



Civil Society State of the Union

2025



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Foreword

By Gabriella Civico,
Civil Society Europe President



As our world continues to face **great challenges in the area of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law**, we, civil society organisations, closely monitor and act with steadfast commitment to **safeguard our universal rights** and freedoms and improve our societies. Rising inequality, the climate crisis, the digital transformation and the attacks on civic space and democratic institutions concern all of us.

Each year the President of the European Commission delivers the State of the European Union (SOTEU) address to the European Parliament: it is the moment where **analysis and vision come together** in providing the directive lines for the Commission's actions and legislative proposals for the upcoming year. This institutional perspective often fails to reflect the concerns and aspirations of regular citizens, in particular those from minority and underrepresented groups and movements. For this reason, we want to put the understanding and vision of civil society organisations in the spotlight: **we know the struggles of people who live in Europe firsthand**, and can provide this perspective.

The Civil Society State of the Union (CS SOTEU) has this ambition: born out of the Civil Society Convention for the Future of Europe, led by Civil Society Europe, the CS SOTEU 2025 puts forward concrete proposals to tackle the challenges Europe faces in areas as diverse as: democracy, fundamental rights and civic space; migration and mobility; social justice; climate crisis; digital transition; human-centred security.

This report is crucial for the next period of EU decision-making to fill gaps in some areas and set the agenda in others. The rapid changes we all see require **timely and sustainable responses**. As independent civil society organisations representing a wide range of citizens' experiences and interests, we offer clear analysis rooted in lived experience and grassroots contexts. The **solutions that are needed** to overcome the problems we face, developed through the collaboration of **over 35 CSOs representing millions of citizens, are reflected in this report**. I hope all EU institutional partners will take it into good account. We are ready to support the implementation of all processes described here to secure a better future for the EU that is fair and inclusive for all.

Who We Are

Civil Society Europe (CSE) is the **coordination of civil society organisations at European (EU) level**, representing 24 European networks and federations of civil society organisations (CSOs). Through its membership, CSE **reaches out to millions of people** who are active in or supported by not-for-profit organisations and CSOs across the EU.

Established in 2014, CSE has carved out a unique space as the most representative organisation gathering CSOs interested in strengthening the role of civil society and civic space at the EU level. It is recognised as the **point of reference for EU institutions** on all matters regarding civic space and civil society involvement in policy-making, which is defined by the term 'civil dialogue'.

CSE's mission is to contribute to EU and national institutions' **recognition of the essential role and value** of independent and plural civil society organisations (CSOs) in building and nurturing a democratic society **based on fundamental rights**.

We strive to create the conditions for the development of a strong and independent civil society voice at EU level, as well as a **thriving and enabling** civic space across the European Union.



Introduction

Civil Society Europe presents its Civil Society State of the Union 2025. While the European Commission President delivers their assessment on the state of affairs in the European Union each year, it is crucial that civil society **complements this picture with its own perspective.** Compared to the previous report in 2023¹, the **decline of democracy, human rights and the rule of law** continued across the European Union, and the world. Our democratic structures are being **eroded**; migration policies are being reformed with **restrictive and inhumane** approaches; social rights are put to question and set **on a course of disappearance**; actions to counter climate change are being **purposefully reversed** and halted; digitalisation is developing **without the right safeguards** and inclusive measures; and our global world order is shifting in ways that put in question safety and security at a measure we have not seen since the last century.

All of these processes have a significant impact on the well-being of European citizens, in the present and the future. The challenges in them require solutions that center the view of those who represent and work with citizens directly: **civil society organisations.**

This is the reason why Civil Society Europe (CSE) launched a Working Group (WG) in February 2023 dedicated to supporting civil society and citizens' participation in EU democracy, and to follow-up on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and its final proposals. This WG—composed of independent European networks of CSOs specialised in different sectors—has written for the second time a Civil Society State of the Union Report addressed to EU institutions and EU Member States. This document comprises our vision and key recommendations as civil society for a more **democratic, socially and environmentally just EU.**

This document is structured in six sections.

¹ <https://civilsocietyeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CSE-State-of-the-Union-DIGITAL-v3.pdf>

Strengthening democracy, fundamental rights and civic space in the EU and the world

In the context of shrinking civic space in the EU and the world, the section **“Strengthening democracy, fundamental rights and civic space in the EU and the world”** builds on several proposed EU initiatives and calls to strengthen the **Rule of Law**, better **protect civil society and human rights defenders**, uphold **civil dialogue** and **transparency** of the EU institutions, and **align EU foreign policy to its democratic values**.

Enhancing freedom of movement and solidarity for a more inclusive European society

Migration and mobility are woven into the **social, economic, and political fabric** of the European Union. Yet the EU continues to struggle with fragmented and security-driven responses that fall short of its legal and moral obligations. The section **“Enhancing freedom of movement and solidarity for a more inclusive European society”** calls for a **coherent and rights-based** EU approach that upholds freedom of movement, strengthens inclusive and safe pathways, and protects the dignity and agency of all people on the move. Civil society, local communities, and volunteers

are central to this effort, and their role must be **recognised, supported, and embedded** in policy design and implementation.

A socially just EU

Social Europe remains a priority on the EU agenda, but its impact is **uneven**. While employment indicators have improved, progress on reducing poverty and increasing education targets from early childhood to secondary, tertiary and adult education remains limited. Initiatives such as the **Union of Skills** offer potential, particularly through the promotion of transversal competences and lifelong learning that go beyond a narrow labour-market focus. However, these efforts **risk being undermined** by a return to austerity under reformed economic governance, coupled with a growing emphasis on competitiveness and defense that further fails to understand that social investment is the **key** to make the EU more **competitive** and **secure** for everyone. This shift threatens to sideline social investment and priorities. In this context, the section **“A socially just EU”** calls to embed social, educational, cultural and health needs across its broader agenda and to increase social investments — including through extended flexibility, the easing of economic governance debt sustainability limitations, and the

creation of dedicated investment envelopes for **social, equality, and green** measures; to focus on vulnerable and underrepresented groups in initiatives like the **Affordable Housing Initiative, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and the Social Pillar Action Plan**; to focus on healthcare building on the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, investing in the **Long-term Care Strategy**, improving working conditions and training in the health and care professions, and ensuring **continued funding** for health research and infrastructure modernisation. Embedding citizenship education with a global dimension, strengthening community-based learning and ensuring inclusive learning environments will be **essential** to building a more **inclusive and resilient** system.

Averting the planetary crisis through climate action, nature restoration and sustainable resource use

While the **climate crisis remains the biggest threat to humanity**, the new focus on competitiveness from the EU **risks a setback** of the achievements of the European Green Deal. Against the risks of deregulation and the repression of environmental demonstrations across the EU, the section

“Averting the planetary crisis through climate action, nature restoration and sustainable resource use” calls for a **mainstreaming** of environmental commitments across different EU policies and the next Multiannual Financial Framework; proposes the strengthening of EU environmental policies, and promotes a **holistic approach** that encompasses environment, industrial policy and social rights, under the idea that **every one has the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, and that social, health, and environmental objectives must be embedded in any industrial policies.**

A digital transformation that leaves no one behind in the EU

Among the renewed discussion on technological sovereignty, the section **“A digital transformation that leaves no one behind in the EU”** proposes a set of recommendations outlining a vision for a **rights-based and inclusive** digital space in the EU, centred on democratic values, citizen empowerment, and the public interest. It calls on the European Commission to take concrete actions to co-design a European Digital Space through **structured civil society and citizen participation**;

to build digital competences for **inclusive and human-centric** digital transformation, with a strong focus on critical thinking and digital citizenship education as tools to enhance equality and inclusion; and to invest in European, open, and interoperable technologies, along with accessible digital infrastructure. These measures, alongside other key initiatives promoted by civil society organisations, aim to ensure that all citizens can **actively, safely, and meaningfully participate in digital society**. Taken together, they contribute to a coordinated and coherent approach to strengthening Europe's democratic foundations in the digital age.

Shielding European society through human-centred security & readiness policies

Amidst escalating global and cross-sectoral crises, ranging from climate change and digital threats, to democratic backsliding and geopolitical instability, the European Union must **reinforce a whole-of-society approach** to preparedness and resilience, grounded in a human-centred approach to security. Civil society organisations (CSOs) are crucial to this endeavor and warrant greater involvement. The section **“Shielding European society through human-centred security & readiness policies”**

proposes actionable recommendations for enhancing CSO engagement, specifically focusing on: formalising CSO participation within the European Civil Protection Mechanism; integrating human security principles into the EU's internal and external security strategies; fostering a secure, inclusive, and resilient European society within the EU Readiness 2030 plan and other relevant policies. From preventing crises to facilitating recovery, the **EU's readiness and resilience requires the active involvement of civil society** as a vital force in building a peaceful, inclusive, and just Europe.

The Civil Society State of the Union Report is both a **response** and a **proposal** - it is a document that is meant to take stock of the **state of play** of the affairs of the European Union, and **gather the ideas and demands** identified by civil society for change.



