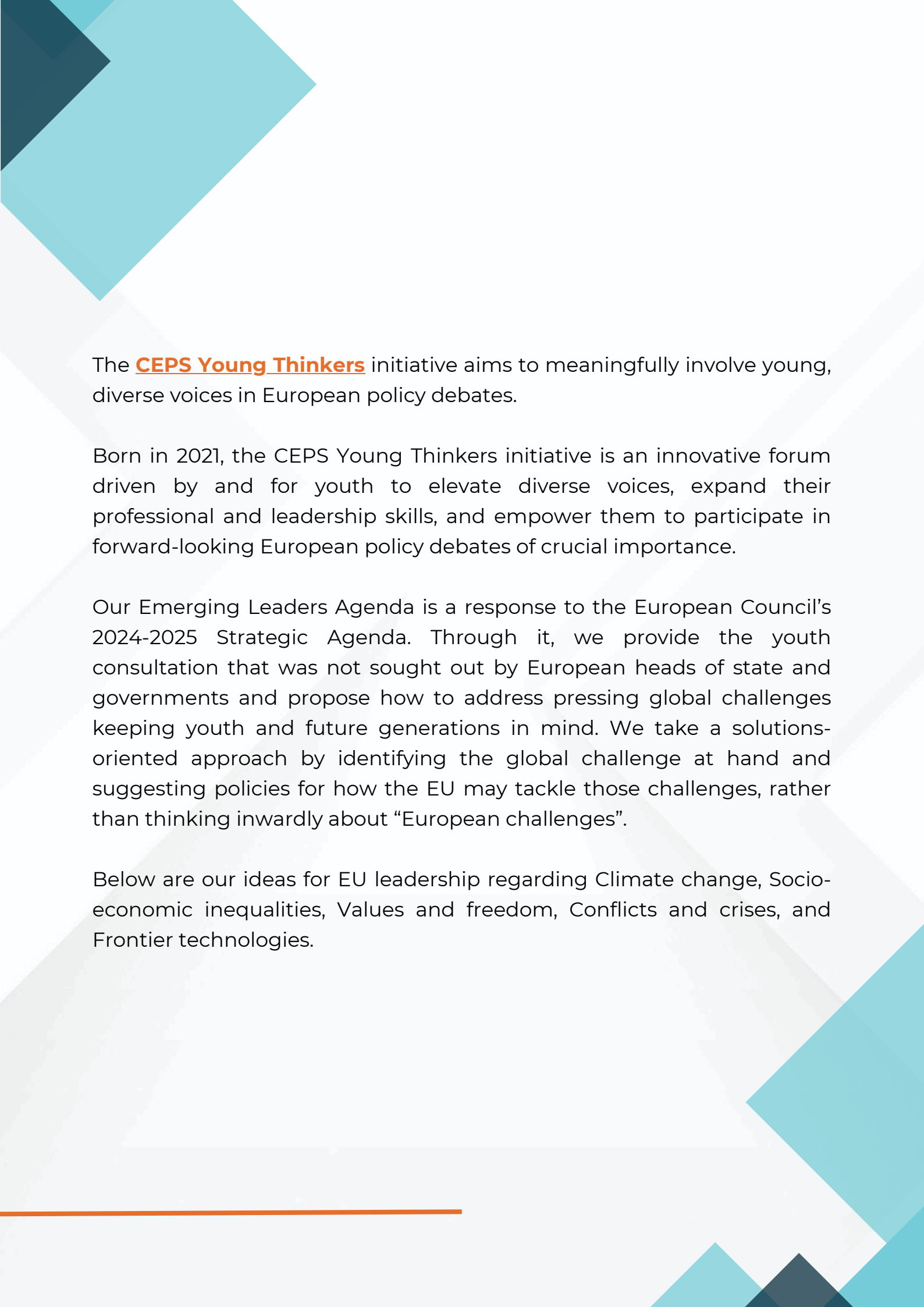


CEPS YOUNG THINKERS EMERGING LEADERS AGENDA

**A youth response to the Council's
2024-2029 Strategic Agenda**



The **CEPS Young Thinkers** initiative aims to meaningfully involve young, diverse voices in European policy debates.

