should establish formal channels allowing affected communities to submit concerns or report violations related to AI systems. These mechanisms should also enable protected whistleblowing in line with Directive (EU) 2019/1937, ensuring confidentiality and safety for those raising rights-related alarms.

Rather than creating a new body, this approach strengthens existing institutions, ensures EU-level and civil society oversight without duplication. By integrating civil society into its overseeing role, the AI Office can ensure that AI systems uphold fundamental rights in practice, not just in principle.

3.2 Combatting dis- and misinformation with transparent labelling on AI-generated content

To counter the surge of AI-generated deepfakes and synthetic media, the EU should mandate universal watermarking and labelling standards for AI-produced images, videos, text and other forms of content. Modeled after Spain's pioneering fines for unlabeled content, the European AI Office would collaborate with platforms, artists, and cybersecurity experts to design machine-and-human-readable watermarks (e.g. cryptographic watermarks) that are interoperable and recognizable, akin to international nutritional labels on food products, taking as example model cards and datasheets for datasets, but now for AI-content generated.

AI companies operating in the EU are obliged to watermark all the AI-generated content made on their platforms. Media networks (including social media platforms) and search engines would be required to integrate detection tools, such as enabling users to flag unmarked content. To ensure accountability and foster innovation and competition, it is recommended that escalating penalties, such as fines of up to 7% of global turnover, be included in the AI Act as enforceable sanctions. This measure not only protects intellectual property and combats disinformation but also empowers citizens to distinguish between human and synthetic content, fostering informed democratic participation.

3.3 Closing loopholes in the EU's AI Act: Classifying all types of electoral AI as high-risk

AI's future role in elections, from biometric voter authentication to algorithmic polling station placement, demands urgent regulatory upgrades. The EU's AI Act currently identifies only the AI systems explicitly attempting to influence voter decisions as "high-risk". We propose reclassifying all AI-driven electoral systems as "high-risk" under the AI Act, closing loopholes that exempt tools like voter roll analytics or automated ballot counting. This reclassification would result in pre-election audits conducted by ENISA-accredited (European Union Agency for Cybersecurity) third parties to assess algorithmic bias, cybersecurity resilience and transparency. Electoral authorities would be required to publish detailed documentation on AI systems' design and decision-making processes, accessible to civil society watchdogs and international observers.

3.4 Encourage cybersecurity while protecting personal data

The GDPR's stringent data protection principles, while vital for privacy, inadvertently could hamper cybersecurity efforts by restricting the collection and sharing of threat intelligence. To resolve this tension, the EU should clarify and expand GDPR Article 6(1)(f) to explicitly permit processing personal data for cybersecurity purposes under "legitimate interests," provided robust safeguards against misuse are in place. Guidelines co-developed by the European Data Protection Board and ENISA would outline permissible use cases, such as identifying bot networks or analysing phishing campaigns, while requiring anonymisation where feasible. Additionally, a centralised EU cybersecurity hub would facilitate cross-border data sharing, enabling rapid response to threats like AI-driven disinformation campaigns or state-sponsored hacking. This balanced approach ensures privacy rights are upheld without leaving democracies defenceless in an era of AI-augmented cyber threats.

3.5 Streamlining the AI system registration in the EU Database by implementing the AICat to ensure transparency and foster innovation

As the European AI Act requires the registration of high-risk AI systems in an EU database (Article 71), a standardised approach would simplify the process for providers while enhancing public transparency.
We recommend adopting AICat, a tool that categorises AI systems, models, and datasets in machine-readable formats (RDF/JSON-LD), building on the EU's DCAT standard. AICat will generate clear, searchable catalogues for both national and EU databases, facilitating oversight, comparison, and transparency, particularly in domains where AI impacts European values.
To support this, we propose including structured metadata fields for summarising fundamental rights impact assessments (FRIA), allowing transparency on key risks and mitigation strategies without disclosing sensitive details.
AICat is available online at https://w3id.org/aicat under the CC-BY-4.0 license.

3.6 Foster transparency among AI companies to improve the public's knowledge of their functioning

To ensure that companies whose main activity is based on AI practices) and state actors uphold transparency in their AI development and deployment, the EU should establish binding financial obligations requiring these entities to allocate a fixed percentage (e.g. up to 3%) of their annual AI-related revenue to transparency-enhancing initiatives. These could include independent audits, explainability reports, public disclosure of training data sources, and regular publication of algorithmic impact assessments.

National Data Protection Agencies collect and distribute these resources, prioritising projects that promote civic awareness and technical scrutiny. Participation by independent civil society organisations, academic institutions, and open-source communities would ensure a balance between industry interests and democratic oversight.

Similar to how environmental regulations have evolved through emissions-based taxation, this measure would internalise the social costs of opacity in AI systems. Companies or nations failing to comply would face escalating penalties, such as access restrictions to EU digital markets or significant fines tied to their total AI revenues.

By enforcing financial accountability, the EU would reinforce fundamental rights and European values, promote algorithmic fairness, and give citizens the tools to understand and challenge automated decisions, securing not just transparency but trust in the age of artificial intelligence.

3.7 Building trust in political communication: Strengthening AI standards for electoral campaigns

Recent European elections have revealed a growing trend in the use of generative AI by political parties to create campaign content, such as promotional videos and posters. While the "Code of Conduct for the 2024 European Parliament Elections" signals a commitment to democratic values, yet, translating its principles into consistent practice remains a challenge.

Unbiased elections are a fundamental pillar of democracy, placing a particular responsibility on candidates and political parties to uphold integrity, transparency, and fairness. Hence, those participating in the electoral process should adhere to high ethical standards in political communication, particularly in campaigns that determine their representative mandate.

In order to safeguard electoral integrity across the EU and ensure a level playing field among political actors, we propose that the current "Code of Conduct for the 2024 European Parliament Elections" be transformed into a binding framework through EU legislation. This framework should result in the adoption of clear and enforceable rules by all Member States regarding the use of AI in political communication.

3.8 Preparing EU citizens for AI cybersecurity threats through training and certification

The NIS2 Directive emphasises the need to enhance cybersecurity in essential services, yet structural challenges hinder its effectiveness. Also, it promotes AI adoption, without addressing ethical risks such as a lack of oversight and human control. A major issue is the financial barriers to implementing AI training, including underfunded sectors like healthcare and energy. The ENISA 2024 report highlights a gap between cybersecurity requirements and national funding plans. In response, we recommend standardised cybersecurity and AI training across EU Member States using existing institutions within the states, which could improve organisational readiness and responsible AI deployment. Training will address social engineering, ethical AI principles, evolving malware and phishing tactics. The Digital Europe Programme provides financial incentives, promoting the use of digital certification by the Member States' institutions to hand out to the services that complete certification. National digital agencies could manage and issue certificates. Participants receive a digital certificate upon completion, and countries should track and report their progress. These certificates will serve as a testament to efforts in risk reduction of services provided by the respective sector.

3.9 Resist the spread of AI-generated disinformation through continuous digital literacy education

According to the Media Literacy Index by the Open Society Institute – Sofia (2018, 2023), a geographic divide exists in Europe regarding resilience to disinformation. Northern European countries rank highest due to strong education systems, media freedom, and public trust. Southeast Europe remains more vulnerable, especially given its proximity to the war in Ukraine and its role in the EU enlargement strategy. On Twitter, 39 of the 50 most influential profiles in a disinformation network were individual citizens, whose posts were 4.3 times more likely to be retweeted than content from commercial or state media (Golovchenko et al., 2018).

To address this, fostering digital media literacy in basic education across these regions through cross-border collaboration is essential, ensuring all Europeans can critically assess information and resist AI-driven disinformation. The Commission Expert Group on Tackling Disinformation & Promoting Digital Literacy should be extended past 2027 and repurposed as a knowledge-transfer hub of successful programs such as Finland's comprehensive National Media Education Policy, Austria's "Schule 4.0" or Sweden's källkritik curricular topic, complementing the Commission's ongoing awareness-raising campaigns (e.g. with ERGA) that may fall prey to limited reach and/or euroscepticism.

3.10 Limiting emotional entanglement between AI and users to safeguard democratic principles

The increasing use of artificial intelligence raises an important social concern: isolated individuals, particularly teenagers who are struggling with social interactions, may begin relying on chatbots as their sole source of emotional and information support. Although AI seems to offer empathetic listening, it risks deepening social isolation, hindering the development of social and critical thinking skills.

The risk worsens if AI becomes the only voice, leading users to passively accept its advice, especially if driven by algorithms designed to maximise engagement, similar to those on social media, which can uncritically reinforce personal beliefs, even if they are biased or reinforce inequalities. This can have deeply harmful effects, including on democratic participation and civic engagement, since the ability to engage in critical dialogue and confront differing viewpoints is fundamental to an active and inclusive democratic society. Protective filters could be introduced by Big Tech platforms to address these risks, preventing them from creating specific addiction goals. In such cases, the system should respond.

This aims to limit emotional dependence and excessive trust in AI tools and algorithms to promote human contact, diversity of opinions, and develop critical thinking essential not only for personal well-being but also for upholding the principles of democracy and civic participation.

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PANEL 4 : Innovation for all. In what ways can the EU balance innovation and competitiveness to support sustainable economic growth?

Executive summary

Innovation is a strategic asset in the global landscape. It is essential not only to achieve sustainability goals, but also to ensure long-term economic growth. The challenge for the EU is to keep pace with global competition while developing an innovation model that reflects our values: human-centred and environmentally responsible. Despite a strong scientific base, we lag behind in experimentation and struggle to turn knowledge into scalable, market-ready solutions.

Our innovation system is held back by three key barriers: inefficient funding mechanisms, limited infrastructure for experimentation, and insufficient cross-border collaboration. To address these, we propose targeted actions such as: a digital one-stop shop to access all EU funds and tailored supportservices for smallinnovators; Clean EnergyZones and legaltestbeds to enable rapidexperimentation; and incentives for cross-border specialisation among Europe's innovation hubs.

Only through strategic coordination can we ensure that innovation is not just encouraged, but truly enabled, in every corner of the Union.

Problem Statement

Innovation is a non-linear, dynamic process that involves creating new — or upgrading existing
— products, processes, or servicesthrough experimentation or by translating knowledge into practical solutions. It extends well beyond technology and is central to Europe's global competitiveness, sustainability goals, and long-term economic growth. Yet, despite this shared vision, the EU continuesto fall short of its innovation potential; furthermore, the current systems across the EU are struggling to deliver.