Strengthening democracy,
fundamental rights and
civic space in the EU and
the world

1.1 Protection and promotion of democracy and civil society

1.1.1 Adopt and implement a European Civil Society Strategy

The Strategy should be equipped with **adequate funding** for its implementation, and include: a legislative proposal to **protect Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and civil society activists in the EU**; a proposal for an interinstitutional agreement on **civil dialogue**; guidelines to protect and **support civic space** and civil society organisations at the EU, national and local levels, including freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, access to information and the right to privacy; guidelines to protect and **promote public funding** for civil society, including European civil society organisations and networks through operating grant funding that fosters social inclusion and democratic participation of all, **especially in the proposal for the new MFF** and related programmes such as the successors of CERV, cohesion funds and European Social Fund+, while recognising their legitimate right of advocacy and the partnership of civil society organisations being involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of public funding; a roadmap towards an enabling environment for philanthropy also

renew the EU's external Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan, **recognising that shrinking space for civil society is a global phenomenon.**

1.1.2 Modify the methodology document and broaden the scope of the Annual Rule of Law Report (7) to include a dedicated chapter on civic space and civil liberties

Shrinking civic space is a reliable first indicator of a **declining rule of law**. Therefore, the Commission should not narrow the scope of its report but **establish civic space as a stand-alone pillar**. This pillar should include sections on civic space funding, the legal status of civil society organisations, the state of civil liberties (not duplicating FRA's report on fundamental rights but integrating valuable context for country-specific recommendations), and equality issues. While the current section on civic space within the pillar of checks and balances covers many of these areas, it does not allow the Commission to **holistically portray the situation on the ground** in the Member States to the fullest extent possible.

1.1.3 Propose a modification to the regulation on EU Rule of Law conditionality (2) to strengthen its link with the Annual Rule of Law Report

The **failure to establish pathways** towards the implementation of the country recommendations and the non-compliance to the rulings of the Court of Justice of the European Union (ECJ) should also be considered among the conditions for the adoption of the measures set out by the regulation.

1.1.4 Propose a regulation to transform the European Cooperation Network on Elections into an EU agency, called European Electoral Authority

The authority would follow up the work on the implementation of the Commission recommendation on **inclusive** and **resilient** electoral processes in the Union (3).

1.1.5 Stand behind the approval of the new European Parliament electoral law (4)

In 2022, the European Parliament voted in favor of a proposal that revises European Parliament electoral law to **make it truly reflect the pan-European nature** of the European elections and to move away from its national focus, with for example transnational lists.

We ask the Commission to urge the Council through any important channel to approve this proposal and pave the way for truly European Elections that constitute a **key factor in a democratic Europe**.

1.1.6 Reintroduce a proposal for an Equal Treatment Directive, with a comprehensive intersectional approach to anti-discrimination

The new proposal should **empower**, among others, **women, LGBTIQ+ people, youth, roma people, racialised people, people with disabilities, people living in poverty** and other marginalised groups.

1.1.7 Make the Democracy Shield a real tool for the revitalisation of democratic life

Ensure the **representation** of stakeholders **acting for the common interest**, CSOs and grassroots movements, workers and trade unions, wider civil society including educational institutions, the academic community (scholars, scientists, artists) and organisations and collectives representing the interests of people systematically excluded from democratic life, to shape public policies. **empower people**, particularly those systematically excluded from democratic life, by implementing citizens' assemblies—among other participatory methods—to co-decide agendas and identify shared

priorities, thus contributing altogether to policymaking processes. Include a 'democracy check' for any EU legislative proposal, to **ensure its compliance with fundamental rights**.

1.1.8 Strengthen Volunteering & the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme

In the context of increasing polarisation in society, the potential impact of the ESC should be **strengthened** with a significantly **increased budget**. Maintaining its unique identity as the only EU programme focussed on embedding solidarity in a thriving European democracy, extra resources would enable increases in the **quality** of the opportunities provided, as well as the **diversity** of participants and causes it can support. The ESC and volunteering in general should be better promoted as **essential pillars** of European democracy and solidarity for people of all ages. Placing the ESC clearly in line with the updated **EU Youth Strategy and Youth Goals (5)**, and as part of a wider EU engagement/ volunteering strategy, will enable the ESC to be a clear and coherent element of the forthcoming **European Civil Society Strategy and Democracy Shield**. The Humanitarian Aid Strand of the ESC should be evolved to reflect true reciprocity in solidarity with other parts of the world and play a key

in ensuring that **volunteering maintains a fundamental role** in democratic processes.

1.1.9 Continue supporting the proposed directive on European Cross-Border Associations (ECBA)(6) and propose a similar directive for cross-border foundations

The **ECBA Directive** shall recognise cross-border associations the right of establishment, operations and automatic mutual recognition within the Single Market. As a next step, a similar directive for cross-border foundations should be developed.

1.1.10 Develop a roadmap for the implementation of the Porto Santo Charter (7) on the role of culture and cultural education in democratic societies

In line with the EU Commission's priorities, the role of culture and cultural education for safeguarding and strengthening democracy should be explicitly **emphasised and underpinned with concrete measures** that recognise and value diversity. This includes, above all, measures that promote cultural participation and intercultural dialogue and empower people to act as cultural citizens in **free self-determination**. A cultural and creative sector that is based on the idea of cultural citizenship and is

itself democratically constituted can be a **driving force in the fight against disinformation, social polarisation and the undermining of the rule of law.**

1.1.11 Promote global citizenship education (GCE) and lifelong learning as pillars of democratic resilience and participation

Ensure **adequate** and **sustainable funding** opportunities for CSOs and support inclusive citizenship education with a global dimension, and lifelong learning for all learners, including adults, young people, and people in vulnerable situations. Bolster democratic and citizenship competences, such as critical thinking, democratic participation & engagement in EU programmes such as Erasmus+, CERV and Horizon, as the success of participatory democratic processes hinges on well-prepared learners from early ages to adulthood.



1.2 Civil dialogue and transparency of the institutions

1.2.1 Propose an inter-institutional agreement on transparency and accountability of the EU institutions

Coordination and **strengthening** of the institutional ethical frameworks should be foreseen, including for rules on conflicts of interest, side activities, revolving doors and lobbying. The EU Transparency Register should have **equal reporting requirements for all** 'interest representatives' (organisations, associations, groups and self-employed individuals) who carry out activities to influence the EU policy and decision-making process'. Transparency and access to documents should be included in all phases of the co-decision procedure, including in the preparatory work of the Council, the trilogues and comitology. The EU WhoIsWho should provide the contacts of people working in the EU institutions, with clear organigrams.

1.2.2 Modify the regulation establishing the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (8) in order to strengthen its mandate

In particular, involve FRA in the 'democracy check' for the impact assessment of new EU legislation, and provide the agency with **adequate financial means** for it.

1.2.3 Establish an inter-institutional framework for civil dialogue (9)

As per **Article 11 of TEU**, the civil dialogue framework should be co-designed **in partnership with civil society** and should include both the 'vertical', sectorial dimension and the 'transversal', whole-institutional dimension. It should involve agenda-setting, orientation of the policies and programmes, and co-creation of policies and joint initiatives. It should be open to EU-level civil society organisations, with a clear set of eligibility criteria. The proposed **Civil Society Platform** should be considered as the transversal civil dialogue structure between the European Commission and European civil society, and should follow the criteria indicated in this point. The Civil Society Platform should also be involved by the European Commission in the monitoring and assessment of the **European Civil Society Strategy**.

1.3 Standing up for democracy and fundamental rights in the world

1.3.1 Shape the EU's foreign policy on the principles of equal partnership, human rights, and democratic, social and sustainable development

Against the return of transactional and imperialist foreign policy stances, the EU should be the champion of **multilateralism**. The EU should **acknowledge historical imbalances**, as well as the social responsibilities of the countries and corporations that benefit, or have benefited, from exploiting ecosystems and communities; **encourage emancipation from colonial legacies** and processes of recognition, reparation and restitution; invest in democratic, human and environmental SDG-oriented development policies; involve the accession countries in democracy-related policies developed within the EU (e.g. Rule of Law cycle, Democracy Shield).

1.3.2 Ensure policy coherence between internal and external Union policies on human rights, democracy and civic space

This includes also **properly assessing** and **addressing the impact** of EU policies across sectors on partner countries. This dimension should be taken into account when evaluating new policy proposals.

1.3.3 Include stronger policies to reduce climate change, conflicts and poverty within international agreements, backed by sufficient funding

Therefore, trade agreements and international treaties **should not limit** ambitious multilateral and national policies for transitioning to sustainable societies (including by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants) and economies. Moreover, they should not aggravate current global challenges, including climate change.

1.3.4 Promote local democracy initiatives outside of the EU

Ensure that **democracy support** and **meaningful citizens' engagement** are integrated into all international policies, serving as a driving force for democracy support in the world. **Strong, inclusive and participatory** local democracy initiatives—led by independent civil society organisations and local authorities—can contribute to fostering resilient, empowered communities and **strengthen democratic governance** on a global scale.

