Reinventing Engagement Through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

Transnational publication

REACHING OUT: CITIZENS AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE FOR RULE OF LAW, ENVIRONMENT, AND EU INTEGRATION
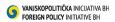
Edited by Miloš Pavković

Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

REACHing Out: Citizens as Drivers of Change for Rule of Law, Environment, and EU Integration

CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Coordinator

Funded by
the European Union

TABLE OF FIGURES

FOREWORD

At a time when Europe's democracies are being tested on multiple fronts — by polarisation and populism, misinformation and apathy, institutional fatigue and geopolitical uncertainty — the REACH project offers a powerful reminder that democratic renewal begins with listening. Across the continent, citizens express deep concern about fairness, accountability, and sustainability, yet often feel unheard by political institutions. REACH demonstrates that this disconnect is not inevitable. When citizens are invited to deliberate openly, supported by information, facilitation, and mutual respect, they can articulate visions for reform that are both principled and practicable.

Implemented by a consortium of organisations from the Western Balkans and the European Union, REACH is also a story of regional ownership and European maturity. That a Western Balkan think tank led a project engaging both EU and non-EU countries underscores an often-overlooked truth: the enlargement countries are not passive recipients of European integration, but active contributors to the Union's own democratic innovation. Their ability to design and run a deliberative process of EU relevance testifies to the region's capacity to enrich Europe's emerging participatory and deliberative wave with experience, commitment, and creativity.

Using a common methodology applied simultaneously across seven countries, the project produced directly comparable insights and recommendations — a rare achievement in participatory research. This methodological coherence not only enhanced analytical depth and cross-country learning, but also offers inspiration for the European Union itself. If deliberation is to become a genuine pillar of European policymaking, the EU should strive for similarly standardised and scalable participatory frameworks across its initiatives, ensuring that citizen input can be meaningfully compared, aggregated, and translated into policy outcomes.

The citizen consultations organised under REACH reaffirmed that democracy thrives not only through elections, but through sustained participation — the kind that builds trust, strengthens institutions, and grounds public policy in lived experience. The initiative's focus on the intersection between the rule of law, environmental sustainability, and EU integration underscores that these are not separate agendas, but deeply intertwined foundations of democratic renewal — within the Union and beyond it.

This Transnational Volume captures that collective wisdom. It reminds us that the power of democracy lies not only in institutions, but in citizens — when they are given a genuine voice, a shared framework, and a sense that their ideas matter. REACH stands as both a method and a message: that Europe's renewal depends on more inclusive conversations, grounded in mutual learning between its members and its future ones.

By Corina Stratulat

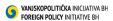Associate Director, European Policy Centre (EPC)

Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Transnational Volume presents the outcomes of an 18-month project aimed at strengthening democratic participation across the EU and the Western Balkans. Coordinated by the European Policy Centre (CEP) and implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Serbia, and Kosovo, the *Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)* initiative explored how structured citizen consultations can renew democracy by delivering a series of deliberative exercises and citizen participation experiments. It responds to the erosion of institutional trust, rising populism, and civic disengagement by demonstrating that inclusive deliberation can reconnect citizens and institutions through informed, respectful dialogue.

At its core, REACH tested a simple premise: when citizens are given space, structure, and access to information, they can develop meaningful policy recommendations. The project focused on three interlinked themes – **rule of law, environmental sustainability, and EU integration/enlargement** – examined through a three-tiered process of **local, national, and transnational consultations**. This structure enabled the comparison and integration of citizen perspectives across diverse political and cultural contexts.

Altogether, REACH conducted **16 local consultations**, **seven national consultations**, and a **transnational deliberative event** held in Belgrade in September 2025. Each stage deepened engagement: local discussions identified challenges; national events translated them into actionable proposals; and the transnational meeting brought participants from all seven countries together to refine and align their recommendations. These deliberations produced **71 citizen-driven policy proposals** addressing governance, environmental, and institutional reforms.

Methodologically, REACH is notable for its **standardised and comparative design**, developed by Corina Stratulat of the European Policy Centre. The shared deliberation protocol ensured consistency while allowing national flexibility. Consultations were inclusive and demographically balanced, with at least 30% youth participation. Through expert facilitation and evidence-based discussion, participants generated realistic, policy-oriented solutions on issues ranging from judicial reform and anti-corruption to renewable energy and civic education.

A central insight from REACH is the **mutual dependence between the rule of law, environmental policy, and EU integration**. Citizens recognised that without rule of law, neither sustainability nor credible EU accession is possible, while EU integration itself drives institutional reform and civic empowerment.

The transnational event marked a milestone in participatory democracy, transforming national proposals into a coherent European framework and demonstrating the value of cross-border deliberation in fostering democratic renewal.

Ultimately, REACH shows that democracy thrives beyond elections – through continuous participation, learning, and co-creation. It proves that citizens are capable partners in policymaking and that Europe's democratic renewal depends on listening to its people and turning their collective insight into tangible change.
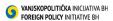
INTRODUCTION

In a decade marked by the rise of populist leaders and the global decline of democratic norms, many see the path to democratic renewal as a return to direct democracy and active citizen participation. In this context, the European Policy Centre (CEP), in collaboration with partners from seven countries across the EU and the Western Balkans, implemented an 18-month initiative titled *Reinventing Engagement Through Affirmative Citizen Consultation* (REACH).[1] With one of its strategic goals being to **enhance direct citizen engagement**, the project was implemented in both EU and non-EU countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, France, Serbia, and Kosovo.[2] Through REACH, CEP and its partners from the aforementioned countries sought to strengthen democracy, promote civic participation, increase transparency, and ensure that policies reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of the community.

To achieve its main objectives, the project was based on organising **citizen consultations** – structured events where individuals gather to discuss and provide input on policy issues, ensuring their voices and perspectives are included in the decision-making process – in seven countries. The consultations were conducted at three levels: local, national and transnational. They engaged citizens in discussing challenges and developing concrete policy recommendations in three broad areas: rule of law, EU integration/enlargement, and environment. These areas have been recognised by policy experts, academics and international institutions as pressing issues with significant implications for democracy in Europe. Alongside citizens, consultations involved subject-matter experts who supported participants in crafting practical policy solutions for local, national, and supra-national authorities.