At the heart of this issue lies a fundamental question: If innovation is central to the EU's strategy, why does it still fall short of its full potential? Despite Europe's strong scientific base and clear ambitions for digital leadership and climate neutrality, innovation remains fragmented, underfunded, and unevenly distributed. As a result, Europe struggles to convert knowledge into scalable, market-ready solutions, facing persistent gaps in transparency, inclusivity, and public value.

Complex funding procedures and regulatory burdens disproportionately affectSMEs, limiting their participation in transformative innovation. While digital advancements accelerate, the absence of open, collaborative frameworks and inclusive governance inhibits progress. This problem is also connected to fragmented governance: financing mechanisms, regulations, and infrastructure are often siloed at both national and EU levels. For example, the gap between demand and available funding is stark; while €24 billion is needed, only €4 billion is currently accessible. Withouta unified system or "one-stopshop" for funding to streamline processes and ensure equitable access, innovators confront bureaucratic complexities.

Moreover, the lack of streamlined access to funding, regulatory support, and a shift toward open-source innovation risks entrenching inequality instead of maximizing the EU's potential. Promising ideas frequently stall before they can scale across borders.

This fragmentation and lack of coordination are particularly evidentin critical sectorssuch as clean energy, smart grids, and digital technologies. Although projects show significant potential, they often remain confined to isolated pilot programs due to limited administrative capacity and uneven digitalization across Member States. These efforts struggleto scale due to regulatory misalignment, lengthy permitting procedures, and insufficient technical integration across borders. For instance, the development of pan-European energy corridors remains slow due to nationally siloed infrastructure strategies. This delays the cross-border solutions essential for a resilientand climate-neutral Europe.Network developments must be approached more integratively to truly advance, recognizing the deep interconnections between electricity, natural gas, hydrogen, and heat systems.

Exacerbating these challenges is Europe's limitedability to translateresearch into market-ready innovation. One core issue is that European innovation systems tend to prioritize knowledge accumulation over experimentation, which often limits agility and slows market responsiveness. In contrast,global leaders like the US and China have increasingly embraced experimentation-driven innovation, where iterative trial-and-error, rapid prototyping, and risk-taking drive breakthroughs — even when the required knowledge is acquired during the process rather than beforehand. Furthermore, a shallow venture capital market, heavy compliance burdens, and disjointed regulatory barriers drive many innovators to pursue opportunities elsewhere, contributing to a "brain drain" that further undermines Europe's competitiveness.

Finally, innovation policies often lack structured real-world testing prior to full-scale implementation, making them vulnerable to unforeseen challenges and failures. The current policy framework also fails to adequately assess resilience against economic, geopolitical, and supply chain disruptions. The absence of strategic coordination limits investment; weak infrastructure hampers deployment; and structural inequalities between Member States, particularly the integration gap between Eastern and Western European innovation ecosystems. As a consequence, the EU's innovation potential is diluted and its collective strengths reduced. The result is a system that stifles transformative ideas rather than enabling them.

The EU now faces a crucial choice: persist with fragmentation or take bold, collective steps toward an integrated innovation ecosystem.

To succeed, it must streamline financing, strengthen cross-border collaboration, and align infrastructure and policy with its long-term goals. Most importantly, it must ensure that innovation is not only encouraged—Europe's eagerness to innovate is well known—but also enabled in every corner of the Union. In this way, we can ensure the necessary strategic coordination that enhancesthe EU's abilityto achieve sustainable economic growth.

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Recommendations

4.1 Stimulate Societal Innovation through EU Public-Private Partnerships in Key Sectors

To address societal challenges like climate change and digital inequality, the EU should implement Enhanced Public-Private Innovation Partnerships (PPIPs). These partnerships will unite public authorities, private companies, research institutions, and civil society to co-create scalable innovations. The European Commission and national ministries should coordinate pilot programs in key sectors (green tech, digital health, and medtech) within 12–24 months. Co-funded Innovation Centers and Knowledge Platforms will provide infrastructure. Inclusive governance and youth mentorships will ensure broad participation. Anticipating challenges like misaligned goals or delays, we propose milestone reviews and transparent governance. Success will be tracked through innovation outputs (start-ups, patents), societal impact (emissions cuts, access), and regional equity (jobs, talent retention). Feasibility is high, building on Horizon Europe and digital transition plans

4.2 Securing Europe's Future Through Incentivising Specialisation Amongst Europe's Innovation Hubs

Innovation hubs are emerging across the EU, such as the Munich Quantum Valley or Paris AI, but lack a cohesive EU-wide strategy. To tackle this, we propose "Innovation Hubs"—specialised, cross-border tech-hubs directed and monitored by a Commission-led Multilateral Steering Group (including specialists from the European Research Council, private-sector and regional representatives). The main goal is to facilitate specialisation towards particular industries that regions already have a demonstrable comparative advantage in (identified through a transparent methodology using smart specialisation data, patent activity, and industrial clusters) while ensuring equitable distribution of funds across regions.

Hubs would receive targeted grants and tax credits based on transparent eligibility criteria (R&D track record, collaborative capacity, demonstrable specialisation), which empower regions to strengthen local advantages while aligning with EU-wide priorities. A transnational legal and consulting team would help start- and scale-ups navigate bureaucratic and regulatory barriers. The program doubles down on existing hubs, transforming Europe's fragmented landscape into a network of specialised, high-impact hubs securing talent and reinforcing EU technological sovereignty. Ultimately, this proposal is meant to not just benefit the hubs themselves but also peripheral industrial ecosystems surrounding them.

4.3 Prioritising Trial-and-Error over Precaution: Establishing Legal Testbeds for Fast Regulatory Iterations

The lack of regulatory harmonisation across Member States represents a major constraint to growth in the EU, equating to an effective tariff of up to 110 percent (IMF, 2024). To help reduce these legal barriers, this plan recommends the introduction of specialized regulatory sandboxes within Innovation Hubs, overseen by Policy Governance Labscomposed of the Commission and national regulators. While similar testbeds already exist for technologies like blockchain or AI, this approach could be encouraged as a standard method for testing new policy frameworks. Member States would be invited to consider the outcomes of these sandboxes when shaping or updating national regulation.

To address legal fragmentation, participating states pre-agree to adopt sandbox-tested relaxations through streamlined EU directives; refusal to align may restrict access to Lab benefits, incentivizing cooperation. Firms operating in sandboxes benefit from temporary, industry-specific regulatory relaxations while labs rigorously assess impacts before scaling harmonising reforms EU-wide. Outputs are validated by a newly devised Resilience & Disruption Index (RDI) - measuring compliance burdens, cross-border frictions, and regulatory agility - and fit into EU strategic planning cycles. By defining clear governance and data-driven evaluation, this "experiment-first" approach transforms regulatory diversity into a shared, real advantage for resilient innovation governance.

4.4 Create a Digital One-Stop Shop Platform to Access All European Funds

To strengthen Europe's innovation ecosystem and make funding more accessible, we need to combine all existing websites that offer information about EU funding opportunities, in a one-stop shop platform, which could also redirect the innovators to the application platforms.
Moreover, it would provide a tool that allows innovators to explain their project to the integrated AI developed by a European Start-up, which will match their project with the dedicated European funds. In parallel, the prompt written to the AI could be published on the website, so the investors will be able to contact the innovators. This AI could offer translations, funding summaries, and eligibility checks for users, making the bureaucracy surrounding them way easier.
Furthermore, real-time monitoring, transparency tools, and updates made by a group of experts from the European Commission would build trust and improve decision-making. To ensure users have their voice heard, this digital hub will rely on feedback mechanisms, co-design and user-testing loops.

4.5 Launch 'No Innovator Left Behind' Support Services to Increase Small Actors' Successes in Securing EU funds

Notwithstanding the existence of robust EU innovation funding, small and early-stage businesses struggle to access it due to complexity, poor communication, and uneven support across Member States. Although the EU allocated €766 million for communication (2021–2027), most small actors (businesses, researchers, NGOs, etc.) remain unaware of available support, including programs like Horizon, due to ineffective outreach. The technical and bureaucratic language is complex, often 27 forcing applicants to hire expensive consultants, undermining the inclusivity and purpose of the funding.

We propose combining three tools: improved communication campaigns, free national-level consultancy-style services in ministries or Europe Direct Offices, tailored to the needs of applicants from different cultural backgrounds and digital literacy skills, and a simplification strategy for application procedures. This "Europe Direct - Funding" would guide applicants through processes in their native language, allowing fairer competition. While some regions already offer support (e.g., Prague funds consultants for schools), implementation remains uneven.

A unified EU assistance initiative would give all innovators equal opportunities, while recognizing that simplification will take time. Users will be able to provide feedback to help tailor the services to their needs, and clear metrics and indicators will be put in place to measure the effectiveness of the initiative.

4.6 Promote Inclusive and Ethical Digital Innovation through Local Programmes

To close the digital divide, the EU should launch Citizen Assemblies on digital innovation at the local level under the Digital Europe Programme within 18 months. In coordination with national and regional authorities, these hubs will offer infrastructure, digital skills training, and tools like innovation vouchers and grants for SMEs and underserved communities. They will co-develop inclusive digital solutions (education, healthcare, civic tech) and testing environments for ethical AI pilots. Citizen Assemblies will be co-designed with grassroot level initiatives and local governments and inform the direction of broader innovation partnerships (PPIPs), grounding them in public priorities. EU-wide standards will ensure privacy and transparency. To address potential coordination or resource challenges, we recommend collaborative governance and stakeholder feedback loops. The initiative is politically and technically feasible, backed by civil society and local governments. Success will be measured by SME engagement, improved social outcomes, and trust in digital transformation.

4.7 Powering Europe's Future: Driving Sustainable Tech, Slashing Costs and Fueling Economic Growth by Launching Clean Energy Zones

Advanced computing and low-carbon industry across Europe face constraints from aging electricity networks, fragmented markets and high transmission losses (e.g., Bornholm Energy Island). Clean Energy and Digital Innovation Zones establish regional testbeds co-locating smart grids (e.g., Danube InGrid balancing), green hydrogen production (e.g., electrolyzers at offshore wind farms), advanced nuclear pilots (e.g., microreactors) and efficient data centres under unified standards. Coordination by European Commission DG Energy and DG Research & Innovation, with support from the EU Innovation Fund and Connecting Europe Facility, enables streamlined permitting, harmonized regulations, targeted financing and public–private partnerships (e.g., industry consortia). Demonstration projects indicate potential for significant cost savings and reduced transmission losses. Resulting resilient, high-capacity energy corridors can lower operational costs, slash emissions and position Europe as a premier destination for sustainable infrastructure investment, while generating skilled jobs and unlocking new markets through scaled pilots and private investment attraction.