1.3.5 Champion culture and cultural heritage as an engagement strategy within and outside the EU to encourage mutual appreciation and understanding of different communities, nations and peoples

Commit to **including** and **recognising** the value of culture, cultural education and cultural heritage in **EU geopolitical policies**. In the external relations of the EU, this can help to **promote dialogue and to unite people**. In addition, it can also serve to showcase the EU's efforts in championing culture, cultural education and cultural heritage and its state support as a good practice for the constitution of value-based, free and democratic

1.3.6 Promote the protection of cultural heritage in external action

Recognising the European project's post-war roots, the EU should enhance its activities in the **protection and promotion of cultural heritage**, in cooperation with Member States, since this commonly shared attribute across the EU can help foster and **safeguard peace, strengthen democracy and promote reconciliation** in post-conflict situations.

1.3.7 Ensure a strong focus on support of civil society outside of the EU in the next MFF heading on external action

Robustly support civil society outside of the EU in all its diversity, including through **long-term, core funding and structured, systematic dialogue** at EU institutions and EU delegations levels. The units supporting civil society, rule of law, gender etc. are shrinking in the external action, and those supporting infrastructure are growing - there should be a rebalance also on funding of the EU personnel dedicated to it. Promote an **enabling environment for civil society and civic space** in the EU's partner countries, both online and offline, through political dialogue and the promotion and protection of fundamental rights. Dedicate more support for civil society in countries that have seen a rise in authoritarian tendencies or have become fully authoritarian. **Renounce** and **condemn** any type of foreign agent law or attacks on the integrity of civil society organisations through the pretext of wanting transparency. These are thinly veiled attempts, including at the European level, at discrediting their work and making it, in consequence, harder to secure stable funding for their work.

1.3.8 Develop a strategy for the protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in third countries

The strategy should include an **action plan** to implement the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders; (10) the creation of local and regional networks of HRDs (with political and technical funding); pathways to facilitate HRDs access to visas in order to escape difficult situations and to attend international conferences; involving HRDs in consultations, for instance on the implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (11), including HRDs in rural areas and women HRDs; and develop a 'consent first policy' for any support offered to HRDs.



1.3.9 Prolong beyond 2025 the Council decision concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses (12)

The list of the sanctioned natural persons and legal persons, entities and bodies shall be adapted to take into account the violation of human rights since the last update in 2024.





Enhancing freedom of
movement and solidarity
for a more inclusive
European society

2.1 A rights- and solidarity-based European approach to migration and protection of people

2.1.1 Ensure full compliance of the Pact on Migration and Asylum and of the Common European Asylum System with the EU and international human rights standards

While civil society continues to be critical of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, its implementation presents a **crucial opportunity to address longstanding violations and implementation gaps** in relation to the asylum and reception systems. It is therefore essential to ensure the holistic and comprehensive implementation of the Pact's legislative instruments, which include improved standards related to Reception Conditions, the Union Resettlement Framework, a solidarity mechanism and independent monitoring at the border. The implementation of the Pact must be carried out in **full compliance** with EU and international law, particularly the Charter of Fundamental Rights and the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

2.1.2 Safeguard the Right to Asylum in Europe

Currently, around **86%** of the world's refugees are hosted by **developing countries**,

many of which have limited resources yet continue to demonstrate remarkable generosity. In contrast, **Europe has increasingly pursued deterrence strategies**, including outsourcing protection responsibilities to third countries, entering into externalisation agreements with third countries, and restricting access to asylum for those who have arrived in Europe. These approaches not only **undermine** the EU's reputation as a global champion of human rights, but are also more **costly** and **creates dependence** on third countries. Instead, the EU should prioritise preserving the right to asylum within its territory, ensuring that individuals who arrive in the EU have meaningful access to asylum procedures and an in merit assessment of their claim. This approach aligns with the EU's core values and legal obligations and supports the principle of responsibility-sharing with major refugee-hosting countries, as outlined in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

2.1.3 Shift the focus from return to regular pathways and inclusive policies

In recent years, several legislative and policy initiatives, including most

recently the proposal for a new return regulation (1), have focused on increasing the number of returns. This often included the expansion of detention, the lowering of procedural guarantees like suspensive appeals, and preventing people from accessing permits other than asylum. Yet the EU's focus on returns and detention is **not a realistic response to the complexities of migration** and will likely only lead to an increase in irregularity. On the contrary, ensuring access to secure residence statuses on a variety of grounds, including through regular pathways and through regularisation, is key to addressing a complex reality, **allowing people to integrate in the community and avoiding situations of irregularity and exclusion.** We urge the Commission to shift focus and resources from returns, deportations and detention to regular pathways on a variety of grounds, and promote decent work and full civic and social inclusion.

2.1.4 Empower Civil Society and Volunteers in Migrant Support

Ensure that civil society organisations and volunteers can **support all migrants and refugees without fear** of criminalization or administrative barriers, regardless of individuals' residence status. **Recognise and facilitate** the crucial role these organisations play in providing humanitarian assistance, integration services, support with enforcement

of rights and advocacy and ensure adequate funding for these activities. (2) (9) (10) (11) (12) (14)

2.1.5 Promote a positive migration discourse

Promote **inclusive, value-based and fact-based narratives** on migration, cultural richness and diversity that counter polarising and security-driven discourses. Civil society should be resourced to be a leader in this space and **strengthen social cohesion.**

2.1.6 Ensure access to justice and remedies

Strengthen legal protection and access to justice for people **regardless of their migration status.** EU institutions must guarantee that all migrants at all stages of migration and asylum procedures and mobile EU citizens can access independent complaint mechanisms and legal remedies to **enforce their rights without fear of deportation,** based on firewall principles (16), while supporting migrant victims within justice systems.

2.1.7 Reform Frontex with a rights-based mandate

Frontex **must be reformed to prioritise fundamental rights, transparency and democratic oversight.** Its operations must comply with international law, with

strong accountability mechanisms to address pushbacks, discrimination and violations of migrants' rights.

Member States must not support reforms that prioritise removals over rights protections. Instead, they must work with civil society to **ensure transparency, monitoring, and the primacy of fundamental rights** in all return and border management operations. (5)(13)(6)(8)



2.2 Facilitating inclusive, structural, and quality mobility pathways

2.2.1 Abolish the border controls and re-establish the freedom of movement within the Schengen area

As we mark the 40th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement, it's worth reflecting on what's at stake.

Schengen has allowed millions of people to live and work across borders, enabling commuters, cross-border families, and regional economies **to thrive in a way that feels natural and symbiotic.**

However, this foundational freedom is increasingly under threat. Around a third of Schengen countries have reinstated internal border controls, often citing migration and security concerns under the provisions of the Schengen Border Code (21). While these measures **may be framed as temporary**, they undermine the very essence of what Schengen represents. Moreover, civil society organisations have also denounced how new provisions introduced in the recently-amended Schengen Borders Code as “alternative measures” are **very likely to disproportionately target racialised communities**, and practically legitimise ethnic and racial profiling and expose people to institutional and police abuse. Freedom of movement across internal borders must be fully and immediately restored to preserve the integrity and

benefits of a borderless Europe, as well as **preventing discriminatory and illegal practice of ethnic and racial profiling**, which undermines the right to non-discrimination and stands at odds with the European Commission's commitments under the Anti-Racism Action Plan.

2.2.2 Review the Free Movement Directive

Reassess the 2004 Free Movement Directive to reflect current mobility patterns and legal realities, **addressing discrimination, and emerging challenges** in mobile citizens' rights especially enforcement issues, as well as the interrelationship between the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and free movement law. Linked to this, address problems that EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU face post Brexit in enforcing their more limited rights in the EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement, for example, re. upgrades to permanent residence, travel issues due to ETA/EES, and digital-only proof of status for EU citizens in the UK. (15)

2.2.3 Ensure human rights portability for all mobile citizens

While recognising the different framework of rights and conditions of mobile EU citizens and non-EU

migrants in the EU, the EU should ensure, regardless of their status, the full portability of the social, educational, and individual rights, including under the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, of all mobile citizens (both EU citizens and third country nationals) across EU Member States, **promoting safe pathways** for people in need of protection by establishing and expanding resettlement schemes, humanitarian admission programs, and other complementary pathways to ensure safe and legal access to protection for those in need. Provide entry visas for students and job-seekers across all levels, supporting member states to improve their national policies and general work permit systems to be **more inclusive, and better promote decent work and social inclusion**. Establish tailored procedures for the provision of visas for students and researchers at risk of political persecution in their countries due to their activism, and allow the issuance of humanitarian visas for people from countries affected by serious human rights violations, armed conflicts or natural disasters. (6) (2) (5)

2.2.4 Enable the political participation for mobile citizens and residents

Facilitate the political and civic participation of mobile EU citizens and third-country nationals, including **access to democratic**

processes, including as volunteers, at local and European levels. (8) (2) (5)(20)

2.2.5 Ensure access to quality learning mobility opportunities and recognition of qualifications for all

Remove structural barriers to physical learning mobility, ensuring all students—particularly forcibly displaced and third-country nationals—can access study and training opportunities throughout the EU. (17) This also includes further developing the structures for recognition of qualifications and prior-learning intra-EU and facilitating the validations and recognition of third-country nationals' learning, skills and qualifications; including both non-formal and informal learning. (4) (18) (19)