Born in 2021, the CEPS Young Thinkers initiative is an innovative forum driven by and for youth to elevate diverse voices, expand their professional and leadership skills, and empower them to participate in forward-looking European policy debates of crucial importance.

Our Emerging Leaders Agenda is a response to the European Council's 2024-2025 Strategic Agenda. Through it, we provide the youth consultation that was not sought out by European heads of state and governments and propose how to address pressing global challenges keeping youth and future generations in mind. We take a solutions-oriented approach by identifying the global challenge at hand and suggesting policies for how the EU may tackle those challenges, rather than thinking inwardly about "European challenges".

Below are our ideas for EU leadership regarding Climate change, Socio-economic inequalities, Values and freedom, Conflicts and crises, and Frontier technologies.

Climate change



Accelerated energy autonomy, new energy sources and green technologies



Sustainable sourcing and a collective EU circularity mindset

We urge the EU to maintain its commitment to a green, fair and social Europe. We stress that a more ambitious energy strategy is necessary considering the overshooting of planetary boundaries, evidenced by the urgency of climate change. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has further underscored the need for a secure energy future for the Union.

To address these interconnected challenges and ensure the EU adheres to the goal of decarbonisation as per the Green Deal, we propose two focus points: energy resilience and sustainable resource management. Coordinated EU-level action ensures a cohesive approach across borders, leveraging economies of scale in renewable energy investments and fostering innovation in sustainable practices.

Accelerated energy autonomy, new energy sources and green technologies

Energy resilience hinges on achieving greater energy autonomy and exploring new energy sources. As of 2021, the production and use of energy accounted for over 75% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions. Boosting greener energy production is critical to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. Currently, the EU imports nearly 60% of its energy needs, making it vulnerable to external geopolitical events and market volatility. To strengthen energy resilience, European institutions should prioritise **increasing targets for renewable energy production, promoting decarbonisation in carbon-intensive industries, investing in regional energy networks, and developing more integrated electricity markets.**

The EU has a solid foundation for alternative energy production, such as biomethane, renewable hydrogen, and biomass, which are vital not only for reducing emissions but also for decreasing the EU's reliance on fossil fuels. Biomass is key to achieving the objectives of the EU Green Deal. Currently, biomass plays a crucial role in supporting decarbonisation efforts across the energy, transport, and building sectors, with policy incentives driving its significant contribution of 56% to the EU's renewable energy consumption as of 2021.

Yet the increased production and utilisation of biomass raises concerns about potential adverse impacts, such as the depletion of carbon sinks, the risk of deforestation, and the potential damage to ecosystems. Thus, while biomass offers clear benefits in reducing carbon emissions, careful management and sustainable practices are essential to ensure long-term viability as a renewable energy source. We therefore call upon EU institutions to devise **policies that minimise the impact of biomass production on biodiversity and promote the use of recycled biomass.**

Furthermore, as efficiently utilising alternative energy sources is limited due to available technologies, we urge the EU to take the lead in **integrating green technology advances into its industrial policy**, encompassing domestic research, production, and talent throughout the entire technological development lifecycle.

Sustainable sourcing and a collective EU circularity mindset

Sustainable sourcing of key materials, such as critical materials, is essential to achieving a resource-efficient transition. Therefore, we urge the EU institutions to further **reinforce sustainable extractive practices.** This can be done by exploring how to minimise the socio-environmental impacts of mining and fostering multi-stakeholder dialogue amongst all Member States, as exemplified by the EU Critical Raw Materials Act. Furthermore, we suggest exploring improved indicators for facilitating local communities' **informed consent on mining projects.** These indicators can indeed help monitor and evaluate progress towards more sustainable practices.

In line with these efforts, EU Member States should take joint measures to improve the collection and recycling of waste containing critical raw materials. We thus emphasise the urgency of **prioritising circularity among EU Member States** to ensure most products can be easily processed and reinserted in the EU market. We advocate for a horizontal approach that not only incorporates reused materials but also encourages repairing and product repurposing to contribute towards a circular economy. This objective can only be achieved through coordinated policies among Member States to ensure consumers can make informed choices about products containing critical materials, as well as ensuring equal access to circularity and large-scale recycling.