4.8 Energy Without Borders: Harmonising infrastructure to Ignite Europe's Leadership in Digital and Green Innovation

Fragmented national energy strategies, divergent grid codes and disjointed infrastructure hinder Europe's leadership in quantum computing, AI and hydrogen (e.g., constrained interconnectors). The Pan-European Energy Framework aligns electricity and hydrogen corridors, unified grid codes and data centre energy standards under harmonized regulations. European Commission DG Energy and ACER draft planning and permitting guidelines (e.g., one-stop-shop approvals and joint environmental assessments). Council of the EU and European Parliament endorsement will mobilize Connecting Europe Facility and TEN-E funding (e.g., strategic interconnections). Joint procurement platforms and cross-border project roadmaps can unlock economies of scale, lower capital costs and secure supply. Final benefits include reduced consumer energy bills, accelerated clean-tech deployment, stimulation of private investment, creation of high-skilled jobs, support for SMEs and strengthened European competitiveness in digital and green industries.

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PANEL 5 : Education beyond graduation. How can the EU promote lifelong learning to prepare its citizens for rapid technological and socioeconomic changes?

Executive summary

In a context of rapid technological change, demographic shifts,and growing socio-economic inequalities, the EU must urgently transform its lifelong learning (LLL) systems to remain inclusive, resilient, and competitive. With only 11.3% of adults participating in LLL—far below the 2030 target of 60%—access remains unequal, infrastructure limited, and recognition of non-formal learningweak.This policy package proposes a coordinated European strategy to make LLL a universal right and cultural norm. Key recommendations include: implementing paid educational leave across Member States; launching an EU-wide awareness campaign to promote LLL; funding local hubs to support unemployed learners; creating a unified digital platform to align training with job market needs; expanding microcredentials and digital credentials; enhancing regional infrastructure for inclusive access; promoting AI and digital literacy for all generations; and establishing a regulatory sandbox to foster innovation in AI-driven education. Together, these measures aim to empowercitizens, foster socialcohesion, and future-proof Europe's workforce.

Problem Statement

In a rapidly changing globalcontext marked by technological disruption, demographic shifts, and increasing socio-economic inequalities, the EU faces an urgent need to reimagine and strengthen its lifelong learningsystems. Lifelong learning(LLL)—defined as the continuous development of skills, knowledge, and competencies throughout an individual's life—is increasingly recognized as essential for economic competitiveness, democratic resilience, social inclusion, and personal well-being. Yet, the current European landscape of LLL remains highly fragmented, unequal, and insufficiently accessible or visible to all segments of the population. According to Eurostat (2023), only 11.3% of adults in the EU participate in lifelong learning—a figure far from the EU's 2030 target of 60% of adults engaging in training annually (European Skills Agenda, 2020). Participation varies widely across Member States and regions, revealing stark territorial and socio-economic disparities. Access is often hindered by factors such as insufficient infrastructure, lack of financial support, rigid formal education systems, inadequate recognition of non-formal learning, digital divides, and low awareness or perceived value of continuing education. These barriers disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including the unemployed, low-skilled workers, older adults, and residents of rural or under-resourced regions. At the EU policy level, a framework for addressing some of these challenges already exists. The European Pillar of Social Rights (2017) asserts that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and life-long learning. The European Education Area (EEA), Digital Education Action Plan, and European Skills Agenda aim to promote access to learning opportunities and improve skills matching across the continent. Additionally, tools such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Europass, and ESCO support the comparability and visibility of qualifications. However, these frameworks often remain under-implemented or poorly integrated into national systems.

The lack of harmonized recognition mechanisms, funding consistency, and user-friendly infrastructure hampers the development of a truly inclusive and learner-centered LLL ecosystem. Beyond skills development, lifelong learning also plays a

crucial societal role. Research highlights the positive effects of LLL on civic engagement, social trust, mental health, and intergenerational cohesion (Laal & Salamati, 2012; Putnam, 1993). However, cultural perceptions of learning after formal education remain limited in many countries, and the broader social potential of LLL is often overlooked by policymakers and employers alike. Furthermore, digital transformation and AI adoption are reshaping both the labor market and learning environments. While these technologies offer new opportunities for personalized and flexible education (e.g., AI-based training, modular microcredentials), their implementation faces legal, technical, and ethical obstacles—particularly relatedto data protection (GDPR), the AI Act, and lack of interoperability between systems. Lastly, administrative and legal barriers to cross-border learning—such as inconsistent quality assurance, degree recognition, and access to joint or modular programs—continue to limit mobility and innovation within the EuropeanEducation Area. In summary, despitesignificant policy efforts and strategic declarations, existing EU and national policies fall short of delivering an equitable, accessible, and future-oriented lifelong learning system.The absence of coherent coordination, coupled with social and infrastructural disparities, undermines the EU's goals of inclusive growth, democratic resilience, and a skilled, adaptable workforce. A systemic, multi-level response is required—one that recognizes lifelong learning as a foundational pillar of European integration, empowerment, and cohesion.

Recommendations

5.1 Making Paid Educational Leaves a Standard all Over Europe

The EU comprises diverse localities with unique cultures and histories. To fulfil its motto, "united in diversity," EU policies must promote inclusivity and strengthen ties among citizens. Yet in recent decades, participation in community organisations—such as political parties, churches, and associations—has declined. This individualisation, alongside social media filter bubbles, has weakened social bonds and trust in democratic systems (cf. Social Capital, Putnam 1993). Lifelong learning offers a way to reverse this trend by fostering cultural exchange and social cohesion. One concrete approach is paid educational leave, a policy already in place in Germany. We recommend that the EU gives employees, both from the public and private sector, across all member states the right to take five days (or ten days every two years) of paid educational leave. This time would be used for certified learning experiences—online or offline—with a preference for on-site, regional, and train-accessible formats. The topic of study would be freely chosen, ranging from job-related skills and civic education to mental health, political engagement, or First Aid training. Such a policy promotes social interaction, personal development, and cultural exchange, ultimately strengthening European identity and democratic resilience.

5.2 Changing Perceptions of Lifelong Learning: An EU Awareness Campaign to Promote Educational Leave and Strengthen Social Cohesion

By means of Articles 174-178 of the TFEU, the EU should strive to connect its citizens and foster inclusive communities. Diversity within the EU is a strength, but it also results in unequal access to education, funds and learning opportunities across regions. The EU must commit to levelling the playing field by ensuring that lifelong learning programs and infrastructure are available to the same extent in all member states. In many member states, educational leave is not yet widely valued or understood, especially in relation to its societal benefits. To reinforce social ties and economic competitiveness, it is essential to highlight the personal and professional advantages of lifelong learning. Laal & Salamati (2012) emphasized that these advantages include i.a. improved productivity, enhanced well-being, and stronger civic engagement. We propose that the EU launch a comprehensive awareness campaign targeting both employers and employees. These campaigns should be tailored to national and regional contexts and may include EU-coordinated programs to address cultural differences in how educational leave is perceived. Highlighting success stories, emphasizing social benefits, and framing lifelong learning as a tool for empowerment will help build public trust and engagement—key ingredients in countering the decline of community participation and democratic trust.

5.3 Empowering the Unemployed Through Lifelong Learning: EU Support for Funded Courses and Local Access Points

To strengthen cohesion across the EU, policies must focus on those most vulnerable to social isolation — the unemployed — especially since loneliness tends to decrease with higher income, education, and age as we see in the EU Fairness policy brief 3/2023. While employed individuals can benefit from structured educational leave, unemployed citizens often lack access to resources and guidance for self-development. Yet, they stand to gain enormously from lifelong learning through upskilling and empowerment. Drawing on successful initiatives in the Netherlands, we recommend that national governments be encouraged to support the unemployed by funding (fully or partially) course fees and providing assistance in finding suitable educational opportunities. Local hubs with a community-building mission—such as libraries, municipal houses, or community centres—should serve as access points for these services. This policy not only promotes inclusion but also helps reconnect unemployed citizens with their local communities and with European society at large.

5.4 Encourage The Fusion and the Use of the Available EU Tools and Platforms for Lifelong Learning and Job Alignment

Currently, EU-sponsored training and job searching is disseminated in a variety of fragmented and aging platforms which cannot represent the actual need of students, adults who re-train. Such platforms are becoming disconnected from the actual labour market needs. We propose to fuse the platforms into a single modern one, where all EU-supported training and job opportunities are aggregated by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. This platform would allow students, jobseekers and employees to find training and job opportunities across Europe using precise filters such as language, field, skills and country. Databases on rankings and the current employment situation in Europe could be integrated in the platform in order to generate job and training alerts as well as career guidance to users according to their profile and the needs of the labour market.

The platform would also be the space for employers to post their skill needs to help training providers adjust their programs in real time. This tool would make learning more accessible and targeted, especially for those looking to upskill or switch careers. It would also support better coordination between EU initiatives, national systems, and the labour market—making lifelong learning more effective and future-ready.

5.5 The Right to Return: Upskilling and Reskilling Through EU-Recognised Microcredentials for Lifelong Higher Education Access

How does Artificial Intelligence (AI) work? Most European citizens use it, yet few of them can answer this question. The fast pace of technological advancement makes continuous learning essential. This proposal establishes an EU-wide framework for AI fluency and digital literacy, designed to serve all age groups through tailored, interdisciplinary learning. The programme blends mandatory and voluntary pathways delivered via schools, workplaces, and community centres, addressing relevant challenges of rapid technological change. Curricula are co-designed by interdisciplinary experts and adapted based on age groups. Learning formats include gamified modules, AI tools, extended reality systems, and adapted interfaces for accessibility. Features include hands-on labs on critical evaluation and understanding of AI and technology, such as bias detection labs. Lifelong relevance of this programme is ensured through a tier-based certification system aligned with EU qualification frameworks. Open-source materials, continuous evaluation, and a centralized digital platform are employed to guarantee transparency and scalability. Ethical oversight is ensured by an independent EU AI Fluency Council. The three-phase rollout begins on a small scale and targets full EU deployment by 2030. Funding combines Horizon Europe and Digital Europe resources with ethically governed public-private partnerships, as well as tax incentives. This initiative equips citizens to learn and critically engage with AI and rapid technological change.