With 16 local consultations in 16 different cities across seven countries, seven national citizen consultations and one transnational deliberative event, REACH stands as one of the largest exercises in direct democracy in recent years, generating multiple valuable insights. This project sought to confirm the thesis that ordinary citizens are not only passive spectators of political developments, but that, in fact, if given the opportunity, they are ready to participate in shaping policies and contributing to preserving and building a democratic society. The REACH consultations represent a powerful demonstration of the untapped potential of deliberative democracy: participants engaged with high levels of knowledge, interest, and critical thinking, producing recommendations of direct relevance to decision-makers at both national and EU levels. A central lesson of this process is that **citizens are not only well-informed about the challenges facing their respective countries in the areas of the rule of law, EU integration, and environmental governance, but are also adept at articulating practical, actionable solutions.** Consultations revealed a nuanced public understanding of the interdependence between these three domains: citizens repeatedly stressed that without the rule of law, neither environmental sustainability nor genuine progress towards EU accession can be achieved, all the while EU integration acts as a driver for rule of law reforms.

This Transnational Volume presents a compilation of works from seven National Publications produced by the implementing countries, with additional chapters providing insights from the transnational event (see the Methodology chapter) and highlighting key similarities and differences between EU and non-EU Western Balkan countries involved in REACH. The final chapter discusses common patterns across countries, as well as the most significant findings and conclusions of the initiative.

---

[1] See more about the project here: European Policy Centre (CEP), *Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)*, 2024.
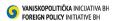
[2] This designation is without prejudice to status and is in line with UNSC Resolution 1244(1999) and advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on Kosovo's declaration of independence.

METHODOLOGY OF CITIZEN CONSULTATIONS

REACH is conceived as a series of deliberative exercises and citizen participation experiments aiming to engage citizens in deliberation and allow them to express views, learn from each other and co-create outcomes. In order to fully utilise citizen consultations organised as part of the REACH initiative, a tailor-made methodology has been developed to be applied in all countries. The methodological approach of the project was developed by an external expert, i,e. Corina Stratulat from the European Policy Centre (EPC). Ms Stratulat has proven experience in the field of participatory and deliberative democracy and used it to design a deliberative process for the REACH project, applicable across national contexts and levels of government. The methodological bedrock was a **standardised methodology, with a common agenda, approach and reporting forms**. As such, the methods templates insisted on several mandatory elements, while also granting partners with some flexibility to make their own idiosyncratic choices about the different processes. Among the common aspects, in view of the lessons learned from similar past initiatives at different levels in the EU, partners had to select the same topics for their events – i.e. **environment, EU integration/accession and the rule of law**. Likewise, all partners had to secure a **diverse group of participants** at their events. Core demographic criteria (e.g. gender, age, and socio-economics) were imposed in all cases, including the demand that at least 30% of the group is made up of young people (age 18-30). This methodological framework not only stimulated quality debates but also produced relevant recommendations in response to identified problems within the thematic areas of rule of law, EU integration and environment. Prior to the implementation of the consultations, each partner organisation underwent a day-long training session with Ms Stratulat.

Since the project was implemented in seven countries, namely Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, and France, the methodology was designed to enable comparisons between partners. A deliberative protocol was designed and implemented at different levels: **local, national and transnational**. What made the methodology comparable is that the process has a number of critical elements that were mandatory and common to all partners, e.g. the target participants, the sequence of plenaries and working groups, the questions raised for deliberations, the filtering strategy from general to specific, the facilitation protocol, etc.[3] Other elements were left to the choice of partners, e.g. recruitment method, whether to pay an honorarium or not for participants, whether to use in-house or professional facilitators, etc. But fundamental aspects of the deliberative process were standardised for all partners at each level. Every project partner organised two or three local citizen consultations in their respective country.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, three local citizen consultations were organised in order to account for distinctive ethnic compositions, while in other countries, two citizen consultations were organised. All local events were implemented between October 2024 and March 2025 in different cities. The recruitment of citizens for local events varied from country to country, as it was envisaged in the methodology that implementing partners would choose the recruitment strategy. In some cases (e. g. Serbia), a professional recruitment agency was hired, while in others, implementing partners recruited citizens independently through open calls, street flyer distribution, newspaper ads, etc. In both cases, strict conditions were set in order to achieve balanced representation. For every local consultative event, at least 25 citizens were recruited, but the group of citizens had to represent the socio-demographic features of the city and a balanced representation of minorities, young and old citizens, males and females. In total, 16 local citizen consultations were organised across 7 countries, gathering 432 citizens. The aim of the local consultative event was to let citizens map key issues and challenges in their respective countries and cities within three predetermined areas: rule of law, EU

---

[3] To help channel these inclusive conversations towards results and to ensure that the discussions remain constructive, citizen-focused, forward-looking, and well-informed, all partners had to make use of facilitators and experts. For consistency purposes, all facilitators (as well as experts) received specific and the same guidelines in advance of the events.
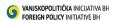
integration/enlargement, and environment. Discussions were facilitated by trained moderators, with experts and note-takers in charge of supporting citizen deliberations.

Following the successful completion of local consultations, **seven national consultative events** were held in each of the seven countries between March and August 2025. National consultations included citizen delegates – representatives of citizens from local consultations chosen by implementing organisations based on demonstrated active and constructive engagement during the local consultations – and additional experts (stakeholders) – representatives of relevant institutions, civil society organisations and academia, with the aim to be a corrective factor in a sense to supplement citizens with theoretical and practical knowledge and support citizens in developing concrete policy proposals. More importantly, the idea behind involving stakeholders in the national consultations was to put in conversation officials together with citizens as a means of bridging the divide. The role of stakeholders was not to start the process from scratch, but rather to assist citizens in building upon what has been reached through the local consultation process. Each national consultation gathered at least 26 participants, while the majority of events saw more than 30 participants. Unlike local consultations, where the focus of deliberation was on identifying key challenges and problems, national consultative events aimed at developing concrete policy recommendations for already mapped problems. Moreover, citizens and experts were tasked with narrowing down the list of recommendations to ten. This meant that they had to prioritise and vote for concrete proposals. Voting methods differed from country to country, although the aim was to strive for consensus, majority voting took place as a last resort (Bulgaria, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and France). In cases of strong dissenting opinion, the proposals that did not reach the majority support were recorded and presented in national publications. This was the case, for instance, in Serbia regarding the recommendation on adopting a spatial and development plan, or in Greece on LGBTQI+ rights. The result of seven national consultations was reflected in 71 policy recommendations in total, developed and upvoted by citizens and experts and published in seven national publications.[4]

The transnational deliberative event gathered 76 participants in person and 14 online via Zoom.[5] The main idea behind this event was to gather citizen delegates – national representatives from all seven countries with additional relevant stakeholders, namely experts in fields of rule of law, EU integration and environment, for an additional round of deliberations across countries, bringing together different national perspectives. The transnational event served as a venue for multi-stakeholder and citizens' exchanges about findings, insights, recommendations and experiences collected during the previous phases of the REACH. National delegates, three citizens and three stakeholders who participated in local and national consultations in their respective countries, chosen based on merit as in the previous phase, presented their policy recommendations to other participants. All participants were divided into six groups, whereby in each group, national delegates would present their recommendations, while other participants had a chance to comment on them and suggest