Even with increasing sustainable sourcing, the current rate of extraction, production and consumption, and the resulting intensive use of resources is happening at a rate at which they cannot be replenished. Hence, alongside improved technological practices, it is also necessary to focus on a systemic change approach towards a post-growth society, which can be achieved through strategies such as circularity and sufficiency.

We call on the EU institutions and Member States to ensure that sufficiency and sustainable resource management become key pillars of the next legislature, with a focus on **material use reduction as well as introducing demand reduction measures and transforming our consumer economy into a sharing economy.**

We align ourselves with the 'Sufficiency Manifesto' co-signed by over 70 NGOs and think tanks, as well as the 'Yes to an EU Legislation on Sustainable Resource Management' open letter signed by over 100 European organisations. Without a holistic systemic change, it will not be possible to reach a truly circular economy which decreases the material and carbon footprint and sustains our society. Sustainable resource management and a focus on sufficiency while respecting planetary boundaries have could potentially result in a higher quality of life for all EU citizens, as well as leading to a more resilient Europe and bringing us closer to reaching climate targets and ensuring resource justice.

Socio-economic inequalities



Ensuring sustainable and accessible housing



EU investment in adult education and skills development



Addressing health inequalities

The coming decade marks a transition period for mitigating the severe impacts of climate change in Europe. This transition is particularly challenging for three groups, namely low-income households, workers in carbon-intensive sectors and other marginalised groups at risk of social exclusion. Low-income households may face increased living costs due to new policies, workers in high-carbon industries face potential job losses and the need for retraining and marginalised groups are at risk of exacerbated social inequalities.

To ensure that these groups participate in and benefit fully from the Green Transition, the notion of a 'Just Transition' is often invoked, referring to social policies that protect and support those most affected by climate change.

Despite its importance, EU-level initiatives for reducing social inequalities remain insufficient. We, therefore, advocate for swift engagement in three interrelated policy domains that are crucial for achieving the Just Transition for Europe: **sustainable housing, skills for the green transition and equitable health services.**

Ensuring sustainable and accessible housing

First, the EU must support Member States in **improving access to housing and promoting the transition to a green and sustainable housing sector.** Across Europe, housing accessibility is often low, especially for young and low-income households, and in urban areas.

The quality of residences is also often old or poorly insulated. It is imperative to consider the environmental impact of the housing sector, as it contributes 36% of Europe's total greenhouse gas emissions. The EU, therefore, has a crucial role in promoting the greening of the sector, which will necessitate substantial investment in both existing and new housing stock, in line with the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD).

To achieve its goals, the EU must **mobilise and expand investments**, for example through the European Investment Bank, which has already financed social housing projects of over EUR 6.5 billion. Additionally, **public-private partnerships should encourage private investments** to accelerate the development of green and affordable housing. The EU must also **implement and monitor elevated EU-wide standards for green housing**, while ensuring that these benchmarks do not impair accessibility (e.g. through complementary housing allowances for vulnerable groups).

EU investment in adult education and skills development

Secondly, the EU must focus on addressing the changing landscape brought about by the Green Transition and prioritise investment and support to its Member States, especially in the areas of adult education and skills development. The European Commission has highlighted a significant skills gap across diverse sectors and regions, as well as projected labour shortages due to demographic shifts and technological improvements.

While the Green Transition presents new opportunities for the employment landscape, such as creating nearly five million new jobs, there is also the risk of leaving lower-skilled workers behind, particularly core-aged men. It was estimated that achieving net-zero emissions will result in up to 18 million workers within the EU needing to re or upskill to adapt to the upcoming changes. To address these issues, the EU needs to **increase its own investment and support its Member States in investing in adult learning and skills development** for the new types of positions that are being created by the Green Transition.