5.6 AI Fluency and Digital Literacy: Educational Framework on Technology for All Generations

How does Artificial Intelligence (AI) work? Most European citizens use it, yet few of them can answer this question. The fast pace of technological advancement makes continuous learning essential. This proposal establishes an EU-wide framework for AI fluency and digital literacy, designed to serve all age groups through tailored, interdisciplinary learning. The programme blends mandatory and voluntary pathways delivered via schools, workplaces, and community centres, addressing relevant challenges of rapid technological change. Curricula are co-designed by interdisciplinary experts and adapted based on age groups. Learning formats include gamified modules, AI tools, extended reality systems, and adapted interfaces for accessibility. Features include hands-on labs on critical evaluation and understanding of AI and technology, such as bias detection labs. Lifelong relevance of this programme is ensured through a tier-based certification system aligned with EU qualification frameworks. Open-source materials, continuous evaluation, and a centralized digital platform are employed to guarantee transparency and scalability. Ethical oversight is ensured by an independent EU AI Fluency Council. The three-phase rollout begins on a small scale and targets full EU deployment by 2030. Funding combines Horizon Europe and Digital Europe resources with ethically governed public-private partnerships, as well as tax incentives. This initiative equips citizens to learn and critically engage with AI and rapid technological change.

5.7 Regulation with Innovation: A Pan-European Regulatory Sandbox for AI in Lifelong Learning

As the EU grapples with an ageing population, automation-driven labor disruptions, and rising global competition in digital technologies, lifelong learning has become a strategic economic necessity. AI holds great potential to personalize education, recognize informal skills, and align people with evolving labor market needs. However, the EU's strong rights-based regulatory framework —particularly the GDPR, the AI Act, and fragmented national credentialing systems—currently hinders innovation in this space. To resolve this, we propose the creation of a Pan-European Regulatory Sandbox for AI in Lifelong Learning. This would be a controlled, collaborative environment where developers, education providers, and researchers can test AI-driven learning and reskilling tools with temporary regulatory flexibility. The sandbox would operate under the existing legal framework—specifically Articles 53–55 of the EU AI Act—and be coordinated by the European Commission. Participants would work under close supervision, with clear guidelines for data protection, ethical use, and risk management. The goal is to enable responsible experimentation without undermining fundamental rights. This approach allows the EU to support innovation in education technologies while ensuring safeguards, helping build adaptive, future-ready learning systems for all citizens.

5.8 Improvement and Use of Regional Infrastructure for Inclusive, Equal and Accessible Lifelong Learning

Across the EU, disparities in educational infrastructure and the lack of accessible, community-based learning spaces hinder equitable lifelong learning, especially for ageing populations and persons with special needs. Many regions still lack multifunctional centres that welcome people of all ages and with specific needs for education, mentoring, and civic engagement. To address this, the EU should maximise the use of existing public infrastructure, such as universities, municipal halls, libraries, and underused community centres; to open this infrastructure and use them as inclusive learning hubs with multifunctionality purposes. A standardised framework should be applied to ensure each region offers public spaces that are fully accessible, cater to aiding senior citizens and the community of people with specific needs such as impaired mobility, cognitive, vision and hearing abilities, using appropriate tools. This initiative should begin with an EU-wide audit to map underutilised facilities, followed by a coordinated upgrade scheme co-funded by the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). By ensuring that every urban and rural area has a barrier-free space with minimal bureaucracy, this policy will foster equal access to lifelong learning regardless of age, ability, or socio-economic background, while strengthening resiliency between communities through intergenerational engagement.

5.9 Promoting and Enhancing Existing Digital Credentialing Systems within National Education and Training Frameworks

To future-proof Europe's workforce and foster inclusive growth, this policy advocates the integration and promotion of modular, verifiable digital credentialing ecosystems such as EQF, EDCI, or CEDEFOP into education and vocational training systems. These stackable credentials should contribute to formal qualifications and support flexible, lifelong learning. A cultural shift is essential: education must be understood as a continuous, lifelong process. Systems should not only offer access but also cultivate the motivation to engage in learning, making it effective, enduring, and transferable across jobs and education pathways. National ministries, working closely with quality assurance bodies and social partners, should lead implementation efforts. Education and training institutions must also strengthen the validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) by standardizing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) procedures and equipping educators with skills in competency-based assessment. To increase participation, governments must ensure sufficient learner support. Moreover, lifelong learning engagement should be tracked using tools such as the EU Skills Index and Eurostat statistics, while institutions should be incentivized through funding and accreditation mechanisms. Promotion and validation of verifiable digital credentials facilitate the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies. This would achieve economic growth, employment, and their transfer across institutional, sectoral, and national borders.

PANEL 6 : Living with dignity. What measures should the EU consider to ensure affordable housing for its younger generations?

Executive summary

Living with dignity beginswith having a secure, stable,and affordable placeto live. Across the EU young people face growing challenges in accessing affordable housing due to rising rent prices, stagnant wages, limited housing stock, and increasing urban inequality. These barriers not only affecttheir living conditions but also limitopportunities for education, employment, and social mobility.

This policy proposal seeks to addressthe question: What measures should the EU consider to ensure affordable housing for its younger generations? Recognizing that housing is primarily a national competence, our recommendations aim to identify realistic and impactful interventions the EU can support—through funding, coordination, innovation, and policy guidance—to help member states expand access to affordable, inclusive, and sustainable housing.

By combiningregulatory tools, financialincentives, and best-practice sharing across borders, we propose a multi-dimensional approach to empoweryoung Europeans to live with dignity in urban and rural areas alike.

Problem Statement

The lack of affordable housing is becomingone of the most pressingsocio-economic challenges facing young people across the EU. As housing prices rise faster than wages—particularly in urban centres—many young Europeans are struggling to accessadequate, secure, and affordable homes.This affordability crisis exacerbates inequality, delays independence and family formation, limits access to education and employment opportunities, and undermines the fundamental right to live with dignity.

While housing policy primarily falls under the jurisdiction of national governments, the EU holds a critical complementary role in promoting social inclusion, regional cohesion, and economic development. Yet, existing EU-level strategies—such as those under the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Urban Agenda for the EU, and structural funding instruments—remain insufficient to address the scale and complexity of this issue.

In addition, fragmented planning practices, speculative real estate markets, and the lack of typological diversity in housingsupply contribute to a deep mismatch between what is available and what young people actually need. Without urgent and coordinated action, the housing crisis threatens to entrench intergenerational inequality and hinder sustainable urban development across the Union.

This proposal exploreshow the EU can leverageits supporting competences, funding mechanisms, and policycoordination tools to promote housingaffordability, diversity, and accessibility for its younger generations.

Recommendations

6.1 Expanding EU Housing Supports via Multi-Level Allocation of European Investment Bank Funds

To address the growing housing affordability crisis faced by Europe's youth, we propose expanding the role of the European Investment Bank (EIB) in financing affordable housing initiatives for students through a structured allocation system.

The EIB can support inclusive youth housing by offering low-interest loans and co-investment to public authorities, universities, and housing cooperatives. By increasing earmarked funding within its Urban Development programs, the EU ensures long-term investment in dignified living conditions.

Funds should be allocated across local, regional, and national levels to qualified actors - such as municipal housing agencies, housing cooperatives, social enterprises, and private developers.

Housing projects must meet key criteria: affordability (≤30% of household income), accessibility, non-discrimination, reduction of youth housing shortages, and compliance with EU housing quality and safety standards.

Local authorities should assess compliance, while a joint EU-EIB body oversees progress and ensures alignment with EU goals.

6.2 Sustainable student housing through EU and national funding

This proposal calls for increased and coordinated EU and national funding to expand and improve university housing infrastructure, and to standardize housing access conditions across Member States, hence ensuring greater access to higher education for European students. Implementation will focus on: 1) providing low-interest loans to universities via the InvestEU programme to construct or renovate student residences, 2) allocating EU and national funds through the ERDF to convert underutilised urban buildings into sustainable student housing in alignment with New European Bauhaus principles, and 3) incentivising affordable co-living developments via public-private partnerships, utilising ERDF and ESF+ for grants and EIB/national banks for loans, articles 4(2)(b)(c), 6 and 174–175 TFEU providing legal foundation. These measures will alleviate the shortage of affordable student accommodation, improve living standards, and enhance student mobility. The European Commission will uptake an executive role in legislation of this policy.

6.3 European Housing Safety Net - Delors Housing Scholarship for Students

This proposal calls for the creation of a European Housing Scholarship program, modelled with specific eligibilty criteria to acommodate students in a reasonable manner. The scholarship would offer monthly housing subsidies to eligible students enrolled in public, private or social institutions. The eligibility criteria would include country of origin(to determine any local or foreign policies in place to support housing needs), family income, individual income, age, and other relevant aspects. The program would be co-funded by the EU and member states, managed in cooperation with universities and student housing providers, having into account existing Member State funding programs.

This initiative would promote equal access to education, reduce housing insecurity among youth, and improve mobility across the Union. It would also serve as a pilot for broader EU engagement in youth housing support, addressing a growing affordability gap without requiring treaty reform and providing a common safety-net for every European student.

6.4 EU Initiative for Youth Empowerment in Rural and Peripheral Regions

European peripheral and rural regions face persistent barriers to education, employment, digital access, and cultural participation. To promote territorial cohesion, the EU should establish a dedicated EU Rural Youth Empowerment Program focused on empowering young people in rural and less developed regions. This initiative would support youth-led projects in entrepreneurship, sustainability and digital innovation. It should provide targeted funding, mentorship, and training, developed in cooperation with European University Alliances, local authorities, and civil society. DG REGIO should lead the coordination of the program, ensuring alignment with EU Cohesion Policy and regional development strategies. In parallel, DG EAC should contribute by integrating educational and mobility components, including grants for short-term exchanges between rural and urban areas. By investing in rural youth, the EU can counteract depopulation, revitalize local economies, and strengthen social cohesion. In doing so, it will also alleviate demographic and infrastructural pressure on urban centres, creating a more resilient Europe.