---

[4] See more at: Pavković, Miloš, *Towards Trust and Reform: Citizen-Driven Policy Proposals for Strengthening Rule of Law, EU Integration and Environmental Governance in Serbia*, European Policy Centre (CEP), September 2025; Limaj, Jon, *Citizens Shaping Kosovo's Future: Rule of Law, EU Integration and Environment,* Kosovo Center for Security Studies KCSS), August 2025; Couteau, Benjamin*, From citizen consultations to bold transformations: French views on a stronger, fairer and more democratic European Union*, Institut Jacques Delors, September 2025; Giakoumopoulou, Ioanna, *Greece's Youth as a Changemakers*, South-East Europe Programme of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), September 2025; Mineva, Daniela & Nikolov, Tsvetomir, *Rule of Law, Environment and EU Integration as a Central Priorities for Bulgarian Citizens*, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), 2025; Ćutahija, Haris, *Bridging Divides, Building Trust: Citizen Vision for a European Future in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Foreign Policy Initiative BiH (FPI BiH), 2025.

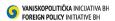[5] Due to security concerns, participants from Croatia and Kosovo had to participate online, de facto making the event hybrid. CEP, as organiser, made every effort to include online participants in the same way as in-situ participants at the event.

revisions.[6] Following group work, national delegations gathered to discuss all input received from the group work and potentially amended their final list of policy proposals. All of the countries indeed revised their list of policy proposals following the discussion and concrete changes as well as lessons learned from the transnational event are described in each country chapter of this publication. After the session of consultations within the national delegation finished, in the final session, representatives of each national delegation presented the final list of their policy recommendations and key changes they made during the transnational deliberative event. Final results of this deliberative event are captured in this publication, which is to be presented at the final event of the project, a conference taking place in Brussels in November 2025.

Figure 1 - Breakdown of citizen consultation and key results

The Transnational Volume consists of excerpts of the national publication of each country and an outlook on key developments and changes to policy proposals after the transnational consultation. In the first part, for each country chapter, a detailed list of policy proposals with explanations of how, why, and for whom they were developed is presented, while in the second part, lessons learned from the transnational event are reflected.

---

[6] Since the transnational event gathered more than 70 participants, they were divided into six groups with 10-12 participants in order to facilitate group discussion. Each group had at least one national delegation from all seven countries and several stakeholders. Each groups had its dedicated facilitator and note-taker.

Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bridging Divides, Building Trust: Citizen Visions for a European Future of Bosnia and Herzegovina

Haris Ćutahija, Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI)

The national consultation in Vogošća represented the culmination of a months-long deliberative process. Building on the foundational insights from Banja Luka, Mostar, and Tuzla, citizen delegates and experts collaboratively refined a broad range of ideas into a focused set of actionable recommendations. While the working groups initially produced 24 proposals, the final plenary session engaged in a critical consolidation exercise. This process prioritised clarity, avoiding duplication, and strategic impact, merging similar ideas and focusing on proposals with a clear path to implementation within Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex governance structure. The result is a coherent set of ten policy proposals that directly address the most urgent systemic failures identified by citizens across the country.
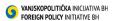
These proposals are not merely a wish list; they are a citizen mandate for concrete action. They reflect a deep understanding that progress in one area is inherently linked to progress in another. For example, transparent EU fund management (Proposal 3) is a prerequisite for environmental modernisation (Proposal 9), and judicial vetting (Proposal 1) is fundamental to enforcing any new regulation. The following section elaborates on these ten priority proposals, providing context, comparative examples, and a critical analysis of their potential impact and challenges within the BiH context.

Table 1 Policy proposals in Bosnia and Herzegovina

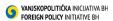| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Implement a transparent and independent vetting system for judges and prosecutors	Rule of Law
2	Ensure merit-based, public appointments for all senior public officials	Rule of Law
3	Establish a real-time, publicly accessible online platform for tracking all EU fund allocation and spending	EU Integration
4	Launch a large-scale, multi-platform public campaign on the concrete benefits of EU membership and the reform process	EU Integration
5	Significantly expand EU-funded youth mobility, exchange, and vocational training programs	EU Integration
6	Modernise waste management infrastructure and implement a comprehensive recycling system in major urban centres	Environment
7	Enforce stricter air pollution controls and expand independent air quality monitoring networks	Environment
8	Integrate practical environmental education and climate awareness into national school curricula	Environment

9	Create a transparent, publicly overseen Environmental Protection Fund to finance local sustainability projects	Environment
10	Strengthen legal protections and support systems for whistleblowers reporting corruption	Rule of Law

Policy Proposal 1: Implement a transparent and independent vetting system for judges and prosecutors

This proposal directly targets the deep-rooted lack of public trust in the judiciary, identified as a critical issue in all local consultations. Citizens perceive courts and prosecutors' offices as susceptible to political influence and corruption. Vetting involves a comprehensive reassessment of a judge's or prosecutor's integrity, assets, competence, and past rulings to identify those unfit for office. This process is seen as a necessary shock therapy to reset the judiciary.

As a comparative practice, Albania underwent an extensive vetting process managed by independent international and national bodies as a key requirement for EU accession talks. While politically contentious, it is credited with removing corrupt officials and beginning a process of judicial renewal. When it comes to potential implementation and key challenges for implementing this proposal in BiH, it comes down to political will. This recommendation would require immense political will from different stakeholders and institutions. The lead institutions would be the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council (HJPC), but its independence is itself often questioned. A potential model could involve a special independent body with international oversight to ensure credibility. The main challenges are political obstruction from elites who benefit from the current system and the logistical complexity of conducting thorough, fair vetting across both entities.

Policy Proposal 2: Ensure merit-based public appointments for all senior public officials

Closely linked to Proposal 1, this aims to tackle nepotism and political patronage in public administration, which citizens cited as a primary cause of inefficiency and corruption. The demand is for open competitions, publicly disclosed criteria, and appointment decisions based solely on qualifications and experience rather than ethnic or party affiliation. One of the good comparative examples is the EU institutions themselves. The European Union's own recruitment for its institutions is famously based on rigorous competitive exams (concours). Many new EU member states, like Croatia, had to reform their civil service laws to align with these principles, emphasising meritocracy.

This proposal comes with potential challenges for implementation. This would need to be enacted through reforms to civil service laws at the state and entity levels, enforced by Civil Service Agencies. The greatest challenge is overcoming the entrenched patronage networks that form the backbone of the current political system. Success would require strong pressure from the EU and civil society, coupled with transparent monitoring of appointment procedures. This would fundamentally transform public administration from a system of political reward into a professional, efficient, and citizen-oriented service, thereby restoring public trust and significantly improving the quality of governance at all levels.