This investment should be prioritised in countries and regions with a higher percentage of individuals working in positions that may disappear or undergo significant changes due to the Green Transition, such as Croatia, Poland, Greece, and Romania. This can be achieved by leveraging existing programmes such as the EU Pact for Skill or European Skills Agenda by aligning skills development initiatives with the demands of the evolving environmentally sustainable sectors.

To make this possible, **the EU must improve its data collection and analysis regarding skills intelligence**, to proactively prepare individuals for the demands of these emerging sectors. Furthermore, governments need to develop longer-term strategies to diversify economic activities in regions that are highly dependent on jobs that may disappear.

Addressing health inequalities

Covid-19 caused 1.2 million avoidable deaths and drastically impacted jobs, education and the economy in the EU.

In 2022 alone, long-Covid reduced the labour supply by between 600 000 to one million and caused a 40% increase in housing prices. This disruption resulted in the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, particularly in the presence of the 'triple planetary crisis' of biodiversity, climate change and pollution.

In a corrective attempt, the EU needs to **adopt an equitable approach to health services provision to minimise inequalities and facilitate the Just Transition for a stronger Social Europe**. The EU must uphold its previous commitments outlined in the EU Global Health Strategy of 2022, which advocate for strong and fair health systems, as well as ensuring equitable access to medical countermeasures through Health Emergency Preparedness and Response.

The **One Health approach** must be adopted to take the interdependence of health, society, development sectors and environment into account, and to mitigate adverse effects of future pandemics.

This means employing a strategy that is multidisciplinary and multi-level. Such a strategy can be adopted by taking actionable steps based on the analysis by EuroHealthNet of the European Semester, to impact key policy areas such as housing, social inclusion through skill building and education, the Digital Transition and climate adaptation.

Finally, the Advisory Committee on Public Health Emergencies should introduce a new **primary focus on social inequalities in health while facilitating evidence-informed action**, to ensure an equitable approach.

To uphold its commitment to a Just Transition, the EU must address social inequalities by prioritising sustainable housing, skills development, and equitable health services. These three interrelated policy areas are crucial to promoting and guaranteeing vulnerable groups' participation in the changing socioeconomic landscape brought about by the Green Transition. By integrating these measures, the EU can reinforce the 'just' dimension of the transition, ensuring fairness and equity for all citizens.

CEPS Young Thinker advocates: Warda Batool, Magdalena Bochnak, Rafael Castro, Jan Einhoff, Tugay Aslim

Values and freedom



The rule of law



Fundamental rights and migration

Certain Member States have demonstrated clear and persistent breaches of EU values and the rule of law. Until Member States align with the values expressed in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the cornerstone of this political community is under threat. We call on the EU to fully adhere to these values as human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and respect for human rights are foundational EU principles. We therefore urge the EU to protect these values by upholding the rule of law throughout all policy areas, including in its migration policies.

The rule of law

The EU has seen a decline in the rule of law as legal and democratic checks and balances are continuously being undermined by certain governments.

Although the European Commission and the EU in general possess a powerful set of tools for preventing and remedying such derogations, they are hesitant to use them. We emphasise that **the rule of law must be prioritised** at the EU institutional level.

We urge the European Commission to **address rule of law derogations with the tools already at their disposal**, such as withholding EU funds or following through with Article 7 TEU, where the EU holds the power to suspend membership benefits (e.g. voting rights). For these to successfully happen, we call on the EU institutions to rethink the effectiveness of their current internal structures.

Considering the urgency of preserving democratic values, we **support the establishment of a novel authority** that will operate as a bespoke body outside of and independent from the European Commission (but working closely with it) to **monitor Article 2 adherence and enforcement**. Such a body will put pressure on the EU institutions to follow through with the Article 7 procedures while it will also signal the EU's commitment to Article 2 values.

The European Commission ought to **clarify the nuanced definitions** of the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism is needed (e.g. what exact action would be 'putting the EU budget at risk') and Article 7 TEU proceedings (e.g. what is a 'clear risk of serious breach' and 'serious and persistent breaches'). By having failed to provide clear standards and consequences for Article 2 breaches, the EU has allowed illiberal Member States to disengage from the EU's *acquis* and abuse their negotiating and voting capacities in the institutions.