6.5 Enhancing Youth Access to Housing Through Incentivised Co-Living and Cooperative Housing in Urban Areas

Micro Urban Villages (MUVs) and youth housing cooperatives offer an innovative and inclusive solution to the lack of affordable housing in Europe. Built on underused urban plots, these small-scale, community-focused clusters of energy-efficient homes promote shared amenities, green design, and inclusive living. By using modular construction and cooperative ownership models, MUVs reduce individual housing costs while making it easier for people to connect with each other. MUVs are adaptable to a range of urban settings, from high-density city centers to declining industrial communities, making them a flexible policy tool across Europe. This way of living is optimal both in economic terms and in promoting energy sobriety.
To expand these models, the European Commission should encourage Member States and their local authorities to enable compact, mixed-use infill developments on underutilized urban plots. Through DG Regio, funds to actively support these initiatives while enforcing environmental standards should be implemented. The initiative should start with pilot projects in cities with severe youth housing shortages.

6.6 An EU Framework for Mandatory Housing Needs Assessments and a Common Quality Label for Inclusive Development

We propose making a Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) mandatory before any construction permit approval, inspired by the UK model (2021). The HNA would be an independent, objective evaluation of the number and types of dwellings needed in a given area, conducted without land availability constraints. Local and national authorities would oversee housing plans and validate results. This ensures housing reflects real needs, improves affordability, and reduces social exclusion. The measure could be established via a directive under article 153(j) TFEU.

To complement this, we propose a European Socially Balanced Housing (SBL) label for projects aligned with local needs and social equity. Projects meeting HNA criteria would earn the label by providing diverse, affordable housing and demonstrating positive urban impact. The label promotes inclusion, sets standards, informs residents, and directs funding to socially responsible projects, turning housing data into effective action against inequality. It would be provided under article 114 TFEU and implemented by the European Commission through the Housing Commissioner and the newly established "Housing Task Force".

6.7 Dorm Capacity-Based Funding System - EU funds given to universities based on a percentage determined by dorm spaces relative to total of students.

This policy links EU funding for educational institutions to the availability of student housing. Institutions with fewer dormitory spaces relative to enrolled students would receive proportionate financial support specifically earmarked for infrastructure development, encouraging expansion and modernization of housing infrastructure. To maintain long-term impact, funding should be performance-based, with continued support tied to measurable outcomes such as increases in dormitory capacity or improved student satisfaction surveys. A tiered system prioritizes universities with shortages, while providing support to those with sufficient capacity.
Ministries can facilitate public-private partnerships, leveraging EU funds as incentives to attract private developers for student housing projects. Linking funding to student housing availability, this policy ensures that universities with limited dorm capacity receive targeted support to expand infrastructure, promote public-private partnerships, and enhance student living conditions, while reducing pressure on the regular housing market

6.8 Transforming Empty Buildings: A Sustainable and Affordable Youth Housing Plan

We propose a Green Conversion Initiative (GCI) to transform underutilised public and private buildings, such as vacant schools, libraries, barracks, and offices, into affordable and sustainable housing for European youth aged 18–30. Integrated into the European Green Deal and aligned with the National Energy and Climate Plans and ETS/ETS-2 for coordinated implementation and compliance, the initiative would use existing EU funds (Just Transition Fund, Social Climate Fund) to support conversion projects.
First, the EU Building Stock Observatory and EUBUCCO with data on the buildings' conditions should be expanded. Then, projects should meet affordability and sustainability criteria, including clean energy use, insulation, green space, and waste management in order to receive funding. To avoid political backlash, the initiative should be framed as a youth empowerment and job creation tool where local governments and youth-led teams would co-organise architecture/engineering competitions for these unused spaces. Finally, a central EU task force would coordinate oversight and mitigate challenges such as coordination gaps or funding shortfalls post-RRF. This initiative empowers youth while advancing Europe's social and environmental goals.

6.9 Ensuring Affordable Accomodation by Increasing Social Housing and Introducing Rent Monitoring.

In the EU, there was a steady increase of 48% in housing prices between 2010–2023 (Eurostat, 2024). Therefore, it is recommended that a European framework be developed to encourage Member States to define targets for social housing and implement barometers for rental prices. Cities and towns could be encouraged to ensure that at least 15–25% of all newly built houses are designated as social housing. Local governments may receive incentives if they exceed this percentage proportionately, and could face reduced access to certain funding mechanisms if they do not meet the suggested targets.

Moreover, a dynamic pricing barometer could be developed for each area to determine the maximum rental price of housing, based on various parameters such as location, size, year of construction, access to public transportation, etc. These barometers would be publicly available, and housing inspections could be conducted by qualified professionals, employed by Member States' existing regulatory agencies. Both property owners and tenants would have access to the results.

6.10 EU Standards for Minimum Room Sizes and Communal Spaces

This proposal recommends the establishment of minimum quality guidelines for common and private living spaces in student housing across the EU. In newly built residences, it is suggested that each tenant be allocated at least $12\,m^2$ of bedroom space (shared rooms providing $12\,m^2$ per person), with a minimum ceiling height of $2.5\,m$. Studios should ideally not be smaller than $25\,m^2$.

For existing buildings that do not meet these recommendations, structural adaptations could be encouraged to make better use of underused spaces. All buildings should implement appropriate safety measures. In housing with six or more private rooms, it is further recommended to include a common area equivalent to 10–20% of the total building area, in order to foster community development and support student well-being.

National agencies, either newly created or repurposed, could be tasked with supporting implementation, monitoring adherence to these standards, and ensuring access to financing. While enforcement would remain a national responsibility, the EU could support this initiative under its shared competence in consumer protection and youth welfare, by facilitating cooperation and promoting adherence to these quality guidelines.

PANEL 7 : Unveiling inequalities. What are the issues relatedto the gender pay gap and minorities?

Executive summary

Inequalities in the world are growing, and the European Union (EU) is not exempt from this increasingly alarming trend. We propose an intersectional policy agenda addressing five persistent challenges in the EU: economic disparities, gender inequality, labour rights, minority exclusion, and climate-driven injustice. The panel proposes an EU Directive to reduce wealth inequality. On gender, it recommends bindingquotas for women in leadership, guaranteed access to contraception, and a ban on gender-based price discrimination.
To advance labour equity, the panel calls for mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting, transparency measures, inclusive parental leave, and enforceable disability accommodations. For minority protection, the proposals support targeted education access to reach underrepresented communities. Finally, the panel urges legal recognition of climate-displaced persons and the creation of "Climate Passports" to ensure permanent protection and integration.
Together, these measures seek to build a more cohesive, inclusive, and resilient EU that actively confronts structural inequality and ensures dignity and opportunity for all.

Problem Statement

Persistent and intersecting disparities continue to be a challenge to the EU, built on the principles of equality, solidarity, and respect for human rights. Despite the apparent decrease in overall income inequality across European member states in the past 20 years, economic disparities have been on the rise in individual member states, especially among the EU15. The bottom half holds less than 5% of the wealth, whereas the top 10% own between 60% and 90%.
From the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) to the Gender Equality Strategy, the EU has made significant progress in implementing progressive policies; however, these initiatives are still scattered, unevenly applied, or insufficiently binding. Despite some progress, the 2024 Gender Inequality Index highlights persistent disparities across key areas. Women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership positions, with only 61.4% parity in the power sector and 74.2% in the workforce. Additionally, gaps in access to birth control (88.6%) and the continued presence of the pink tax (83.4%) underscore ongoing challenges in achieving gender equality in health and economic sectors.

With few policy tools to addressits structural causes,wealth inequality has increased at an alarmingrate that far outpaces income inequality. Ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities, and second caregivers are still excluded from education and work, which usually leads to cycles of poverty and underrepresentation. Meanwhile, vulnerable groups, especially marginalized youth, continue to face disproportionate barriers to education, mobility, and social integration.

While work has historically been a crucial driver of social mobility—capable of elevating and empowering disadvantaged communities—we are now faced with the paradox of a labor market that still discriminates based on gender, ethnicity, and physical ability. Inequalities also have a geographic dimension, due to a lack of harmonization in many areas.

Climate change may displace up to 150 million people by 2050, yet current international and regional migration frameworks fail to address the slow-onset nature of environmental degradation and its socioeconomic impacts. Forced displacement of communities and the constitutional gap on "climate migrants" are two novel aspects of injustice caused by climate change. These disparities are systemic, intersectional, and reinforce one another; they are not isolated. The EU's long-term social cohesiveness, economic stability, and democratic legitimacy are all threatened by their perseverance, in addition to individual dignity and opportunity. Without decisive, harmonized, and legally binding action at the EU level, the Union risks failing its most fundamental promise: to leave no one behind.

Recommendations

7.1 EU Directive on Reducing Wealth Inequality

In alignment with the European Pillar of Social Rights, we recommend a European framework on the Reduction of Wealth Inequality, in accordance with Article 153 of the TFEU on social inclusion.

Wealth inequality, defined as the concentration of capital ownership, has been rising, with top 1% shares ranging from 20% to 40%. Research shows its negative impact on living standards, democracy, and economic prosperity.

This framework would encourage Member States to improve wealth data collection and transparency, and to set voluntary national targets, aiming to reduce the top 1% wealth share by 5% by 2030 and below 20% by 2040, a level already achieved in Belgium and Portugal. Estimates would be based on Pareto extrapolation. Progress could be reported annually through national action plans.

7.2 Parity in EU Leadership: Directive to Ensure Women Representation in High-Level Public Roles

When looking into the Gender Inequality Index 2024, it is clearly visible that leadership roles, such as top-level public administration, and nominations to EU-level posts, are mostly dominated by men. Article 8 TFEU requires member states to eliminate inequalities and promote equality between men and women in all sorts of activities. This is reflected in certain directives such as the Women on Boards deal to boost gender balance in companies and the Roadmap for Women's Rights; however, it is not enough to combat the problem since the inequality index regarding power and work is lower than 75%. To ensure gender equality in decision-making roles, the EU should ensure a minimum representation of 40% of women in the nominations to EU bodies and external delegations. This directive would be included under Article 157(3) TFEU, and it would apply per appointment cycle. As the legal procedure follows, EU member states would have to report annually to the commission and, in the case that the requirements are not met, the infringement procedure would be activated.

7.3 Bridging the Gaps in Contraceptive Access Across the EU through a Binding Legal Framework

Access to modern contraceptives is essential for gender equality, health, and personal autonomy. Yet, many women (usually under the age of 25) face barriers such as high costs, lack of insurance coverage, and inadequate youth services.