Policy Proposal 3: Establish a real-time, publicly accessible online platform for tracking all EU fund allocation and spending

Citizens expressed deep frustration with the opacity surrounding EU funds, suspecting misuse and favouritism. This proposal calls for a digital platform where any citizen can see which projects receive funding, who the beneficiaries are, the contract values, and the implementation status. This is a direct tool for fighting corruption and increasing accountability, but at the same time supporting BiH's accession to the EU.
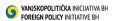
The technological implementation is not only feasible but can leverage established, off-the-shelf solutions. The gold standard for this is Estonia's X-Road, a decentralised data exchange layer that allows various databases, both public and private, to communicate and share information securely and seamlessly. This is not a theoretical model; it is a proven, operational system that forms the backbone of Estonia's world-leading e-governance. The proposal for BiH is not to build a complex new system from scratch, but to implement a tailored module for fund tracking on top of such a secure data exchange framework. The European Union itself provides the blueprint and funding for this through the Digital Europe Programme, which explicitly supports the digital transformation of public administration in member states and candidate countries.

Therefore, the key institutions—the Ministry of Finance and Treasury of BiH and the Directorate for European Integration—would not be acting alone. They would be partnering with EU technical assistance bodies and leveraging pre-existing, funded EU initiatives aimed at this exact goal. The technology is a solved problem; the requirement is the political decision to adopt it. Consequently, the primary obstacles are confirmed to be non-technical: a deeply entrenched lack of political will from those who benefit from opaque dealings and the administrative inertia of institutions resistant to radical transparency.

Policy Proposal 4: Launch a large-scale, multi-platform public campaign on the concrete benefits of EU membership and the reform process

Participants felt that the EU narrative is dominated by abstract political talk in Sarajevo, failing to resonate with ordinary citizens. This proposal demands a communication strategy that uses simple language, concrete examples, and diverse channels (TV, social media, local community meetings) to explain how specific reforms translate into better roads, schools, environmental standards, and job opportunities.

The Directorate for European Integration and the EU Delegation are the lead actors when it comes to this proposal. The challenge is to move beyond one-off events and create a sustained, professionalised campaign that is decentralised to reach all communities and demographics. It must also honestly address the challenges and costs of integration to be credible. For instance, the EU's "EU4You" information campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which combined TV spots, social media content, and local events, showed how EU support contributed to projects like modernising schools and improving air quality, offering a good model to expand and professionalise.

Policy Proposal 5: Significantly expand EU-funded youth mobility, exchange, and vocational training programs

There was a strong consensus, especially among young participants, that the EU's greatest tangible benefit is opportunity. This proposal calls for expanding beyond university-level Erasmus+ to include more vocational training, apprenticeships in EU companies, and youth entrepreneurship grants, directly addressing brain drain and youth unemployment. Since youth is the main driver of Bosnia's EU accession process, and it will continue to be in the future, the EU needs to recognise this fact.

The EU Delegation and the relevant ministries (e.g., Civil Affairs) would need to prioritize and co-fund such initiatives. This co-financing is a fundamental principle of EU pre-accession and structural funds, yet it highlights a critical current obstacle: Bosnia and Herzegovina's failure to adopt its Reform Agenda has led the EU to block a significant portion of funding. This sends a powerful negative message to citizens, demonstrating a clear lack of domestic political will for reform and a failure to secure available EU resources. While the implementation of Proposal 2 (merit-based public appointments) would be a key step toward unblocking these funds, it is imperative that BiH authorities also demonstrate readiness to invest their own resources. This commitment to shared financial responsibility is not only a prerequisite for
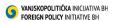
accessing EU funds but is also the core logic of the country's own Economic and Reform Programme and how EU membership itself functions, where member states must co-finance projects to draw from structural funds.

Policy Proposal 6: Modernise waste-management infrastructure and implement a comprehensive recycling system in major urban centres

The dismal state of waste management, from rampant illegal dumping to the absence of recycling, was a universal complaint. This proposal calls for concrete investment in sorting facilities, recycling plants, and modernised collection services, starting with the largest urban polluters like Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Mostar.

This proposal falls under the jurisdiction of cantonal ministries of communal economy and local municipalities. Financing could come from the EU, the Environmental Protection Fund of the Federation of BiH, and international financial institutions. This recommendation is designed to learn from and improve upon past international projects. For instance, the World Bank-funded "Solid Waste Management Project" faced significant challenges, including delays and mixed results, largely due to complex municipal procurement processes and a lack of sustained capacity building. Similarly, various EU-funded initiatives have successfully provided individual containers or bins but often failed to implement a comprehensive, self-sustaining system. What differentiates this proposal is its explicit demand for a systemic overhaul—moving beyond pilot projects and one-off donations towards a mandated, cantonal-level investment in integrated infrastructure (sorting facilities, composting plants, modernised collection vehicles) coupled with a sustained public education campaign. This approach aims to create a permanent system rather than temporary, project-based solutions. The main challenges remain the high upfront investment cost, overcoming institutional inertia at the municipal level, and changing deeply ingrained public habits regarding waste disposal.

Policy Proposal 7: Enforce stricter air pollution controls and expand independent air quality monitoring networks

Citizens, particularly in industrial cities like Tuzla and Zenica, live with the daily health impacts of poor air quality. This proposal has two pillars: firstly, enforcing existing pollution limits for industries and thermal power plants with meaningful fines; secondly, deploying more independent air quality sensors and making the data publicly available in real-time to empower citizens and hold polluters accountable.

Establishing a comprehensive, real-time monitoring network across BiH is a significant but manageable investment. The cost for a single reference-grade monitoring station ranges from €30,000 to €50,000. A meaningful network would require dozens of these, alongside a larger number of lower-cost sensor units for hyper-local data. Therefore, the total investment needed is in the range of several million euros. This level of funding is not available in the regular budgets of the responsible bodies (the Federal Ministry of Environment and Tourism and the cantonal ministries), which are chronically underfunded. Consequently, co-financing from the EU (particularly through the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance – IPA) and other international financial institutions (e.g., the World Bank, the EBRD) is not just beneficial but absolutely essential. This aligns with the EU's own goals under the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans.

This proposal aims to avoid the failures of previous initiatives. A key example is the World Bank's "Air Quality Management and Improvement Project", which was launched with ambition but ultimately failed to achieve its core objectives. Its shortcomings provide a critical lesson: simply purchasing equipment is not enough. The failure was due to a lack of sustainable planning for maintenance, calibration, and data management, as well as a lack of genuine political will to use the data for enforcement. This proposal differs by demanding a holistic package: investment in infrastructure must be legally and irrevocably tied to its permanent operation, transparent data publication, and most importantly, its mandatory use by regulatory bodies to impose and collect fines. The challenge remains the strong political and economic influence of polluting industries, which resist regulation. A truly independent monitoring system directly threatens this
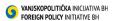
dynamic by providing irrefutable, public evidence of violations, reducing the government's ability to obscure the data and avoid enforcing the law.