Allowing illiberal governments to hold EU procedures hostage disrupts the fundamental treaty structures. This calls into question the EU's actual commitment to Article 2 values. Such a tepid approach sends the message that Member States can violate EU values and avoid sanctions. We therefore, urge the EU institutions to set **clear and concrete standards and consequences** for the Member States regarding these values.

To address the illiberal Member States' demonstrable deviations from the EU's rule of law norms and their subsequent ability to hinder EU decision-making, we also call on the European Council to **rethink the requirement for a unanimous decision** on issues related to Article 2 values. Otherwise, illiberal governments will continue to abuse their access to EU funds.

Fundamental rights and migration

The EU must reassert its commitment to **upholding fundamental human rights** in line with the values outlined in Article 2.

We call for an EU that prioritises the creation and protection of a positive, inclusive, values-based vision of 'Europeanness'. The EU must develop policies that encourage gender equality, diversity, inclusion and the protection of freedoms of speech and religion, racialised people, minority rights and LGBTIQ+ rights, in line with its commitment to a 'Union of Equality'.

The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum has been heavily faulted on many grounds, including having the strong potential to legitimise detention, increase ethnic profiling and policing and undermine the principle of non-refoulement while encouraging a 'fortress' Europe. Since these starkly undermine the EU's core values, we call on Member States and the EU as a whole to implement migration, refugee, and asylum policies that put human rights, dignity, and freedom first. A just rules-based system which controls entry into the EU can and must adhere to European values. We urge the EU to commit to **greater legal pathways** for asylum seekers fleeing political repression and violence in their home countries, as well as for economic migrants.

As a matter of necessity, we therefore urge the EU to **uphold the non-refoulement principle, work to end racial profiling on migration and asylum applications**, find a more **humane alternative to detentions** and, in general, **provide for just and legitimate pathways** to migrants seeking to access the EU.

The rise in migrant deaths as a result of attempting to cross the Mediterranean is unacceptable and must be addressed. An **EU inquiry** should be established to duly investigate these deaths and hold the responsible parties accountable. Subsequently, to prevent future loss of life in the Mediterranean, Frontex should have a **clear mandate over search and rescue**, and clear legal responsibilities in case of infractions.

Regarding the 'external dimension' of migration, we call on the EU to **increase its commitment to international development aid**. We urge the EU to make all aid deals with third countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa conditional to fulfilling democratic goals and protecting human rights, particularly regarding migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

Furthermore, the European Parliament should exercise democratic scrutiny over all deals concluded between the Commission or the Member States and third countries. Through this **heightened collaboration** with stakeholders in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the EU can be a major player in creating political stability and economic growth in these regions.

The EU must equally set out the necessary mechanisms to address all fundamental rights concerns regarding the Pact on Migration and Asylum, ensuring that the core values enacted under Article 2 TEU are not undermined. Lastly, we call on the EU to refrain from overemphasising and politicising migration.

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Conflicts and crises



Leveraging technological innovation



Strengthening the EU's soft power



Strengthening the EU's hard power



Promoting a discussion on UN reform

The global landscape has become increasingly turbulent, intricate and prone to swift transformations. Escalating conflicts, humanitarian catastrophes or economic distress are only some of the pressing issues that have significant consequences for the EU and the rest of the world. The context beyond them involves a variety of interconnected factors, including history, socio-economic conditions, culture and technological advancements. These elements collectively shape the current environment and influence future developments in complex and often unpredictable ways.

To effectively address the core causes of instability and ensure sustainable, comprehensive, and cohesive strategies, a truly future-oriented EU approach to conflicts and crises **must promote the discussion on UN reform, bolster soft and hard power, and address technological advancements in peacebuilding.**

We call on the EU to work conscientiously for a better future by **supporting youth initiatives** and innovative ideas. To do so, a strategic shift is required which can prioritise the EU's resilience, helping to secure the future of upcoming generations, while ensuring more harmonised cooperation on foreign policy among its Member States. **The EU must safeguard its values, bolster economic and military resilience, and promote stability.**

We call on the EU to implement a visionary strategy that frames foreign policy according to the long-term impact of its actions up to 2050. Utilising its diplomatic, economic, and military tools, the **EU must address the root causes of instability, build resilience, and support peacebuilding efforts in conflict-affected regions.** Reflecting on the benefits of ring-fencing spending for long-term goals versus maintaining flexibility with cash flows, we believe that **the EU must issue joint debt in the form of Global Future bonds** to comprehensively and preventively address future conflicts and crises.