Current EU policy relies on non-binding resolutions, leading to big differences in implementation. To address this, we propose a legally binding directive under Article 168 TFEU, establishing minimum standards for the affordability, availability, and accessibility of all contraceptive methods, including emergency contraception. Implementation of this directive can be achieved through member states integrating contraceptives into national healthcare, subsiding the aforementioned products partially or fully and introducing price caps.

Member States should report annually on progress, with clear EU-level enforcement mechanisms. This measure would translate the values of the 2021 SRHR resolution into enforceable rights, narrowing inequality and enabling all individuals, regardless of age, income, or location, to make informed reproductive choices.

7.4 Pink Tax Free: Eliminate Gender-Based Price Discrimination in the EU

The Pink Tax refers to the price increase observed in feminine products, which often feature a pink hue. This rise in price specifically targets women, as similar products marketed toward men are often significantly cheaper. Such gender-based economic discrimination reinforces existing pay gaps and broader inequality. While EU legislation prohibits discrimination based on sex, it does not currently address gender-based pricing differences in consumer markets.

To help fill this gap, we propose the development of EU-wide guidelines discouraging unjustified gender price discrimination and promoting greater transparency in pricing policies. Member States would be encouraged to support a voluntary labeling system, certifying that products targeted toward women are free of additional, unjustified costs. The "Pink Tax Free" label could be awarded by an independent third-party body in collaboration with European institutions.

By removing this implicit financial burden on women, the EU would take a meaningful step toward fairer markets and everyday gender equality.

7.5 Ethnicity (or Geographical Origin) Pay Gap Reporting and Internal Pay Transparency in the EU

Despite recent advances, the EU Pay Transparency Directive (2023) does not include standardized, EU-wide ethnicity pay gap reporting based on national definitions or geographical origin, leaving a critical gap in addressing workplace inequality. We propose extending the Directive so that the EU introduces annual ethnicity or geographical origin pay gap reporting for companies with over 100 employees, applying harmonized methodologies and national definitions. Collection and processing of ethnicity and origin data would take place only with employees' explicit consent, and all data is GDPR compliant.

Where significant unexplained gaps (e.g., over 5%) are identified, employers are expected to develop corrective action plans and conduct joint pay assessments with worker representatives, in line with the approach used for gender pay gaps. To strengthen the impact, this reporting would be complemented by greater internal pay transparency, making internal (within the company) salary data and pay criteria accessible to all employees not just on request and discouraging pay secrecy clauses, subject to employee consent for data use. This approach enables measurable progress on pay equity, respects employee privacy, and addresses intersectional discrimination across the EU.

7.6 Advancing Equal Access for all: An EU Framework for Remote Work Rights, Disability Inclusion and Fair Workplace Practices

Currently, persons with disabilities still face indirect discrimination due to unavailable technologies, inflexible practices, and lack of workplace support. We recommend granting all EU employees with disabilities whose roles allow remote work the right to request and access such arrangements, and require objective justification for any refusal. Extending the European Disability Rights Strategy 2021–2030, we propose EU-wide disability employment quotas, established with social partners according to the dimension of the companies, encouraged through financial penalties, incentives like subsidies, and linked to public procurement eligibility. Private and public institutions as well as companies need to guarantee proportional quotas for jobs, internships, and traineeships. Employers would report annually on quota fulfillment and accommodations to the relevant national ministry. The European Commission, in coordination with the European Disability Forum and the Disability Platform, will oversee standards and progress. Finally, the EU Multi-Financial Framework would not fund projects that separate persons with disabilities from the rest of the community, even if these projects improve their living conditions.

7.7 Promoting Equal Parental Leave: 14 weeks with 2 weeks mandatory nontransferable Parental Leave for Fathers or Second Caregivers

The EU should embed comprehensive functional parenthood support in funding criteria by extending leave entitlements not only to biological mothers but to all recognized caregivers, co-parents, social tutors, and plural-parent families. It is essential that caregivers can balance work and family life. We recommend extending parental leave to a minimum period for 14 weeks, with 2 weeks mandatory non-transferable leave for fathers or second parents, the same level as mothers in the EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019), to be taken within the first year after a child's birth or adoption, compensated at no less than 80% of median salary. Non-transferable leave increases uptake among fathers and second parents, supporting equitable caregiving. National governments should provide free or subsidized full-day childcare (≤€300/month per child) for all parents. Additionally, mothers returning to full-time work after three years postpartum or while the other parent uses their leave should receive monetary rewards such as tax credits. Mothers who reduce work hours for caregiving should receive prorated pension contributions equivalent to full-time employment until the child turns 18, preventing retirement gaps. These EU measures promote parenthood and gender equity, ensuring all families and children receive needed support.

7.8 Positive Action to promote higher education for youth from minority communities and socio-economically disadvantaged groups

According to UNICEF, some main reasons for depriving people from minority communities of pursuing education, especially higher-level education, have been financial instability and child labour. Eurostat reported that in 2023, 24.8% of children under 18 in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. While Article 5 of Directive "2000/43/EC" makes positive action measures possible for the member states, it doesn't seem effective in tackling educational inequalities and supporting marginalized communities throughout the EU.
Aligning with the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025, member states should be required to adopt national law that mandates the allocation of educational incentives, especially focused on people barriered by socio-economic obstacles, like targeted scholarships and internships for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Local education authorities and University departments like Diversity or Inclusion Departments shall be held accountable for designing, regulating, and monitoring of such plans within their region. Moreover, to help tackle poverty, this policy requires member states to have a National Educational Inclusion and Welfare Steering Committee. This committee shall monitor and operate its regional committees, which consist of representatives from universities, civil society promoting inclusion, and DEI related organizations. The primary objective of this committee would be to support targeted scholarship programs, create student job opportunities for qualified students from minority communities, and develop programs and training to promote networking opportunities and reduce the employment gap.

7.9 Clear Legal Definition of "climate-displaced persons" and Integration into the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum

The European Commission, in cooperation with the European Parliament, should formally recognize "climate-displaced persons" within EU asylum law by establishing a clear legal category. These are individuals or groups forced to leave their habitual residence, temporarily or permanently, due to the adverse effects of climate change—such as sea level rise, extreme weather, droughts, or ecosystem degradation—that threaten their livelihoods or safety. Current international legal instruments, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, do not adequately protect those displaced by climate-related causes. To address this gap, the Commission should introduce a legislative proposal by 2028, setting minimum protection standards under Article 78 of the TFEU while allowing for national flexibility. This new category should also be integrated into the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, with provisions for temporary humanitarian protection. Instruments such as the Qualification Directive should be amended during the next review cycle to ensure legal clarity and support. By taking these steps, the EU can strengthen its legal and institutional preparedness for future migration flows, provide vital humanitarian assistance, and uphold its values of solidarity and human rights in the face of climate-induced displacement.

7.10 Anticipating the Wave: Strengthening EU Urban and Social Systems for Climate Migration

The Institute for Economics and Peace projects that by 2050, up to 1.2 billion people could be displaced globally due to extreme weather and natural disasters. As a global economic leader and major emitter, as it has contributed to 22% of the global cumulative emissions according to Our World in Data, the EU has an obligation to act decisively. The EU must prepare for the social and urban impacts of "climate-displaced persons" seeking asylum. Big influxes can result in rapid urban growth, informal settlements, and infrastructure breakdown, especially in sanitation, housing, and transit. Unmanaged influxes may result in rapid urban growth, informal settlements, and infrastructure breakdown, especially in sanitation, housing, and transit. We propose that the EU prepares for this migration wave by arranging a funding mechanism to support Member States in undertaking the necessary infrastructural changes to accommodate the incoming migrants. Infrastructure development must be timely and equitable. Member States should use this fund to implement comprehensive integration programs, including language education, housing, healthcare, and mental health services. With adequate foresight, the EU's strong governance and economy can absorb climate migrants without exacerbating social tensions or triggering conflict. Immediate legislative action is essential.

PANEL 8 : Unity in Diversity. How can the EU foster cultural understanding and inclusivity in an increasingly diverse Europe?

Executive summary

Through the adoption of "Unity inDiversity" as its official motto, the EU made a clear statement regarding its intention to link the development of an emotional and identitarian European belonging to the recognition of cultural diversity and richness. From these premises, the main goal seems to be the creation of a space where every single individual carrying their own uniquebackground is not only welcomedbut represented too. However, during the process towards this direction, significant hurdles are currently to be found, namely the scarcity of European standardisation, the weak communication among various stakeholders, and the marginalvisibility of minorities. In order to mark the first initialstep towards the overcoming of such hurdles, the policy brief seeks to provide policymakers with a roadmap to navigate the complex and sensitive panorama of inclusivity. Building on an approach that is attentive to the real, lived, and concrete challenges within the Europeancitizenry, the policyrecommendations that are put forward span multiple dimensions, rangingfrom migration and multilingualism to gender diversity, disability and workforce.

Problem Statement

In the year 2000, "United in Diversity" was adopted as the official motto of the EU, bringing a powerful message with it: Europeans unite to work for peace and prosperity together, while at the same time being enriched by the different cultures, traditions,and languages of the European continent. This vision is still central to the EuropeanUnion two decades later. While the motto primarily referred to political unity at the beginning, its meaning has further developed to refer to a form of social and identitarian unity: a sense of identity and belonging to Europe.

This development of the understanding of unity moving from a political to an identitarian concept is something that was supportedby data from the Eurobarometer. The Standard Eurobarometer 101 (2024) demonstrates that during thelast 12 years, the number of European citizens who felt like citizens of the EU increased. While in 2012, only G1% of the respondents felt like citizens of the EU, the percentage increased

in 2020 to 70% and in 2024 to 74%. However, this finding is weakened by the Special Eurobarometer 508 (2020), which reports that only 5G% of EU citizens identify with the label European. Thus, feeling like an EU citizen seems more common thandeveloping a genuine European identity. That means that, while legal or political belongingmay be easily conferred, building an emotional and identitarian connection to Europe is more complex.
So, what contributes to the emotionaland identitarian connection to Europe? Data gives a clear answer: European values and cultures are the primary contributors to a shared European identity. According to the Special Eurobarometer Survey 5G2 (2025),these two are the most significant factors that lead to a feeling of unity and community among EU citizens.