Policy Proposal 8: Integrate practical environmental education and climate awareness into national school curricula

The identified lack of environmental awareness was not isolated to a single region or group; it was a universal concern raised by participants across all consultations, from Banja Luka and Mostar to Tuzla, and spanning all age and socio-economic categories. This consensus highlights that environmental neglect is perceived as a fundamental, nationwide issue rooted in education. This proposal aims to foster a new culture of environmental stewardship by integrating hands-on learning about recycling, conservation, and climate change into subjects from biology to civics, starting from primary school.

A proven model for this approach can be found in Slovenia, which, over two decades ago systematically integrated environmental protection into its educational system, from kindergarten onwards. This long-term, generational investment in ecological literacy is widely cited as a key factor in shaping a societal ethos of sustainability, contributing directly to Slovenia's current status as one of the greenest and cleanest countries in Europe. Emulating this model would require a coordinated effort to develop modern teaching materials and train educators across BiH's diverse and often divided educational jurisdictions.

Although there was consensus among citizens on this policy proposal, its implementation could face significant challenges rooted in the constitutional fragmentation of the education system. Reforming education in BiH is notoriously difficult because it falls under the exclusive jurisdiction of the entities (Republic of Srpska and the Federation of BiH) and, within the Federation, is further devolved to ten cantonal ministries, leading to 13 different education systems with little to no coordination. Past attempts to introduce nationwide curricular reforms, even on less contentious issues, have largely failed due to this institutional inertia and political blockage. Therefore, a more pragmatic approach is essential. This proposal must be strategically reframed: instead of a single, nationwide reform, it should be advanced as a parallel initiative within each entity and canton, championed by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH as a coordinator and supported by EU funding incentives. The goal would be to achieve the same core objective—the integration of practical environmental education—through tailored agreements with each ministry, leveraging their individual curricula review cycles to avoid the perception of imposed centralisation. The challenges of overcoming crowded curricula, training teachers adequately, and ensuring effective content remain, but this entity- and canton-specific strategy is the only viable path forward given the political constraints.

Policy Proposal 9: Create a transparent, publicly overseen environmental protection fund to finance local sustainability projects

Citizens proposed a new mechanism to finance grassroots environmental action. This fund would be capitalised from environmental fines, a portion of EU grants, and the state budget. Its key feature would be a governance board including civil society representatives to ensure grants are awarded transparently to community projects like river clean-ups, park maintenance, or small-scale renewable energy initiatives.

A powerful model for such a fund exists in neighbouring Croatia. The Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund (FZOEU) has been successfully operating for years, financing everything from energy renovations of buildings to waste management and renewable energy projects through a transparent, competitive bidding process. It is funded by various sources, including fees on end-of-life vehicles and packaging, providing a stable and independent revenue stream.
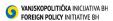
This proposal would require establishing a new legal framework, likely at the entity level (e.g., reforming the existing FBiH Environmental Protection Fund). The challenge is twofold: first, preventing this fund from being captured by political interests and ensuring its decision-making process is truly transparent and accessible to small community groups. Second, and equally critical, is generating the necessary political will. Environmental protection and the creation of transparent financial mechanisms are typically low priorities for entity-level parliamentarians, who often focus on more immediately visible infrastructure projects or issues tied to ethnic nationalism. This lack of championing at the legislative level represents a major barrier to even initiating the required legal reforms.

Policy Proposal 10: Strengthen legal protections and support systems for whistleblowers reporting corruption

This proposal recognises that fighting deep-seated corruption requires empowering insiders to speak up without fear of retaliation. It calls for robust legal safeguards, anonymous reporting channels, financial and psychological support, and, crucially, a track record of prosecuting those who threaten or retaliate against whistleblowers.

The most relevant and directly applicable model for BiH is the European Union's comprehensive whistleblower protection framework, established by the EU Directive on the protection of persons who report breaches of Union law. This directive mandates a harmonised high standard of protection across member states and candidate countries, requiring secure internal and external reporting channels, safeguards against retaliation, and support for whistleblowers. While the U.S. system is notable for its potential for significant financial rewards, the EU's approach is structurally more suited to BiH's context, as it is a mandatory requirement for EU accession and is designed to be integrated directly into national legal systems. Within the region, Serbia has adopted a Whistleblower Protection Law, albeit with criticisms over its implementation, as part of these very EU accession requirements.

The Parliamentary Assembly of BiH and the Ministries of Justice are responsible for this legislation. The greatest challenge remains cultural: building trust that the system will actually protect individuals, which requires a demonstrable commitment from prosecutors and courts to take these cases seriously. This challenge circles back to the fundamental need for independent judicial reform, as outlined in Proposal 1.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

The revision of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) national-level recommendations was conducted within the framework of the REACH Transnational Event held on 18 September 2025 in Belgrade, which brought together citizen delegates, experts, and institutional stakeholders from all participating REACH countries. Structured through a sequence of national presentations, cross-country feedback sessions, and a plenary exchange of insights, the event functioned as a deliberative convergence point between the national and transnational dimensions of the project. The BiH delegation, comprising representatives of the Foreign Policy Initiative BH, citizen delegates from prior consultations, and experts, presented the ten proposals developed during the National Consultation in Vogošća. These were then scrutinised in mixed working groups where delegations from other Western Balkan and EU member states provided comparative feedback on clarity, feasibility, and regional alignment.

The revisions of the BiH recommendations were motivated by three interrelated objectives. First, the Belgrade consultations encouraged greater policy coherence and concision. The original BiH national report contained richly contextualised proposals that at times overlapped thematically (e.g. judicial reform and anti-corruption measures). Through peer deliberation, the list was linguistically and structurally streamlined, clarifying linkages between individual proposals and their systemic impact. For instance, "Transparent Vetting of Judges and Prosecutors" and "Merit-Based Public Appointments" were reframed as sequential steps within a single integrity framework, rather than parallel reforms. Second, revisions sought stronger comparability and transnational relevance. Input from other delegations - particularly
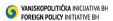
from Serbia, Croatia, and Greece – highlighted the importance of aligning citizen proposals with existing EU instruments, such as the Digital Europe Program, the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and the EU Whistleblower Protection Directive. Consequently, several BiH proposals were reworded to foreground their compatibility with EU conditionality and funding mechanisms. The inclusion of explicit references to co-financing and international oversight mechanisms reflects this shift from normative aspiration to practical implementability. Third, the revision process was guided by a deliberate broadening of ownership. Whereas the national-level document was primarily citizen-driven, the Belgrade dialogue introduced a stronger emphasis on multi-level governance, acknowledging the joint responsibility of domestic institutions, EU bodies, and civil society. This resulted in the explicit address of recommendations not only to BiH authorities but also to EU institutions and regional partners, underscoring the interdependence of reforms across borders.