2.3 Strengthening local integration & social cohesion of migrant and host communities

2.3.1 Reform accessibility to public services for migrant communities

Meaningfully access health, education, housing, social protection systems and other essential services, **without unnecessary restrictions** based on migration or residence status or registration with a municipality. Policies on public services need to be grounded in social rights and equality. (8) (2) (4)

2.3.2 Respect the right to family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection and Expand Family Reunification

Ensure that beneficiaries of international protections including those who have received subsidiary protection are entitled to **swift and streamlined family reunification** in Europe. Broaden the definition of family reunification to include a wider range of family members for all migrants and mobile EU citizens, and allow applications to be made in the country of destination where currently not possible. This will help create **stronger, more stable integration** outcomes. (7) (8) (9)

2.3.3 Promote full labour-market inclusion of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Ensure the full exercise of the labour

rights under the European Pillar of Social Rights, and for EU citizens, in accordance with articles 45 and 49 TFEU. **Enable autonomy, mobility in the labour market and social inclusion**, including family and social rights. Ensure the inclusive development and application of EU labour laws, raising awareness of developments in CJEU case law and the need for inclusive interpretations of labour relationships, to **include undocumented workers as far as possible**.(4) (5) (6) (10) (22)





A socially
just EU

3.1 Strengthening Governance and Investment in a socially just EU

3.1.1 Ensure long-term, adequate public social investments at the national and European level

Increase social investments including through an extension of flexibility, easing of economic governance debt sustainability limitations and dedicated investment envelopes for social, equality, and green measures. **Protect and ring-fence budgets for social programmes** in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), to ensure that they are not subject to reallocations to other areas. Leverage philanthropic funding and investments in line with EU values by creating public/private co-investment opportunities for social innovation.

3.1.2 Involve civil society stakeholders in the design of macroeconomic instruments' goals and the MFF

Include a **conditionality clause** on stakeholders' involvement at Member States' level for the specific investments and reforms agreed within the framework of such instruments.



3.2 Building skills and competences for holistic participation in society

3.2.1 Use the Union of Skills (1) to support the development and provision of key competences for lifelong learning and transversal competences

The Union of Skills should shift away from a paradigm which prioritises exclusively a labour-market oriented approach to skills development towards **transversal skills** and competences for **active citizenship** and **personal development**.

3.2.2 Develop a common language and understanding for learning outcomes, to ensure alignment of obtained credentials and certifications across all sectors of learning, and launch Europe-wide Individual Learning Accounts

These shall **respect the diversity** of learning offers, including non-formal training providers and improve quality assurance for non-accredited high-quality training impacted by administrative and financial barriers.

3.2.3 Integrate Global Citizenship Education into the school curriculum

Incentivise Active Citizenship Education in tertiary education, VET and adult education as a pillar in all initiatives and funding instruments under the Union of Skills and other

education related programmes of the EU.

3.2.4 Launch a European plan for establishing Community Lifelong Learning Centers

Strengthen community-based learning and service-learning, as well as by promoting partnerships between education providers, communities and civil society actors, including volunteer-involving organisations.

3.2.5 Safeguard the rights of learners and educational staff through EU policy

That can be done via the AI in education initiative, the Action Plan on Basic Skills (2), the EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda, European Competence Framework for Academic Staff and the European Strategy for VET.



3.3 Equal access to Education and Lifelong Learning

3.3.1 Increase public funding for individuals, as well as for learning providers, under key EU programmes

This can be done by an **adequate increase** of the Erasmus+ budget, DEAR programme and education oriented actions under Horizon, paying **particular attention to vulnerable and underrepresented learners**.

3.3.2 Develop a Europe-wide lifelong learning approach to enable a holistic recognition system of skills, prior learning and formal qualifications across sectors for all learners and workers, including low-skilled workers

Explore the possibility to base the Skills Portability Initiative on already existing initiatives such as the European Approach to Microcredentials (3), Bologna Process Tools, Lisbon Recognition Convention (4), Copenhagen Process, etc.

3.3.3 Embed socio-economic needs of learners in EU legislation

In particular, focus on the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (5), Intergenerational Fairness Strategy, Anti-Poverty Strategy, Housing Action Plan and other EU initiatives.

3.3.4 Combat intersectional discrimination as a key barrier to accessing quality, inclusive, mainstream education and promote diversity and anti-bias training for all educational staff

Leverage on the EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda and the European Competence Framework for Academic Staff initiatives. Furthermore, **strategies for learning and monitoring should be expanded beyond formal education**.



3.4 Fair working conditions

3.4.1 Protect the implementation of the Adequate Minimum Wages directive (6)

Ensure that it is an effective tool to **protect all workers**, including atypical workers and workers from marginalised groups, from in-work poverty and social exclusion. **Ensure fair pay**, particularly in high-precarity sectors. Ensure that the target of 80% collective bargaining coverage established by the directive is ambitiously pursued and adequately covers atypical workers and workers from marginalised groups. Combat specific forms of wage discrimination such as **gender and ethnic pay gaps**, as well as **lower minimum wages for young people**.

3.4.2 Ensure that the Quality Jobs roadmap promotes the creation of quality jobs in the framework of the green and digital transitions

The roadmap should include **protection against abusive practices in the workplace** and the right to disconnect, while encompassing those in non-standard employment (platform work, temporary contracts, gig economy).

3.4.3 Promote inclusive and effective Paid Training Leave schemes in the EU

Facilitate policy, legislative and

budgetary measures towards this end, such as the Individual Learning Accounts (7).

3.4.4 Ensure that the Traineeship Directive (8) guarantees the improvement of working conditions

Ensure that the Directive includes a **ban on unpaid traineeships**. Fight against abusive practices faced by trainees and for the recognition of **clear learning outcomes** as key to quality traineeships in Europe.



3.5 Social protection, healthcare and inclusion

3.5.1 Develop a real Union of Equality

Increase **mainstreaming** and **coordination** across the different Union of Equality strategies (the Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities (9), the Gender Equality strategy (10), the LGBTIQ+ equality strategy (11), the Anti-racism action plan (12), and the EU Roma Strategic Framework (13)). Identify structural barriers, establish clear objectives based on indicators, collect disaggregated equality data and provide dedicated funding in that regard. Strengthen the Task Force on Equality, with a view to advancing the aims and objectives of the now-withdrawn Horizontal Treatment Directive. **Mainstream the fight against intersectional discrimination** and the objectives of the Union of Equality into the EU's main policy and economic frameworks, such as the Social Pillar Action Plan (14) and the MFF.

3.5.2 Propose an ambitious Affordable Housing Plan

The Plan should **recognise access to affordable housing as a fundamental right** and promote a holistic approach to **tackle the root causes of homelessness** (rough sleepers and people in precarious housing situations), housing poverty and unaffordability. Increase

investment in social housing and **promote a just transition** approach, by for instance addressing the consumption side of energy poverty, including through the European Strategy for Housing Construction.

3.5.3 Put forward an ambitious anti-poverty strategy that holistically tackles the root causes of poverty and is aimed at eradicating it

Adequately involve people experiencing poverty and civil society organisations in its definition. Ensure representation of organisations representing the interests of **children, families, and other vulnerable groups**.

3.5.4 Ensure strong investments on health in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)

Secure the future of the EU4Health budget and dedicated funding for public health in the upcoming MFF, by specifically **addressing the needs** of people and communities, which are disproportionately affected by stigma and discrimination. **Ensure a continued focus for health research** in a future Horizon research programme, including for practice-based research for care and treatment, as well as dedicated funding streams in the future health programme, to turn research findings into practice.

3.5.5 Develop an ambitious European Health Union

Prioritise health policy at an EU level, learning lessons from the coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic, by investing in programmes and initiatives that **strengthen national health systems**, including through dedicated funding for the long-term Care Strategy and community-based health care services (based on the objectives of the Council Recommendation on affordable high-quality long-term care (15)). **Prioritise health equity** and **improve access** to health services for communities which are **disproportionately affected** by stigma and discrimination by ensuring an integrated, intersectional approach that takes into account the broader social determinants of health and the inequalities between urban and rural areas regarding access to health services. Prioritise a **co-ordinated European approach** to growing health challenges, such as mental health, the growing burden of non-communicable and communicable diseases and possible future pandemics, by supporting Member States to adapt their healthcare systems in line with the work of organisations such as the World Health Organization.

3.5.6 Dedicate resources to improve working conditions and address shortages of the health and care workforce

Support their training needs; raise the profile of social and care service professions; promote high occupational health and safety standards, an inclusive digital transition and the modernisation of infrastructure, and **support the adaptation** of the house for community-based healthcare.





Averting the planetary crisis through climate action, nature restoration, and sustainable resource use

4.1 Securing the legacy of the European Green Deal: driving transformative change for a sustainable future

4.1.1 Develop, in the successor of the LIFE programme, structural support for local, community-led sustainability initiatives

The supported initiatives should **harness the power of collective action** by citizens and improve social cohesion.