Leveraging technological innovation

We call on the EU to **invest in peace-building military technology** such as demining equipment, medical technology and technology such as **AI deal-making technology for peace negotiations** that can further enhance the EU's strategic capabilities.

Incorporating technological innovation into development assistance can also amplify the impact of EU aid.

This includes leveraging AI and digital technologies to enhance both efficiency and effectiveness in delivering aid. Highlighting the use of advanced technologies in development projects will not only address immediate needs but also build long-term capacity in international partners.

Strengthening the EU's soft power

We also call on the EU to **strengthen its development assistance and humanitarian aid programmes**, highlighting its role as a vanguard of democratic values. Currently, the EU's focus, through initiatives like the Global Gateway, leans towards economic security and larger infrastructure projects, often in response to ongoing competition with China. However, to truly enhance its normative power, **the EU should prioritise targeted aid that addresses the root causes of instability and promotes sustainable development** to better support long-term stability and growth.

We call on the EU to **enhance its development assistance and humanitarian aid programmes as a core component of its soft power strategy.** By targeting aid to address root causes of instability, promoting democratic governance, and integrating conflict sensitivity, the EU can drive long-term positive change and reinforce its position as a key player on the world stage.

Strengthening the EU's hard power

Similarly, the EU **must strengthen its military might to achieve coordinated action.** It is imperative for bolstering its capability to respond effectively to both ongoing and emerging security threats and thereby upholding democratic values. The EU's most significant threat comes from Russia, which is seeking to undermine democracy and human rights, in opposition to many EU core values. **By enhancing its military capabilities, the EU not only safeguards its own interests but also plays a more assertive and influential role in its international partnerships,** such as NATO.

Comprehensive conflict assessments, stakeholder consultation at the local level and a prioritisation of conflict sensitivity in policy design and implementation are crucial to strengthening the EU's hard power as they improve strategic decision-making, enhance legitimacy and local support, ensure operational effectiveness, achieve sustainable outcomes and foster policy coherence and coordination. To do this, measures that could exacerbate already-existing tensions or jeopardise peacebuilding efforts must be avoided. This comprehensive approach ensures that the EU **remains resilient in the face of evolving challenges, safeguarding the well-being and prosperity of future generations.**

Promoting a discussion on UN reform

Lastly, we urge the EU to **promote a broader and deeper global discussion regarding the United Nations (UN)** to promote the reform of its organisation and structures with the goal of improving its decision-making process. The UN must be capable of facing the challenges outlined above and many more, to promote a more lasting peace throughout the world.

To achieve this unity the EU **should pursue a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council** by leveraging France's influence to advocate for a seat and ensuring EU countries with non-permanent seats actively promote the idea and use their tenures in the Security Council to garner support for reform. Meaningfully engaging on UN reform is necessary if the EU wants to rebuild the credibility of a UN system that is currently facing a legitimacy crisis and being challenged by a cross-section of states globally.

For the EU **to demonstrate its capability on the global stage, it should continue to strengthen its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)** to present a cohesive stance on international issues. The UN should be recognised as a beacon of reason, sensibility and acceptance as set out in Article 3(5) of the Treaty of the European Union. For that, **it must deepen its conflict prevention and crisis response mechanisms.** Only through cooperation and accountability among Member States can these goals be achieved in the long run.

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Frontier technologies



Achieving Digital Sovereignty



Narrowing the Digital Divide



Enhancing cybersecurity

Ursula von der Leyen's Commission identified 'A Europe fit for the digital age' as a key priority area, with a pledge to designate 2020-2030 as Europe's digital decade. With an imminent change in EU leadership on the horizon and only five years left to fulfil this mandate, we **urge policymakers to consider three critical challenges.**

Digital sovereignty

Digital sovereignty has emerged as a pivotal strategy for enhancing Europe's technological capacities and ensuring independent decision-making. The EU's private investment in AI research and innovation pales in comparison to that of the US and China.