Several thematic insights from the transnational exchange informed the final reformulation of the BiH recommendations:

1. **Interdependence of Governance and Sustainability** – Delegates from multiple countries emphasised that environmental progress cannot occur without systemic accountability. This reinforced BiH participants' argument that judicial independence (Proposal 1) and anti-corruption mechanisms (Proposal 10) are prerequisites for effective environmental enforcement, motivating their placement at both the beginning and end of the revised list to signify a reform cycle.

2. **Regional Convergence on Transparency Tools** – The cross-country feedback underscored the transformative potential of digital transparency instruments. Comparative examples from Estonia and Croatia prompted the BiH team to strengthen the language of Proposal 3 ("Real-Time Online Tracking of EU Funds"), explicitly positioning it as part of a Europe-wide digital governance trend rather than a domestic innovation.

3. **Communication and Trust-Building** – Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the communication gap between EU institutions and citizens. Drawing on insights from Greek and Slovenian delegates, the BiH delegation reframed its awareness-raising initiative (Proposal 4) as a sustained, multi-platform campaign rooted in community-level engagement rather than one-off visibility actions.

4. **Youth and Mobility as Integration Drivers** – Comparative discussions revealed that brain drain and youth disengagement are common regional concerns. The BiH proposal on youth mobility was consequently expanded to stress vocational training and apprenticeships, aligning with Erasmus+ frameworks and European Year of Skills priorities.

5. **Education as a Long-Term Lever of Change** – Dialogue with participants from countries with successful environmental education systems (e.g. Slovenia) validated the BiH emphasis on early-stage environmental learning (Proposal 8) and inspired its reframing as a gradual, jurisdiction-sensitive reform adaptable to BiH's complex federal structure.

6. **Institutionalisation of Civil Society Oversight** – Comparative exchanges on participatory budgeting and environmental funds encouraged BiH delegates to emphasise civil-society representation in the governance of the proposed Environmental Protection Fund (Proposal 9), ensuring its resilience against politicisation.

The revision process in Belgrade thus functioned as both a peer-review and a norm-diffusion mechanism. It transformed nationally grounded citizen proposals into a coherent and transnationally resonant policy framework. The final recommendations retained the substance of the BiH consultations – centred on judicial integrity, transparency, environmental protection, and youth empowerment – while enhancing their structural clarity, policy realism, and alignment with EU standards. Most importantly, the process demonstrated that deliberation across borders can enrich domestic
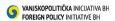
democratic innovation: by situating BiH citizens' visions within a wider European conversation, the Belgrade event underscored the reciprocal relationship between local ownership and European solidarity as twin pillars of democratic renewal.

BULGARIA
Rule of Law, Environment, and EU Integration as Central Priorities for Bulgarian Citizens

Daniela Mineva & Tsvetomir Nikolov, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD)

Within the framework of the project and following local and national consultation events, multiple ideas were generated in all three observed areas: rule of law, EU integration and environment. Citizens, with the support of policy experts, institutional stakeholders and facilitation of CSD, managed to narrow down the choice. They chose ten original policy proposals, deeply analysed and explored them in the pursuit of creation concrete policy proposals. These ten policy proposals are presented in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Table 2 Policy proposals in Bulgaria

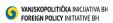| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Media freedom and combating disinformation, especially among vulnerable groups	Rule of law
2	Anti-corruption measures	Rule of law
3	Civic education on law and ethics—including how institutions and courts function, employment rights, etc.	Rule of law
4	Information campaign on the transition to the euro and its benefits	EU integration
5	Broader citizen participation in policymaking and legislation, with sufficient consultation periods	EU integration
6	Environmental education in schools—preserving the urban environment	Environment
7	Illegal logging (including along the coast)—identification, stricter monitoring and regulation of related trade	EU integration
8	Municipal administrations to support and empower local communities	Environment
9	Pilot projects in more cities to reduce incentives for firewood use and promote eco-friendly alternatives	Environment
10	Securing citizens' oversight	Rule of law

Policy Proposal 1: Introducing mobile legal aid

One of the most significant and widely supported policy proposals to emerge from the national consultation was the introduction of mobile legal aid teams as a means to expand access to justice, particularly for citizens living in rural, isolated, or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Participants shared powerful testimonies about how geographic and financial barriers severely limit their ability to access legal services, especially for routine matters like property disputes, social welfare entitlements, and discrimination cases. Many noted that the legal aid system, while formally in place, is often underfunded, bureaucratic, and concentrated in urban centres. As a result, those most in need of legal support are the least likely to receive it, compounding existing social inequalities and undermining public trust in the justice system.

The proposed mobile legal aid teams would consist of lawyers, paralegals, and possibly mediators who could travel on a rotating schedule to towns and villages where legal infrastructure is limited or absent. Their primary role would be to provide free consultations, assist with filing documents, raise legal awareness, and help individuals understand their rights and obligations. The idea echoes successful models in countries such as India, where legal aid vans reach underserved populations, and South Africa, where mobile units are part of broader access-to-justice strategies supported by the Legal Aid Board. In the EU context, Romania has recently experimented with mobile legal counselling projects in Roma communities, offering a valuable reference point for implementation in Bulgaria.

In the Bulgarian context, the Ministry of Justice and the National Legal Aid Bureau would be the lead institutions for designing and deploying the initiative. Cooperation with municipal governments, local bar associations, and community-based organisations would be essential to identify priority regions, schedule visits, and ensure outreach to those most in need. NGOs with experience in community mediation and legal empowerment could also be valuable implementation partners. Pilot programmes could begin in districts with high poverty rates and limited judicial presence, such as in the Northwest or certain mountain and border regions.

However, the success of the initiative will depend heavily on long-term planning and institutional support. Without adequate funding, legal professionals may not be incentivised to participate, and services may be irregular or of low quality. Moreover, the initiative must avoid becoming a top-down bureaucratic exercise by ensuring community involvement in its design and execution. Clear indicators of success such as the number of clients reached, types of cases addressed, and outcomes achieved should be monitored, and citizen feedback mechanisms integrated. While logistical challenges are considerable, the potential impact in terms of increased legal empowerment, reduced social exclusion, and strengthened rule of law makes this proposal particularly compelling.