4.1.2 Mainstream a strengthened 'do no significant harm (DNSH) principle' in the next MFF and develop a green taxonomy for the different programmes to orient their investments

The DNSH principle should be applied to the whole MFF, monitored throughout the whole investment cycle, and ensure a streamlined implementation via (a) a horizontal exclusion list of environmentally harmful activities that are ineligible for EU funding, and (b) detailed sector-specific guidance to identify high-risk investments where DNSH screening offers the most added value. An updated DNSH guidance by the Commission should specifically cover high-priority sectors eligible for multiple EU funding programmes.

4.1.3 Develop, in the next Common Agricultural Policy and the successor of the LIFE programme, specific strands to support and scale up community- and citizens-led initiatives for an agriculture respectful of the planetary boundaries

Such initiatives could comprise permaculture, stewardships of the earth, and agroecology.

4.1.4 Reaffirm the commitment to dedicate public funds to level the playing field in the representation of stakeholder interests between corporate groups and not-for-profit organisations representing general societal interests

The successor of the LIFE programme needs to have a **stronger financial envelope** to support independent research, think tanks and advocacy organisations dedicated to protecting the climate and the environment, consumer safety, animal welfare, labour conditions, healthcare, education and culture.

4.1.5 Ensure that EU fundamental rights and the Rule of Law are also respected on environmental-related issues

Confronted with a wave of repression and criminalisation of environmental

human rights defenders and protesters in several Member States, the EU must **uphold fundamental rights and respect the Rule of Law**, including acts of civil disobedience as recognised by international law (1), as covered by the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

4.1.6 Recognise the unique role that global civil society plays in environmental multilateral fora, as part of the EU environmental foreign policy

This can be realised by ensuring **wide participation of environmental defenders** in critical climate-related meetings globally, including during the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

4.1.7 Add a Social Progress Test to the Better Regulation guidelines and toolbox (2) to ensure that social, environmental and health issues are taken into account in policy making, and to strengthen the intersectional elements and the biodiversity aspects of the analysis of the environmental impacts in the impact assessments for new policy initiatives

The Test must take into account the existing inequalities, including economic, social, gender and racial inequalities, to ensure that new

policies deliver on their social, environmental and health objectives and **contribute to more equitable societies**.

4.1.8 Develop a ‘no-pollution fence’ for the products entering the EU Single Market

The EU should **ensure its consumption does not foster pollution, social dumping or cruelty beyond its borders**. Consequently, the EU should address the trade dimension of the measures it adopts, as allowed to a large extent by the rules of the World Trade Organisation. This can take the shape of introducing import requirements for all products placed on the EU market in the measures, but it could also mean including rules on exports of polluting or cruel products.

4.1.9 Develop a comprehensive strategy to tackle the marketing of unhealthy food, in particular towards children

By 2026, the Commission should assess national measures and voluntary industry commitments on marketing unhealthy food to children. If found insufficient, the Commission should introduce an EU Directive to restrict/ban marketing practices, both offline and online, of unhealthy food (and foods Europeans should eat less of), **particularly to children (3)**.

4.2 Beyond growth for a healthy planet

4.2.1 Embed sustainability and inclusive wellbeing indicators in the EU (competitiveness) agenda, thus following up on the 2023 Strategic Foresight Report (4)

Rather than only focusing on GDP and economic growth, the EU should **include societal and ecological metrics** in all its measurement and accounting frameworks. The foundation for such indicators should be based on the insights obtained in Horizon Europe research projects, particularly MERGE (5). The Clean Industrial Deal implementation should incorporate indicators ensuring that industrial decarbonisation **creates quality jobs and strengthens communities.**

4.2.2 Ensure that the allocation of resources and funds under the next Multiannual Financial Framework is based on sustainable and inclusive wellbeing

Conditionalities for use of public funds should include **concrete commitments to deliver on social and environmental goals** of the EU. It is key to ensure strong and binding green and social conditionalities in the next Multiannual Financial Framework to ensure it contributes to sustainable and inclusive wellbeing objectives. This requires enabling conditions in the Common Provisions Regulation to ensure

accountability and **delivery** on investments linked to the relevant EU frameworks, such as the European Green Deal and the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as earmarking for objectives contributing to sustainable and inclusive wellbeing in the relevant funds. The EU should also ensure that industrial subsidies actively support **sustainability, inclusion and intergenerational fairness.**

4.2.3 Ensure that any proposed simplification of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (6) and of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) (7) do not undermine the principles and the efficacy of the Directives

The Directives still need to ensure that companies **address their adverse impacts** on climate change, the environment—including animal welfare—and human rights throughout their operations and value chains. Any attempt to weaken these frameworks risks undermining their purpose. Instead of creating more exemptions, the European Commission should prioritise filling existing gaps, accelerating the development of the sustainable finance framework, and leveraging the recommendations already made by the Platform on Sustainable Finance

(e.g. for sectors such as agriculture). Ensuring **robust** and **consistent** sustainability reporting and due diligence obligations across sectors will **provide clarity** for businesses, help **identify and mitigate risks**, and support the EU's broader animal welfare, environmental and social objectives.

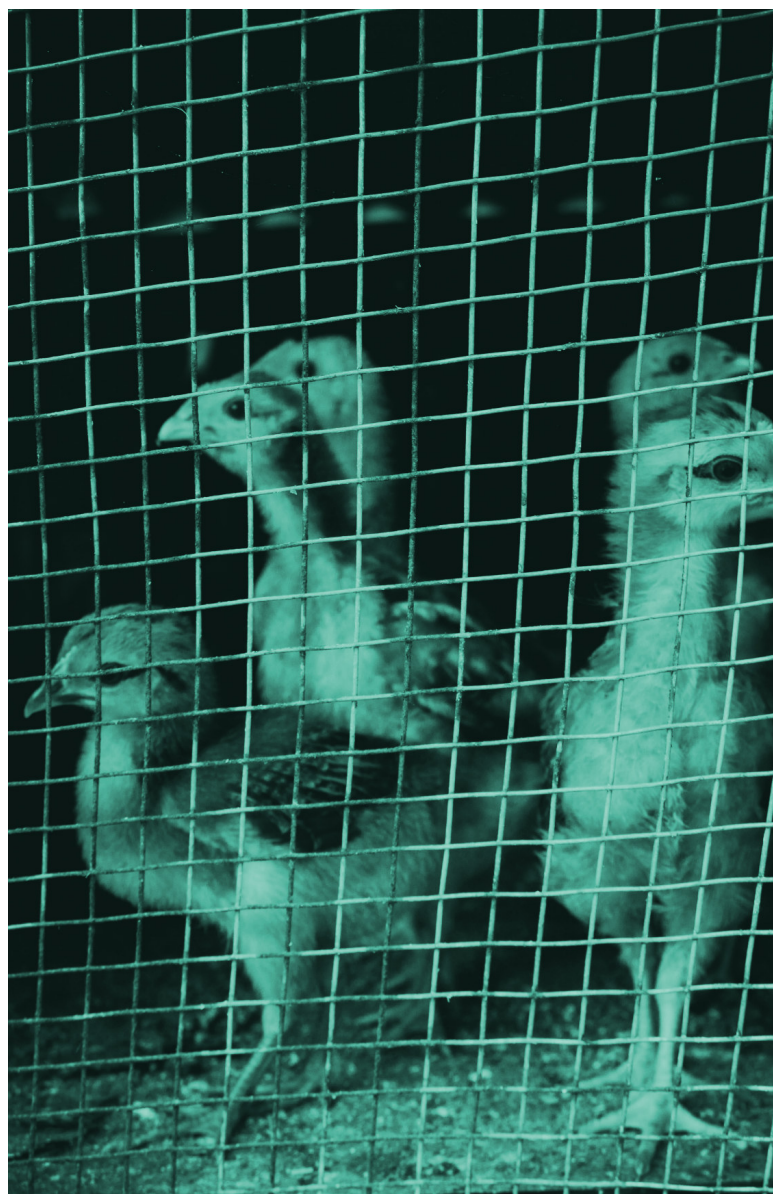
4.2.4 Revise the public procurement directive (8) to ensure that social and environmental conditions are given the same weight as cost considerations

Such a revision of the directive would be able to **support small and medium-sized, locally-rooted organisations and cooperatives operating on just and sustainable business models**, such as sharing decision-making power with all stakeholders and serving a public purpose rather than maximising private profit. This would help, for instance, energy cooperatives, urban and community-supported agriculture, shared economy practices and neighbourhood facilities for the **communities of the future**.

4.2.5 Ambitiously revise the EU animal welfare legislation (9) in line with scientific knowledge and with the Five Domains model (10)

The new legislation should align with citizens' expectations, as expressed through the European Citizens' Initiatives End the Cage Age and Fur

Free Europe. **Improving animal welfare is an essential part of our transition towards sustainable food systems**, as intensive animal productions have additional negative impacts beyond animal cruelty. These production systems are indeed highly polluting for soil, water and air, and the overproduction of monogastric species such as pigs and chickens fuels deforestation as it requires vast import of soy-based feed. Industrialisation of animal farming has also led to an increase of the use of antibiotics as well as an increased risk of spread of zoonosis and infectious diseases, endangering the health of animals and the environment, **but also EU citizens**.