There is also increasing concern over non-EU tech firms' influence, especially regarding data protection, and the challenges they pose to enforcing EU and national regulations. Therefore, **achieving digital sovereignty** is crucial for Europe to safeguard its interests, foster technological innovation and maintain control over its digital future, even when collaborating with external companies.

We urge the Commission to **establish a dedicated fund to support breakthrough innovations in AI Assurance that help organisations mitigate AI risks effectively.** With the AI Act setting new regulations, AI assurance technologies will be essential for ensuring compliance.

By fostering these innovations, the EU can become a leading exporter of AI assurance technologies, creating economic opportunities and strengthening its global influence in the digital sector.

The EU should also introduce a **labelling system for digital products** that certifies adherence to core EU principles like data protection, ethical AI usage, and sustainability. Like the 'Made in the EU' label, this label could be developed with European Standardisation Organisations and/or the forthcoming EU Digital Product Passport. It would help consumers identify products meeting high ethical and regulatory standards, reinforcing the EU's commitment to a responsible digital marketplace. This label would also extend EU regulatory influence globally, requiring non-EU companies to align with these standards to access the European market, thus promoting EU values internationally.

The digital divide

The EU faces a significant digital skills shortage and divide across generations, educational levels, socio-economic statuses, disabilities and geographical regions.

In 2024, while countries race to develop quantum computers and advanced AI, **nearly 11 million Europeans lack internet access, exacerbating the digital divide.** This gap signals a deepening digital divide, likely to expand with AI's adoption and other emerging technologies. Addressing it requires monitoring, equitable internet access, and enhanced digital literacy education. Major investments in digital infrastructure and education are essential to bridge this divide and prevent future disparities.

The EU should introduce an **EU Digital Inclusion Mission** that will study, understand, monitor and tackle how the digital transition impacts various groups affected by the digital divide, developing tailored solutions for each group's specific needs to meaningfully bridge the digital gap across generations, socio-economic statuses, abilities, education levels and geographic locations. By understanding and monitoring the digital divide, the EU Digital Inclusion Mission will develop cohesive, targeted recommendations and programmes. Tailoring interventions to specific needs will ensure all citizens can navigate the digital transition smoothly and effectively.

Cybersecurity

While new technologies create new possibilities, they are also targets for new types of attacks that can cause cyber insecurity and harm. Cyber insecurity and AI risks can lead to societal polarisation, the erosion of human rights, intra-state violence and critical infrastructure disruptions. To mitigate these risks and enhance European expertise, future cybersecurity strategies should focus on researching new security mechanisms, securing supply chains and educating citizens on cybersecurity. Implementing these measures will position Europe as a trusted leader in cybersecurity, ensuring its competitiveness and protecting its population.

For a secure future Europe, **the EU must extend research initiatives and public-private research collaborations on AI and HPC/Quantum Computing security under the Horizon Europe programme.** Cooperation with partners outside of Europe should be strengthened to remain at the forefront of innovation. These endeavours should be supported by European funds, patent sharing, hackathons, specialised education programmes and incentives for open-source innovation and startup founding.

Supply chains for critical technologies should be regularly assessed to uncover any risks. Key risk factors include the raw materials supply, transportation routes, critical parts (e.g. semiconductors), data and infrastructure security, suppliers, dependencies, human resources and specialised talent. For critical risks, specific action plans should be developed to mitigate and prevent these dangers in the future.

Risks stemming from new technologies can be reduced if people understand how these technologies work. Because immersive learning has proven to be the most effective for learning outcomes, the EU should implement education solutions, for instance, a 3D simulation video game with immersive learning. Combined with a social media campaign across platforms using advertising with strong brands, influencers and established public figures, this solution could reach a broad audience, spark new interest in technology and improve technical literacy in the population.



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