Policy Proposal 2: Providing Constitutional Court initiative to citizens and civil society

Another important and forward-looking proposal was to grant non-governmental organisations and individual citizens the right to initiate constitutional review procedures before the Constitutional Court. Currently, access to constitutional justice in Bulgaria is highly restricted. Only a limited number of institutional actors including the President, a fraction of Members of Parliament, or the Ombudsman can request the Court to review the constitutionality of laws. This institutional gatekeeping creates a democratic deficit by limiting the ability of ordinary citizens and civil society groups to challenge laws that may infringe upon their rights or breach constitutional norms. During the consultation, participants expressed frustration at this exclusion and called for a more participatory model of constitutional justice.

The proposal draws inspiration from more inclusive systems found across Europe. In Germany, for example, the Federal Constitutional Court allows for constitutional complaints whereby individuals can challenge state action that allegedly violates their basic rights. Slovenia and Spain have similar mechanisms. These systems have been instrumental in ensuring rights protection, particularly in cases where legislative and executive bodies have failed to uphold
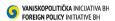
constitutional standards. Participants in Bulgaria saw this reform as a necessary tool to hold power to account and ensure that the constitution remains a living document, accessible, enforceable, and responsive to evolving social values.

To adopt such a model in Bulgaria would require significant constitutional and legal amendments. The National Assembly would have to legislate changes to expand standing before the Constitutional Court. One possible route could involve establishing a tiered access model. NGOs with demonstrated public interest credentials and citizens represented by legal counsel could be granted standing under specific conditions, such as after exhausting all other legal remedies. To prevent frivolous litigation and political abuse, eligibility filters such as a minimum threshold of citizen signatures or a review panel could be introduced. Additionally, timelines for decisions and limits on the scope of review could help manage caseloads and preserve the Court's efficiency.

Supporters of the reform argue that it would democratise constitutional interpretation, give voice to marginalised groups, and enable civil society to play a more active role in shaping Bulgaria's legal development. Critics, however, caution that the court may become overloaded or politicised if access is too open. Nonetheless, these concerns can be addressed through careful procedural design. As a next step, a feasibility study could be conducted by the Ministry of Justice or a parliamentary committee, drawing on comparative legal research and stakeholder consultations. Input from legal scholars, civil society organisations, and constitutional court judges would be vital in designing an access model that balances inclusion with institutional integrity.

Policy Proposal 3: Strengthening protection of journalists and increasing transparency in media ownership

A third recommendation from the national consultations focused on strengthening protections for journalists and increasing transparency in media ownership. Citizens voiced deep concern about the concentration of media power in the hands of politically connected individuals and business conglomerates. Many participants described the current media landscape as one where editorial independence is routinely compromised and investigative journalists are vulnerable to harassment, lawsuits, and economic pressure. There was a clear perception that without a pluralistic and independent media sector, democratic accountability cannot function effectively, as citizens lack access to impartial and trustworthy information.

To address this, participants proposed a set of legal reforms. These included mandatory disclosure of media ownership structures, with publicly accessible registries showing both direct and indirect control of media outlets. Such transparency would help expose hidden ties between political actors and media businesses and allow regulators and the public to identify conflicts of interest. Another key recommendation was the adoption of stronger anti-SLAPP legislation to protect journalists and media organisations from being burdened by lawsuits intended to intimidate or silence them. Strategic lawsuits against public participation are a growing concern in Bulgaria, where journalists investigating corruption or powerful business figures often face lengthy and costly legal battles. By limiting the ability of plaintiffs to use the courts to suppress critical reporting, anti-SLAPP laws could strengthen the independence of the press.

Citizens also called for the creation of financial safeguards for independent journalism. This could include public funding schemes, tax relief for nonprofit media, or innovation grants for investigative reporting. Examples from Sweden and Ireland were highlighted, where transparent and politically neutral funding structures help sustain media diversity and support outlets that are committed to serving the public interest. Participants emphasised that funding must come with clear criteria and oversight mechanisms to avoid misuse or political capture.

Implementing these reforms in Bulgaria would require coordinated action by the National Assembly, the Council for Electronic Media, and independent civil society watchdogs. The main challenge lies in overcoming entrenched political and economic interests that benefit from the current lack of transparency and accountability. Reforms would need to be
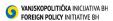
accompanied by public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the role of independent media in a democratic society and build pressure for enforcement.

Policy Proposal 4: Strengthening civic education

The fourth recommendation centred on strengthening civic education, which citizens identified as a crucial response to widespread disinformation, low levels of legal literacy, and public disengagement from democratic institutions. Participants noted that many citizens, particularly young people, lack a basic understanding of how institutions function, what their rights and responsibilities are, and how they can influence decision-making processes. This disconnect was seen as a contributing factor to political apathy, low voter turnout, and the spread of false information on social media.

To address these gaps, participants proposed integrating civic and media literacy into the national school curriculum, starting from an early age. This would include teaching about the constitution, electoral processes, judicial rights, and the responsibilities of citizenship, as well as how to critically assess media content, verify information sources, and understand the impact of disinformation. Community-based education programmes for adults were also recommended, especially in areas with high levels of social exclusion or mistrust of institutions.

This approach aligns with practices in countries such as Finland, where media literacy education is a core component of national education policy and is developed in collaboration with educators, journalists, and civil society organisations. Finland's success in countering disinformation has been partly attributed to its investment in critical thinking and digital literacy education, starting in primary school and continuing through adulthood.

In Bulgaria, responsibility for implementing this proposal would lie primarily with the Ministry of Education and Science, working in close partnership with NGOs, teacher training institutes, and local education authorities. A phased approach could begin with curriculum pilots in selected schools, followed by national rollout. Supplementary materials, teacher training programmes, and online platforms could support delivery. While the long-term nature of this initiative means its impact may not be immediately visible, its preventive potential is significant. However, successful implementation would require sustained political support, investment in teacher development, and close monitoring to ensure content quality and inclusiveness.

Policy Proposal 5: Improving transparency and accessibility of EU funds

The fifth recommendation focused on improving the transparency and accessibility of EU funds, particularly for small businesses, municipalities, and civil society groups. Citizens frequently raised concerns about the bureaucratic hurdles that make it difficult for smaller actors to access funding opportunities. Many reported that the application procedures are overly complex, opaque, and favour well-connected organisations. Others noted that the criteria for awarding grants are not always clearly communicated or consistently applied, which undermines trust in the system and reduces the effectiveness of EU investment.

Participants called for a series of reforms aimed at modernising and demystifying the EU funding process. These included simplified application forms, clearer eligibility guidelines, and improved outreach to potential applicants in rural or underserved areas. Another important proposal was the development of a real-time online platform where all stages of the funding cycle from application to approval, disbursement, and final reporting are publicly visible. Such platforms have been successfully implemented in countries like Estonia, where e-governance tools have improved transparency, reduced corruption risks, and increased citizen trust in public institutions.
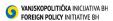
In the Bulgarian context, the Ministry of Innovation and Growth and the Agency for European Programmes would be the key institutions responsible for designing and implementing these reforms. Coordination with local governments and EU structural fund authorities would also be necessary to ensure consistency and support on the ground. From a technological perspective, the proposal is feasible and aligns with broader digitalisation efforts underway in Bulgaria. However, administrative inertia and resistance to greater transparency remain significant obstacles. To succeed, the reform would need strong political backing, adequate investment in digital infrastructure, and robust civic monitoring to ensure it leads to genuine improvements in access and accountability.