4.3 Increasing resilience and sustainability

4.3.1 Develop a lifelong learning approach on education for sustainability and climate change education via the Union of Skills

The implementation of the EU Council recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development (11) and the competence framework focusing on sustainability competences (12) shall be evaluated. Adult-targeted programmes should not be restricted to developing technical green skills. Rather, they need to **enable people to access lifelong learning opportunities** to build competences allowing them to address the global challenges we are facing today, such as active citizenship, collective action, and critical and future thinking. Cooperation among formal, non-formal and informal actors shall be strengthened with a specific strategy to mainstream education **for sustainability across the whole lifelong learning cycle**.

4.3.2 Ensure that the Union of Skills delivers on upskilling and reskilling for the green transition

The Union of Skills through its governance structures must guarantee proper coordination of European and national initiatives to support workers in the relocation, upskilling and reskilling, and to avoid shortages of employees in different

industries (i.e. renewable energy). The Union of Skills should ensure that its actions **reach beyond workers** as access to upskilling and reskilling must be guaranteed to all regardless of employment background for the green transition to be a just one. It should also **strengthen the implementation and evaluation** of the Council Recommendation on ensuring a fair transition to climate neutrality (13).

4.3.3 Deliver an ambitious Circular Economy Act (CEA) that does not only focus on recycling and waste management, but adopts a systemic vision on resources within planetary boundaries, as part of the European Preparedness Union Strategy (14)

The CEA should include a binding reduction target to **lower the EU's material footprint**. To fit within planetary boundaries, such a target should be below 5 tonnes per capita by 2050 (a 66% reduction compared to 2022 levels of 14.8 tonnes per capita), with mid-term reduction targets of at least 20% by 2030 (11.8 tonnes per capita per year) and at least 50% by 2040 (7.4 tonnes per capita per year). Targets should factor in not only volume but also the common good, **ensuring equitable access** for critical resources such as water and food. To reach the objective, the CEA should develop

strategies to prevent overproduction by resource-intensive industries (especially fast fashion), avoid overexploitation of (mineral) resources and **address consumption patterns (particularly of high-income groups)**.

4.3.4 Enhance Energy Efficiency in Public Buildings through EU Cohesion Policy

With the principle of energy efficiency in mind, a specific portion of the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund should be allocated to **support the financing of renovation projects for public buildings**, such as HEIs. To effectively design these energy renovation plans, specific guidance and training should be provided to public authorities.

4.3.5 Ensure access to energy efficient housing via the European Affordable Housing Plan

To grant access to quality and sustainable housing, the European Affordable Housing Plan and State aid rules should incorporate Minimum Energy Performance Standards for rental properties, **tackling energy poverty and improving living conditions for all**.

4.3.6 Propose an ambitious Sustainable Transport Investment Plan

In light of the EU's 2030 and 2050 climate targets, Member States **need to adopt comprehensive policies that drive the sustainable transport transition**. Firstly, regulatory measures must continue to phase out fossil-fuel vehicles and invest in meeting the minimum green fuel mandates for aviation and shipping. Secondly, public funding and pricing reforms should incentivise affordable, electrified/zero-emission and accessible alternatives—particularly supporting low-income households. The upcoming Sustainable Transport Investment Plan and the proposal for the next MFF are **crucial moments to ensure sufficient funding and political commitment for those priorities**.

4.3.7 Ensure that the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) serves as the guiding framework for the Clean Industrial Deal (CID) and Europe's industrial strategy and investments as a whole

This requires, inter alia, integrating social provisions into all CID policies and investments from the outset, ensuring a **coherent and complementary approach** to industrial, social and environmental objectives. All CID (and industrial policy-related) decisions should be based on systematic and

comprehensive assessments of their social, distributional and employment impacts. In addition, targeted and specific initiatives to address the “missing” social fairness elements of industrial policy, such as social protection and access to essential services, should be developed in connection with the CID. Moreover, **new initiatives should be introduced**, for example under the forthcoming Quality Jobs Roadmap, such as a Just Transition Directive for the **anticipation and management of change in the world of work** and a robust SURE 2.0 financial instrument. The social and solidarity economy should be **recognised and supported as essential for economic prosperity**. Trade unions must play a central role, and civil society organisations and local communities should be involved at various stages of decision-making on industrial development to ensure that the rights and needs of all, especially workers and marginalised communities, **are fully taken into account**.

4.3.8 Embed water resilience as a core component of EU preparedness and resilience policies by recognising water as a human right and a strategic priority across sectors

The forthcoming European Water Resilience Strategy must address the growing inequalities and systemic failures linked to drought, pollution,

infrastructure degradation and unaffordable access to clean water.

Water security should be treated with the same urgency as climate and energy transitions and be rooted in rights-based governance.

This includes elevating water within the European Green Deal, integrating water resilience across industrial, agricultural, health and energy policies, and explicitly addressing the human right to water in EU law. All related measures should be co-developed with civil society and affected communities, drawing on the mobilisation sparked by the European Citizens’ Initiative for a Water-Smart and Resilient Europe (15). Investing in equitable water access, inclusive water governance, and water-saving technologies is not only a question of environmental protection—it **is essential to uphold EU fundamental rights, democratic legitimacy and long-term societal resilience**.





A digital transformation
that leaves no one behind
in the EU

5.1 Co-Designing a European Digital Space

5.1.1 Establish a participatory process where citizens and stakeholders co-design, together with EU Institutions and political representatives, a democratic digital space grounded in European values and rights

This includes the co-development of a **holistic roadmap on the future of digital education and skills** in collaboration with all education, training, and lifelong learning stakeholders. The roadmap must move beyond skills to competences, promoting inclusive, learner-centred approaches with targeted support for disadvantaged groups. It must **mainstream anti-discrimination, foster competences** for democratic engagement, digital wellbeing, ethical technology use, and provide guidance on **privacy-respecting** technology procurement.

5.1.2 Revise the Digital Decade's legal base (1) to include Articles 11 TEU and article 165 TFEU, enabling structured civil society participation—especially within the Skills pillar

Civil society must be **recognised for its crucial role** in reaching underserved groups and fostering critical digital literacy, yet current strategies overlook this. Stronger and structured involvement in governance, and dedicated support

for training and civic initiatives, is essential. This, combined with a correct implementation of the European Declaration on Digital Rights, **will contribute to an inclusive and safe digital space.**

5.1.3 Use the 2026 review of the EU Copyright Directive (2) to revise Articles 3 and 4 on Text and Data Mining (TDM)

Introduce an opt-in system, replacing the current opt-out mechanism, and mandating **fair remuneration for rights holders**. This would restore balance between creators and AI developers and align with EU principles of data sovereignty, consent, and fairness. To counterbalance the consequent restricted access to available data for machine learning purposes, the European public domain and the digitization of cultural heritage should be strengthened under Digital Europe and the future pillar of the next MFF concerning National Plans.

5.1.4 Use the ongoing revision of the EU DigComp 3.0 framework (3) to boost Europeans' digital critical thinking

Empower European users in the choice of digital tools, the understanding of their digital rights, the identification of courses of

5.1.5 Invest in infrastructure and tools to build EU digital sovereignty based on European values

Lead by example by adopting and promoting free software, open and interoperable European-developed digital technologies that **respect our environment and human rights**.

European-developed digital technologies should also ensure ethical development and deployment of new solutions, guaranteeing high standards of fairness, transparency, explainability, safety, and security of technology, as well as data privacy standards. Europe should distinguish itself and become a pioneer in innovation in clean tech and other technologies that reflect its core values. The recent proposal of a Eurostack and the call for an European Technology Fund are good steps in the right direction.

5.1.6 Adapt EU regulations to address AI in the workplace through an inclusive process that engages all relevant social and political stakeholders, including all concerned European Commission DGs, such as DG Employment, the EESC, trade unions and representatives of employers as well as civil society organizations in the field

Public trust in digital tools is **eroding**, especially when technologies aim to **replace rather than complement** human labour, often addressing

artificial needs instead of **real societal challenges**. These risks accelerate job displacement without creating meaningful value or offering fair transitions. A **human-centric approach** to AI is essential to protect employment and ensure technological progress benefits all. To this end, all sectoral AI strategies developed by the European Commission should include an employment safeguard component.

5.1.7 Propose a Directive on the application of AI in the workplace

The Directive should define a clear taxonomy of jobs at risk of automation; mandate the creation of publicly funded upskilling and job-transition programmes; support pilot projects in human-centric AI, co-designed with workers in the affected sectors, to **ensure technologies meet actual needs and reinforce social value**; and support the ex-ante assessment of algorithmic fairness and AI ethics standards in terms of transparency, explainability, safety, and security. This approach must **ensure the protection of fundamental rights and guarantee transparent, accessible information for workers and citizens**.

5.2 Building Digital Skills and Education

5.2.1. Retain EU competences over citizenship education and develop frameworks with quality criteria, methodologies, and guidance for education stakeholders across Europe

This should be built from the existing Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) (4) and the Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes (OECD) (5).

5.2.2. Implement an inclusive and equitable European Skills Agenda prioritising digital literacy, critical thinking, and transversal competences for democratic engagement and ethical technology use

Union of Skills objectives cannot be met without stronger EU-level coordination. Despite low acquisition of basic and transversal digital skills, the **digital space increasingly impacts democratic participation.**

5.2.3. Strengthen lifelong learning to empower citizens to navigate digital democracy, harness technologies, and respond to ethical and societal challenges of AI in all aspects of life, including family, education, volunteering, employment, leisure etc.