Therefore, it is paramount to promote European values and cultures in order to fulfil Europe's foundational principle of "unity in diversity" so that it becomes a reality.

Even though the EU is aware of the importance of this consensus, it continues to fall short in turning shared values into shared identity.The problem is not one of vision,but of persistent structural challenges that hinder the promotionof European values and cultures.These challenges fall into three broad categories. The first concernsa lack of European-wide standards (1) in different areas, which results in a fragmented implementation of core EU values and unequal access to rights, opportunities, and protections across Member States.The second one concerns outreach,addressing a lack of dialogue betweencitizens and ineffective means of communication from the EU to its citizens (2), whichfuels misunderstandings, reinforces prejudices, and contributes to the EU's perceived invisibility in the everyday lives of its citizens. The third one entails the persistent marginalisation and underrepresentation of minority languages, cultures, and identities (3) in public and institutional spaces, which undermines social cohesion and prevents large parts of the population from seeing themselves reflected in the European project.

The upcoming policy recommendations suggested by this panel aim to tackle challenges in the three aforementioned categories by proposing innovative cultural measures and efficient structural instruments. On the one hand, the innovative cultural measures aim to provide ideas on how to bring people from different backgrounds together, as well as support and make minorities more visible in the EU landscape. On the other hand,the efficient structural instruments will suggestsolutions for handlingstructural hurdles that hinderthe promotion of European valuesand European cultures.

Recommendations

8.1 Dialogue Hubs for a Better Cohesion Between Residents and Migrants

Across European communities, misinformation, lack of transparency, and limited interaction between residents and newcomers contribute to fear, polarisation of the discourse, and political disengagement related to migration. To address concerns and discuss solutions, the EU should coordinate the creation of EU-wide Dialogue Hubs, both physical and digital, where locals and migrants can engage in debates and workshops, for instance, in town hall meetings and citizen panels. The goal would be to showcase the role of migration and foster understanding between the groups. These Dialogue Hubs would be created under the framework of the Europe Direct Centres, which, in cooperation with Member States and local organisations, would ensure the effective communication and dissemination of the initiative, as well as monitor its impact. These initiatives should be funded through an EU Civic Cohesion Grant, sourced from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), with clear guidelines on allocation and management to ensure transparency and effectiveness.

8.2 A Common EU Portal for Recognition of Non-EU Qualifications

The EU lacks a harmonised approach to recognising qualifications obtained outside its borders, leaving many highly educated people migrating to the EU (hereafter referred to as migrants) unable to work in their fields. Although Member States have their own recognition systems, the lack of shared standards leads to inconsistent outcomes and long delays, particularly in sectors such as education, healthcare, construction, and engineering.

An EU-wide portal for degree recognition should be established, allowing migrants with recognised qualifications to work in their field. During the creation of the portal, institutions, professional bodies, and employers would come together to set the standards, ensuring they are practical and widely accepted. By addressing this policy gap, the EU would promote faster labour integration, help address skills shortages, align migration policies with economic and social needs, and improve the dignity and public perception of migrants.

8.3 Re-establishment of the EU Multilingualism Commissioner

25% of working-age adults in the EU speak no foreign languages. At the same time, global migration is rising and thousands of the world's languages are at risk of disappearing, making integration and language learning more important than ever (European Union, 2022). In 2007, Leonard Orban became the first Commissioner dedicated solely to multilingualism. His portfolio advanced the teaching of EU languages beyond English and promoted linguistic diversity. Although short-lived, due to the changing political priorities of the EU over time, the role addressed a crucial challenge: preserving and strengthening Europe's multilingual identity. The EU should reconsider such priorities, either through a new appointment or by expanding the existing portfolio for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture, and Sport to include multilingualism. The Commissioner would set clear targets, such as increasing access to multilingual education, promoting regional and minority languages, and integrating multilingual practices into media and workplaces. To maximize impact, the Commissioner could oversee a flagship initiative, "Cross-bordering Languages," which would provide digital tools, exchange programs, and support for underserved regions. Close coordination with other EU institutions would ensure that multilingualism reinforces broader objectives, including mobility, social inclusion, and cultural cohesion. This renewed commitment would reaffirm one of the EU's core values – unity in diversity – by bringing citizens closer through shared language and deeper cultural understanding.

8.4 EU Media and Local Culture Support Strategy

The EU is rich in local and regional cultural identities, yet many of these often remain underrepresented and lack visibility at the European level. To address this gap, the EU shall adopt a "Media and Local Culture Support Strategy", encouraging Member States to implement national action plans in compliance with the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. By leveraging the accessibility and broad reach of media, this strategy develops around targeted measures to support local cultural expressions. Firstly, funding should be allocated to regional film productions from underrepresented areas, particularly in minority languages, expanding the MEDIA sub-programme of Creative Europe. Second, building on the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, public national streaming platforms should be encouraged to introduce quotas of local and minority-language content from underrepresented areas. Moreover, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency should establish a EU Music Network, i.e., a digital archive of traditional genres, meant to preserve music heritage and make it easily accessible online. Through these interconnected measures, the strategy empowers communities and contributes to preserving and celebrating local cultural identities, hence marking a step toward greater cultural inclusivity.

8.5 EU Funds Tied to Gender based Anti-Discrimination and Violence Prevention

This proposal seeks to combat intersectional gender-based violence and discrimination through the strategic use of conditionality in EU funding. In particular, it aims to enhance protections and support for structurally marginalised groups, including immigrant women, single mothers, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Access to EU programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the European Social Fund Plus should be contingent upon Member States ensuring the implementation of mandatory anti-discrimination and anti-violence initiatives within educational and research institutions. As part of the grant application process, institutions must provide a clear account of the support systems and services currently in place to prevent and respond to harassment, including an overview of how previous incidents have been addressed. In addition, all funded institutions will be required to ensure that information regarding the role and accessibility of the European Ombudsman is clearly communicated to all programme participants. Should individuals involved in EU-funded projects feel that adequate support was not provided, they may submit a formal complaint to the Ombudsman, which may inform a review of the institution's eligibility in future funding rounds. The anticipated outcomes of this policy include a measurable reduction in violence and discrimination, strengthened commitments to equality, improved intercultural solidarity, and the promotion of sustainable and systemic change across the European Higher Education and Research Area.

8.6 EU Accessibility Certification Framework for accessible Public and Digital Spaces

To promote inclusion and equal access to people with disabilities, older adults, and neurodivergent users, the EU should establish a harmonised EU Accessibility Certification Framework with two certification streams. The first concerns physical public spaces such as libraries, city halls, and transportation hubs, covering ramps, elevators, tactile signage, and easy-to-read materials. The certification would create a recognisable EU-wide standard, thus addressing the current lack of harmonisation in the accessibility panorama. The second stream regards digital public spaces such as e-government websites, education portals, and public apps. The certification would recognise the effort of organisations going beyond compliance with legal technical standards set by the Web Accessibility Directive and the European Accessibility Act. The framework would start as a voluntary scheme, administered by accredited national bodies under EU oversight to ensure consistency across Member States. Over time, the certification could become a prerequisite for receiving EU structural and investment funds, incentivising widespread adoption.

8.7 EU Business Certification for Inclusive Employers Fostering Intercultural Competence

European employers face challenges in managing culturally diverse teams (e.g., different communication styles; approaches to hierarchical structure due to differing cultural backgrounds;discrimination based on ethnicity leading to toxic working environments). There is currently a lack of incentives and standards for promoting intercultural inclusion within companies. This proposal introduces a European certification for inclusive employers to enhance intercultural competence and support the EU's goals of integration and sustainable growth. With the European Certificate for Intercultural Learning Professionals (ECILP), the EU already has a developed framework for teaching and certifying intercultural skills. These skills include cultural knowledge and awareness of differences, intercultural communication, and adaptability in problem-solving.

This proposal envisions a revival and adaptation of ECILP so that any employer can be certified for their intercultural skills. This certification will help international employees to choose an employer that is trained in managing international talents. Furthermore, businesses could take full advantage of the open labour market and showcase their existing qualifications and efforts with a standardised certificate. In the long term, ECILP could become an EU-wide standard for employers of international workers.

8.8 Recommendation on Political Effectiveness and Citizen Trust in the EU

In times of crisis, citizens expect the EU to act swiftly and effectively. Yet, unanimity often delays or blocks action—weakening trust in the EU's ability to deliver. To address this, the European Commission should activate enhanced cooperation under Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). This legal mechanism allows at least nine Member States to move forward together in a specific policy area, while keeping the process open for others to join later. It enables faster progress without waiting for full consensus. For example, during the 2015–2016 migration crisis, the EU struggled to respond collectively. With enhanced cooperation, a core group of countries could have acted quickly to coordinate asylum procedures, relocation mechanisms, and external border support, thus offering real solutions. Once a shared direction emerges, the resulting initiative will be submitted to the Commission for review. The Commission may propose a Directive through the ordinary legislative procedure, involving all Member States and the European Parliament, if they fit - ensuring flexibility, transparency, and democratic legitimacy. Enhanced cooperation under Article 20 lets willing countries act together, while others opt out peacefully, reducing tension and keeping the broader EU more stable.

8.9 Strengthening European Identity through Regional Umbrella Organisations

By failing to provide opportunities to citizens alongside their existing national and regional identities, the development of an European identity is hindered. The work of internationally active local associations is a key measure to bridge this gap because they offer an opportunity for intercultural exchange for locals within the Member States. Their support should be ensured through regional umbrella associations, which connect, advise, and assist the locally active associations, both financially and through non-material means. One example is the Partnerschaftsverband Rheinland-Pfalz / 4er-Netzwerk e.V., which supports and coordinates the internationally active associations and municipal partnerships across regions in Germany, France, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Thus, the civil exchange can be fostered, offering opportunities for the locals to discover different cultures. Through this measure, the connection between the citizens and the cultural diversity of Europe can be fostered, and the European idea can be embedded more firmly within society. The European Commission (EC) should promote decentralised regional umbrella organisations that are responsive to local needs. Organised on a federal basis, these structures would support local initiatives and strengthen ties between identities, ultimately fostering the construction of a European identity. To ensure their effectiveness, the EC must provide sustainable financial resources.