This requires robust digital

citizenship education and **coordinated EU action** on EdTech, educator training, and curriculum development. The goal is a **learner-centred approach** that promotes digital citizenship competences.

5.2.4 Ensure upskilling and reskilling, according to the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights, aligned with digital transition

Review the legal basis of the “Digital Decade Policy Program 2030,” (1) **embedding equality and inclusion as core principles** and introducing democracy-oriented and rights-based indicators and targets.

5.2.5. Provide non-digital alternatives to leave no one behind

Ensure that information and essential services **remain accessible through non-digital means**, particularly in crisis situations, to guarantee access to vital information and resources, such as payment options, for all individuals, regardless of their digital skills or access to technology and/or digital connectivity. These measures should be complemented by comprehensive digital literacy programs tailored to the needs of vulnerable populations, **to prevent digital exclusion and foster long-term inclusion.**

5.3 Investing in Digital Infrastructure and Accessibility

5.3.1. Guarantee publicly funded, secure internet access for all, and increase EU investments in safe, inclusive, and accessible digital infrastructure

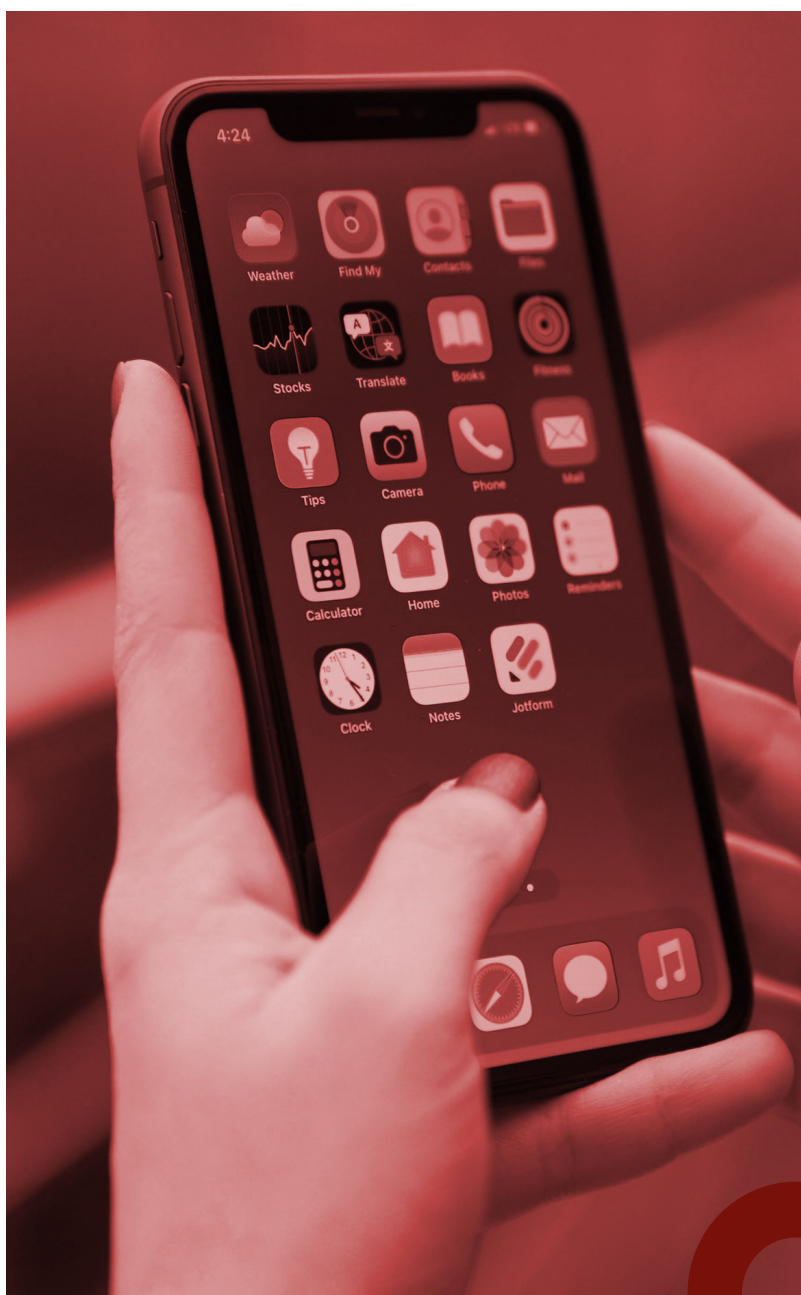
Ensure **full and equal participation** in the digital society for every citizen, with particular attention to marginalised communities. This requires sustained EU funding for digital inclusion that prioritizes universal and free connectivity in all contexts from densely populated urban centres to remote rural areas, **to bridge digital divides and ensure equitable access to essential services.**

5.3.2. Promote technology for social good, including tools for democratic participation by people with disabilities and permanent citizen mechanisms for engaging with and monitoring policymakers

The EU should reinforce the European public domain and structured repositories such as the Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage (DS4CH) (6). This ensures (G)AI training respects the legal and cultural integrity of European assets and promotes diversity. EU programmes (Digital Europe / Horizon Europe / Creative Europe) should launch a **large-scale, EU-funded digitisation campaign for cultural and heritage data.**

5.3.3. Ensure long-term funding for e-participation

Guarantee sustained investment in digital inclusion and digital civic engagement initiatives, with a strong focus on accessibility, equity, and accountability across all digital policy frameworks. Every citizen must be **empowered to participate fully and equally** in digital society, not only as users of digital services, but as active contributors to democratic life through inclusive and accessible e-participation channels.



A photograph of two hands clasped together in a protective gesture, with one hand covering the other. The hands are wearing a black wristband with a white logo and a brown knitted hat. A large white number 6 is overlaid on the left side of the image.

6

Shielding European society
through human-centred
security & readiness policies

6.1 Strengthening the engagement of CSOs in the European Civil Protection Mechanism, and in prevention and response operations

6.1.1 Uphold the commitment made in the UN Pact for the Future

Protect civic space and uphold human rights for all in cementing the efforts to build and sustain peaceful, inclusive and just societies.

6.1.2 Ensure the engagement of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the EU Civil Protection Mechanism

Institutionalise CSO participation in the European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) at all operational levels—from **prevention and preparedness to disaster response**.

This should include the involvement in disaster prevention, response and recovery, addressing health and other emergencies and planning community and individual resilience and disaster response strategies, in particular with the involvement of volunteers. Taking into consideration the EESC Opinion on Crises and crisis phenomena in modern Europe and civil society (1), the European Commission and Member States must provide the necessary conditions for civil society to **actively and meaningfully participate** in developing and contributing to civil preparedness, both at EU and national levels.

6.1.3 Ensure the implementation of the recommendations of the Niinisto Report (2) as regards the involvement of Civil Society in preparedness and resilience plans, including in the EU Preparedness Union Strategy

The **whole-of-society approach** to preparedness and resilience plans enshrined in the Niinisto report must be extended to consider the fundamental role of civil society organisations in 1) enhancing individual and household preparedness; and 2) promoting active citizenship.

6.1.4 Implement basic and primary health care EU-wide

Investment in the implementation and **strengthening** of basic and primary health care EU-wide should be considered a pillar of the European defence system. This is particularly relevant in the context of health crisis prevention, response and recovery operations and **the role of civil society organisations in this context**.

6.2 Building a safe, inclusive and resilient European society as part of the EU Readiness 2030 plan

6.2.1 Recognise and support the role of CSOs in fostering inclusion, preventing radicalisation, and addressing community needs

In the context of growing polarisation in Europe and the focus of European Union's policy priorities shifting towards preparedness and defence mechanisms, we urge the European Commission to consider that while enhancing EU military capacity and investment on defence is necessary, **it must not take away from the importance of social policies and the financing of civil society more generally.** The investment in defence and security **requires a holistic, whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach.** Any funding on defence must include funding for civil defence and civil preparedness and recognize CSOs' role in fostering inclusion, preventing radicalisation and building community resilience, as well as involving them in the policy making agenda, setting processes **through structured civil dialogue on the topic.**

6.2.2 Diversify partnerships by cooperating with neighbouring countries to strengthen Europe's resilience, preparedness and defence strategy

Diversifying partnerships with neighboring countries is essential

for the EU's defence strategy, enhancing regional stability, supporting resilience and combatting democratic backsliding and rise of extremist values, **for which the engagement of civil society is fundamental.**

6.2.3 Ensure preparedness planning is inclusive

Tackle all forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination, through the full implementation of the Roadmap for Women's Rights (3) and ensure that policies and processes reflect the experiences of vulnerable and marginalised groups, including members of the LGBTIQ+ community, people with disabilities, racialised communities, and other vulnerable groups.

6.2.4 Ensure Food Safety

Take into consideration the work of the European Citizens Food Waste Panel and the input of other stakeholders, **including CSOs in the full implementation** of the integrated food safety policy in the EU (4).

6.2.5 Enhance social inclusion and integration in Member States by promoting and empowering volunteering and other non-formal learning activities

Any existing barriers to participation in volunteering and non-formal learning activities **should be removed**, recognizing their necessary role in **fostering community resilience and social cohesion**. CSOs must be empowered to take a leading role in this context, as they have an important role in engaging different stakeholders and diverse groups, building trust and facilitating an inclusive and diverse dialogue that contributes to preventing marginalisation and radicalisation, strengthening social resilience and **reinforcing a shared sense of belonging across communities**.



6.3 Protecting European citizens in the digital space

6.3.1 Prioritise digital literacy for all in partnership with civil society, especially targeting vulnerable populations

Prioritise the implementation of the Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) (5) and partner with CSOs to deliver digital and media literacy programs and counter disinformation, **especially among vulnerable groups.**

6.3.2 Ensure Digital Safety and the regulation of social media outlets to prevent the spread of disinformation and interference in elections and political life through the implementation of the Digital Services Act (6)

The Digital Services Act recognizes the important role played by civil society in **supporting transparency, accountability, and fundamental rights** in the digital space, identifying CSOs as relevant stakeholders in consultations, civil dialogue on the topic and co-regulation mechanisms.

6.3.3 Scale up the Joint Cyber Unit by continuing the implementation of the Cyber Resilience Act (7), the Cyber Solidarity Act (8) and approve the Cyber Blueprint (9), while safeguarding civic space from unintended surveillance

The implementation and approval of

these instruments **should safeguard the civic space, as well as prevent cyber and anti-discrimination laws from being misused to limit media freedom.** Civil society organisations remain strategic partners to deliver digital literacy programs (see point 6.3.1) and counter disinformation (see point 6.3.4), especially among more vulnerable groups of the population.

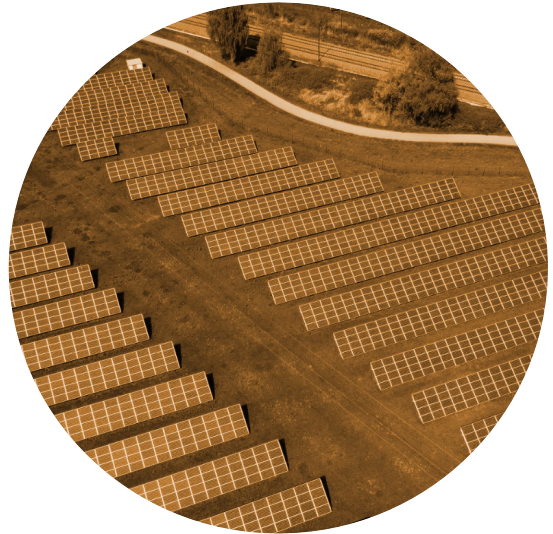
6.3.4 Ensure the application of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (10) to protect internet users

Ensuring the application of this declaration **prevents harms such as misinformation and disinformation, surveillance abuse, digital divide, and the unethical use of AI and data.** The implementation of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and principles must ensure **transparency, accountability, equity and inclusion**, while safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms online, to contribute to a human-centred, ethical digital transformation in Europe.

6.4 Increasing energy security through renewable energy

6.4.1 Diversify Energy Sources and suppliers, including in the framework of the REPowerEU Plan (11)

Develop an inclusive approach including community and not-for-profit based initiatives that **leaves no one behind** in order to reduce the EU's dependence on foreign actors in the energy sector.



6.4.2 Support public engagement and transparency in Energy policy

Integrate CSOs into national and EU-level energy dialogues, **ensuring that justice, inclusion, and transparency are central to the energy transition.**



6.4.3 Ensure the revision of the Renewable Energy Directive (12) as part of the European Green Deal (13) and the Fit for 55 package (14)

Work on setting **more ambitious targets beyond 2030**, in what concerns energy consumption and the transition to cleaner, renewable energy sources that takes into good account the potential contribution of CSOs in energy supply and consumption trends and attitudes.



6.5 Combatting internal and external threats while reinforcing civic space in the EU

6.5.1 Push for a unified approach to defence procurement in the EU so as to free up resources to further invest in civil defence

To effectively shield European society from external threats, a common Defence Union with a unified procurement system must be established. This approach would reduce the need for individual national procurement efforts, freeing up resources that could be redirected toward other priorities. The financial savings could then be **invested in areas such as preparedness, disaster response, and community resilience**, which is a sphere where civil society is particularly relevant and in dire need of additional support and investment in order to better meet needs and expectations.

6.5.2 Recognize the role of civil society as relevant stakeholders in the EU counter-terrorism policy, specifically in the “Anticipate, Prevent, Protect and Respond” approach

Ensure that counterterrorism measures will not result in a general undermining of European citizens’ freedoms and CSOs’ capabilities.

6.5.3 Guarantee civil society participation, risk assessment and ensure no-harm and unintended impact in the updated Internal Security Strategy (15) and the Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU (16)

Ensure civil society’s involvement **throughout the entire process** leading to the adoption of the EU supranational risk assessment.

6.5.4 Ensure that the delegated acts, technical standards and guidelines to be adopted by the European Commission and the Anti-Money Laundering Authority (AMLA) to implement the newly adopted EU Anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism (EU AML/CFT) Package, will minimise the negative impacts of this legislation on the non-profit (NPO) sector

The impacts include: increased challenges for NPOs operating in high-risk jurisdictions, significant compliance burden on crowdfunding platforms, unclear definition of beneficial owner of an NPO and unintended listing of grant recipients as beneficial owners and potential spill-over effects in other jurisdictions which **might not be an adequate level of safeguards** against over-regulation and incorrect

implementation. It is also fundamental to monitor the implementation of the new EU AML/CFT Package in national legislations to avoid misapplications that may result in overly restrictive measures for CSOs, thereby **hindering their engagement in and for European society.** (17)

6.5.5 Develop and fully implement a risk-based and proportionate approach to counterterrorism and anti-money laundering policies with a multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue that involves CSOs, policymakers and banks

Avoid excessive restrictions that may undermine CSOs' initiatives and the respect of fundamental rights, committing to the EU's role in multilateral forums on this subject, in particular its current co-chairmanship with Egypt in the Global Counterterrorism Forum.



6.6 Enshrining peace, democracy and fundamental freedoms in the EU's Global Strategy

6.6.1 Institutionalise Human Security Across all EU policies

Embed human security as a guiding principle across internal and external EU strategies, ensuring that peacebuilding, health security, cyber policy, the victim's agenda, and climate preparedness are treated as integral parts of EU security doctrine, with the involvement of CSOs in the structures created and in the implementation of the policies.

6.6.2 Commit to conflict prevention and active diplomacy to end and prevent armed conflicts

Balance funding allocated to defence with **better support and stronger political, diplomatic and developmental action** to drive human security, climate transition and social and climate justice across the globe. In this way, prioritising non-military responses in fragile regions and bottom-up approaches to conflict prevention, crisis management and peacebuilding policies and operations to ensure a community-based perspective and better response to local security needs and demands.

6.6.3 Commit to an approach to conflict prevention and diplomacy fundamentally enshrined in peace through the commitments to arms control, disarmament and the implementation of the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

The EU must integrate a human rights approach, and embrace civil society participation in its commitment to conflict prevention efforts. In this context it is essential that the EU actively works towards making Europe a Nuclear weapons-free zone through the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; continues to commit to a world free of anti-personnel mines, through the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Mine Ban Treaty); and establish common European rules on controlling the production and sale of conventional arms.

6.6.4 Position the EU with a leading role in shaping the future of education across the globe with peace education, conflict prevention and democracy at its core

The EU should prioritise formal and non-formal education initiatives

as well as citizen engagement opportunities that are centered around the protection and promotion of peace, democracy and fundamental freedoms **in a spirit of solidarity and respect for EU values and fundamental rights.**



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This document has been prepared by a broad coalition of civil society organisations. **We would like to thank in particular the following organisations for their contribution:**

AEC - Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen, ALDA - European Association for local democracy, British in Europe, CAE - Culture Action Europe Caritas Europa, CEV - Centre for European Volunteering, CONCORD Europe, La Coop des Communs, C-EHRN - Correlation – European Harm Reduction Network, EAEA - European Association for the Education of Adults, ECAS - European Citizen Action Service, ECF - European Civic Forum, ECIT Foundation - European Citizens' rights, Involvement and Trust, ECNL - European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, ECRE - European Council on Refugees and Exiles, EFFE - European Federation for Family Employment and home care, EPA - European Parents' Association, EPHA - European Public Health Alliance, ERGO Network - European Grassroots Roma Organisations Network, ESU - European Students' Union, Eurogroup for Animals, EURORIDS-Rare Diseases Europe, EVBB - European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training, Friends of the Earth Europe, INePA - Inštitut za Elektronsko Participacijo, JEF Europe - Young European Federalists, LLLP - Lifelong Learning Platform, Michael Culture Association, Philea - Philanthropy Europe Association, PICUM - Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants, Samaritan International, Social Economy Europe, Social Platform, SOLIDAR, Transport and Environment, Volonteurope, VSE - Victim Support Europe.



**Co-funded by
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