8.10 Europe Direct Ambassadors to Enhance Visibility of EU Programmes

The EU supports cultural diversity through various programmes leading to a stronger identification with the EU (Eurobarometer, 2024). However, they often suffer from low visibility and complex bureaucratic hurdles, making them unknown or inaccessible to potential applicants. While Europe Direct centres (EDCs) offer guidance in this process, they rely on citizens actively reaching out, thus not unleashing their full potential. To facilitate a more active approach in enhancing the visibility of EU projects, the role of Europe Direct Ambassadors should be established. Ambassadors, i.e., local volunteers designated by local EDCs, would proactively reach out to citizens, local institutions, and firms, particularly in, but not limited to, regions not covered by the reach of EDCs. Their tasks, which include offering guidance on EU opportunities and organising events, would aim at raising awareness of EU projects and programs and simplifying public access to funding opportunities. The implementation of this programme would be coordinated by local EDCs, enabling them to tailor it to their capacity and regional needs. Selected Europe Direct Ambassadors would also receive a certification by the EU recognising their engagement. By strengthening local engagement, the Europe Direct Ambassador programme would ultimately bring the EU closer to its citizens and enhance public participation in European initiatives.

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05 | VOTING PROCEDURES

Submission of Recommendations

To prepare for the voting, participants engaged in interpanel debates and discussed potential objections during the second day. Following these debates, they finalised their recommendations. All recommendations were submitted by 5 pm on Thursday, 11th April to be eligible for consideration. This ensured that all proposals were received within the designated timeframe.

Voting Process

During the voting process, the panel coordinator was allotted up to 5 minutes to present the recommendations of their respective panel.

Recommendations were then voted upon individually, employing a simple majority of the expressed votes to determine the outcome. A rejected recommendation was indicated by a red light, while an adopted recommendation was indicated by a green light. The resullts of the vote are recorded in the section below.

Final Recommendations

Following the voting process, the adopted recommendations were compiled in this document. The results of the vote is also published in this document. This document will be used for dissemination purposes.

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Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 1 Mentally (un)stable	1.1 Breaking the Mental Health Stigma: Youth-Driven Advocacy and Early Intervention	71,63%
	1.2 Mental Health Care Equity: Improved Access & Innovation for Waiting Times, Medications and Youth Programs	74,64%
	1.3 Digital Wellness by Design: Protecting Young Europeans from Social Media Overstimulation	73,68%
	1.4 ClimateSpark: Empowering Youth from Eco-Paralysis to Self-Efficacy through Psycho-Ecological Projects in the EU	42,11%
	1.5 A Modern, Balanced Cross-Border News Platform to Reshape Media Consumption Supporting Mental Health	45,24%
	1.6 Mental Health Care Day: Building a Safer and Healthier Society Through Preventive Emotional Education Workshops in Schools	73,46%
	1.7 Regulating the Impact of Influencer Culture on Mental Health Through Education and Platform Moderation	67,77%
	1.8 MentalHealthEDU+: Transforming Academic Pressure Norms into Well-Being Centered Education	75%
	1.9 AI and Mental Health: Building a Safer Psycho-Cognitive Environment	46,45%
	1.10 MovingMinds EU: Ensuring Mental Health Support for Migrants Through Orientation, Therapy Access, and Multilingual Services	66,82%

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Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 2 Greener tomorrow	2.1 Empowering businesses for a greener future: Student-Led sustainability consulting under the EU Green Deal	68,10%
	2.2 Board the Green Erasmus+ Train: Interrail for sustainable mobility	76,53%
	2.3 Universities as example: Sustainability funding for green campus, sustainable research and ecological projects	75,47&
	2.4 Positive climate communication programme at European Universities	61,14%
	2.5 Plant a tree with every degree: Growing a greener Europe	59,72%
	2.6 From knowledge to action: Green skills initiative for sustainable future in Higher Education	52,86%
	2.7 Facilitating SME preparedness for CSRD Compliance through education Partnerships	57,35%
	2.8 From idea to institution: a multi-level pathway for students to shape real policy through parliamentary simulations	59,72%
	2.9 Common European University Sustainability Reporting Standard	76,08%

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Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 3 AI, European democracy and civic engagement	3.1 Strengthening the EU AI-Office by adding an independent Committee for reviewing the Fundamental Rights Impact Assessments of the AI Act (Art. 27)	72,38%
	3.2 Combating dis- and misinformation with transparent labelling on AI-generated content	85,10%
	3.3 **Closing loopholes in the EU's AI Act: Classifying all types of electoral AI as high risk**	63,64%
	3.4 Encourage cybersecurity while protecting personal data	65,38%
	3.5 Streamlining the AI system registration in the EU Database by implementing the tool AICat to ensure transparency and foster innovation	43,06%
	3.6 Foster transparency among AI companies to improve the public's knowledge of their functioning	61,90%
	3.7 Building trust in political communication: Strengthening AI standards for electoral campaigns	59,24%
	3.8 Preparing EU citizens for AI cybersecurity threats through training and certification	59,24%
	3.9 Resist the spread of AI-generated disinformation through continuous digital literacy education	62,68%
	3.10 Limiting emotional entanglement between AI and users to safeguard democratic principles	43,75%

Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 4 *Innovation for all*	4.1 **Stimulate Societal Innovation through EU Public-Private Partnerships in Key Sectors**	63,81%
	4.2 Securing Europe's Future Through Incentivising Specialisation Amongst Europe's Innovation Hubs	60,58%
	4.3 Prioritising Trial-and-Error over Precaution: Establishing Legal Testbeds for Fast Regulatory Iterations	48,36%
	4.4 Create a Digital One-stop Shop Platform to Access All European Funds	71,01%
	4.5 Launch 'No Innovator Left Behind' Support Services to Increase Small Actors Success in Securing EU Funds	67,45%
	4.6 Promote Inclusive and Ethical Digital Innovation through Local Programs	62,38%
	4.7 Powering Europe's Future: Driving Sustainable Tech, Slashing Costs, and Fueling Economic Growth by Launching Clean Energy Zones	55,87%
	4.8 **Energy Without Borders: Harmonizing Infrastructure to Ignite Europe's Leadership in Digital and Green Innovation**	58,77%
Panel 5 *Education beyond graduation*	5.1 Making Paid Educational Leaves a Standard all Over Europe	74,76%
	5.2 Changing Perceptions of Lifelong Learning: An EU Awareness Campaign to Promote Educational Leave and Strengthen Social Cohesion	60,38%
	5.3 Empowering the Unemployed Through Lifelong Learning: EU Support for Funded Courses and Local Access Points	73,81%
	5.4 Encourage The Fusion and the Use of the Available EU Tools and Platforms for Lifelong Learning and Job Alignment	70,28%
	5.5 The Right to Return: Upskilling and Reskilling Through EU-Recognised Microcredentials for Lifelong Higher Education Access	63,98%
	5.6 AI Fluency and Digital Literacy: Educational Framework on Technology for All Generations	64,15%
	5.7 Regulation with Innovation: A Pan-European Regulatory Sandbox for AI in Lifelong Learning	41,15%
	5.8 Improvement and Use of Regional Infrastructure for Inclusive, Equal and Accessible Lifelong Learning	72,12%
	5.9 Promoting and Enhancing Existing Digital Credentialing Systems within National Education and Training Frameworks	54,76%

Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 6 Living with dignity	6.1 Expanding EU Housing Supports via Multi-Level Allocation of European Investment Bank Funds	65,40%
	6.2 Sustainable student housing through EU and national funding	76,44%
	6.3 European Housing Safety Net - Delors Housing Scholarship for Students	65,07%
	6.4 EU Initiative for Youth Empowerment in Rural and Peripheral Regions	72,38%
	6.5 Enhancing Youth Access to Housing Through Incentivised Co-Living and Cooperative Housing in Urban Areas	68,10%
	6.6 An EU Framework for Mandatory Housing Needs Assessments and a Common Quality Label for Inclusive Development	63,03%
	6.7 Dorm Capacity-Based Funding System - EU funds given to universities based on a percentage determined by dorm spaces relative to total of students.	55,92%
	6.8 Transforming Empty Buildings: A Sustainable and Affordable Youth Housing Plan	75,36%
	6.9 Ensuring Affordable Accomodation by Increasing Social Housing and Introducing Rent Monitoring	56,67%
	6.10 EU Standards for Minimum Room Sizes and Communal Spaces	54,81%

Panel	Policy	In Favor
Panel 7 Unveiling inequalities	7.1 EU Directive on Reducing Wealth Inequality	60,77%
	7.2 Parity in EU Leadership: Directive to Ensure Women Representation in High-Level Public Roles	55,83%
	7.3 Bridging the Gaps in Contraceptive Access Across the EU through a Binding Legal Framework	72,73%
	7.4 Pink Tax Free: Eliminate Gender-Based Price Discrimination in the EU	72,38%
	7.5 Ethnicity (or Geographical Origin) Pay Gap Reporting and Internal Pay Transparency in the EU	57,42%
	7.6 Advancing Equal Access for all: An EU Framework for Remote Work Rights, Inclusion and Fair Workplace Practices for Persons with Disabilities	70,67%
	7.7 Promoting Equal Parental Leave: 14 weeks with 2 weeks mandatory non-Transferable Parental Leave for Fathers or Second Caregivers	70,81&
	7.8 Positive Action to promote higher education for youth from minority communities and social-economically disadvantaged groups	69,38%
	7.9 Clear Legal Definition of "climate-displaced persons" and Integration into the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum	59,81%
	7.10 Anticipating the Wave: Strengthening EU Urban and Social Systems for Climate Migration	54,81%

Panel	Policy	In Favor
	8.1 Dialogue Hubs for a Better Cohesion Between Residents and Migrants	64,76%
	8.2 A Common EU Portal for Recognition of Non-EU Qualifications	72,25%
	8.3 Re-establishment of the EU Multilingualism Commissioner	57,62%
	8.4 EU Media and Local Culture Support Strategy	57,89%
	8.5 EU Funds Tied to Gender based Anti-Discrimination and Violence Prevention	63,68%
Panel 8 Unity in diversity	8.6 EU Accessibility Certification Framework for accessible Public and Digital Spaces	62,86%
	8.7 EU Business Certification for Inclusive Employers Fostering Intercultural Competence	54,76%
	8.8 Recommendation on Political Effectiveness and Citizen Trust in the EU	47,39%
	8.9 Strengthening European Identity through Regional Umbrella Organisations	60,95%
	8.10 Europe Direct Ambassadors to Enhance Visibility of EU Programmes	68,72%

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PANEL 1

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PANEL 5

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