Policy Proposal 6: Gradual transition to Euro

The sixth recommendation addressed the upcoming transition to the euro and proposed the introduction of mandatory dual pricing as a safeguard for consumers. Citizens expressed anxiety about the potential inflationary impact of euro adoption, particularly on basic goods and services. There was concern that without clear pricing regulations and public oversight, businesses could exploit the transition to raise prices disproportionately or confuse customers, especially the elderly or those with limited financial literacy.

To counter these risks, participants recommended that all prices be displayed in both leva and euros for a defined transition period before and after the euro is formally introduced. This would help consumers adjust gradually and allow them to compare prices in familiar terms. Additionally, the establishment of a consumer protection hotline was proposed, enabling citizens to report suspicious pricing practices or seek clarification during the transition.

This dual pricing strategy has been used effectively in countries such as Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania, where it was legally required for several months around the time of euro adoption. Evaluations from those countries suggest that it helped maintain consumer confidence, reduced inflation fears, and increased the transparency of the currency changeover process.

In Bulgaria, implementation would fall under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian National Bank in coordination with the Ministry of Economy and the Commission for Consumer Protection. Retail associations and consumer rights organisations would also play an important role in compliance and public communication. While the policy is straightforward and enjoys broad support, its success depends on clear regulatory guidelines, consistent enforcement, and a robust public information campaign. Outreach should target vulnerable populations through accessible media and trusted intermediaries, ensuring that the transition to the euro is as inclusive and equitable as possible.

Policy Proposal 7: Creating municipal monitoring councils

The seventh recommendation emerging from the national consultations called for the creation of municipal environmental monitoring councils. These councils would be composed of citizens, local government officials, environmental experts, and representatives from relevant civil society organisations. Their primary responsibilities would include monitoring pollution levels, evaluating the effectiveness of waste management systems, assessing the implementation of environmental protection laws, and offering recommendations to municipal authorities. Participants highlighted the need for such local bodies to play both a consultative and oversight role, ensuring that municipalities are not only implementing environmental regulations but doing so in a transparent and accountable manner.

This proposal draws on successful participatory environmental governance models implemented in countries like the Netherlands and Canada. In these countries, local environmental councils and community-led advisory bodies have been institutionalised to ensure that environmental policies are shaped by those most directly affected. In the Dutch case, water boards that include citizen-elected representatives play a critical role in flood protection and water quality
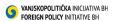
management. In Canada, local advisory panels collaborate with municipalities and provincial governments to ensure compliance with environmental laws and advise on sustainable urban development. These models offer valuable insight into how citizen engagement can enhance both legitimacy and policy effectiveness.

In the Bulgarian context, municipal councils would need to approve and formally establish these bodies through local ordinances. The Ministry of Environment and Water could provide a national framework to standardise their mandates, reporting formats, and coordination with regional environmental inspectorates. One of the key strengths of the proposal is that it brings environmental governance closer to communities, encouraging transparency, trust-building, and responsiveness to local concerns. However, without clearly defined powers, access to data, or formal obligations for authorities to act on their recommendations, these councils risk being purely symbolic. For them to be effective, their decisions should have consultative weight in urban planning, environmental permitting, and municipal budgeting processes.

Policy Proposal 8: Retrofitting of low-income housing for a better environment

An eighth recommendation focused on the retrofitting of low-income housing to improve energy efficiency, reduce heating costs, and lower air pollution. Citizens were especially vocal about the public health impact of traditional heating methods, such as burning wood, coal, or waste materials in poorly insulated buildings. These practices are widespread in marginalised neighbourhoods and are a major contributor to urban air pollution and respiratory illness. The proposal was closely linked to Bulgaria's climate and energy transition commitments under the European Green Deal and was framed as both an environmental and social justice priority.

Participants proposed the development of a state-funded retrofitting programme that would target older apartment blocks and single-family homes in economically disadvantaged areas. Retrofitting measures would include thermal insulation, window replacement, modern heating systems, and ventilation improvements. Germany's federal programme for residential retrofitting, which provides targeted subsidies for low-income households, was cited as a good practice. That model combines environmental targets with income-based social support, creating win-win outcomes in terms of both emissions reduction and poverty alleviation.

In Bulgaria, the implementation of such a programme would require strong inter-ministerial coordination involving the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works, the Ministry of Environment and Water, and local municipalities. Funding could be mobilised from the EU's Just Transition Fund, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, and the Operational Programme Environment. The key challenge lies in the bureaucratic complexity of retrofitting multi-owner buildings, particularly in cases where some residents oppose renovation or cannot afford their share of co-financing. To address this, participants suggested revising the Condominium Ownership Management Act to make collective decisions easier, offering grants instead of loans for the poorest households, and creating municipal one-stop shops for technical assistance and legal guidance.

Policy Proposal 9: Fighting disinformation

The ninth recommendation addressed the urgent need to counteract the spread of misinformation, particularly in relation to EU integration, euro adoption, and national public policy. Citizens expressed concern that disinformation campaigns targeting vulnerable groups such as the elderly and ethnic minorities are eroding public trust and distorting democratic debate. Participants proposed launching a large-scale national media literacy campaign that would educate the public on how to critically evaluate online content, identify false or manipulated information, and better understand EU-related reforms.
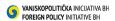
Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

This media literacy initiative would span multiple platforms, including television, radio, schools, community centres, and social media. Public broadcasters would be tasked with producing educational content in accessible formats, while schools would integrate media analysis into existing curricula. Influencers and civil society groups would help disseminate credible information through networks that resonate with different demographics. Latvia's Media Literacy Week and Ukraine's StopFake project were referenced as successful examples of coordinated public-private partnerships in countering disinformation. These campaigns have proven particularly effective when they involve local community figures and are delivered in minority languages.

In Bulgaria, the Council for Electronic Media and the Ministry of Culture would be responsible for overseeing the campaign, supported by educational institutions and independent media organisations. Success would depend on the campaign's perceived neutrality, cultural sensitivity, and its ability to reach underserved and sceptical audiences. To ensure credibility, participants suggested establishing a multi-stakeholder advisory board composed of journalists, educators, psychologists, and representatives of minority communities. The campaign should be designed not as a one-time project, but as a sustained public education effort integrated into broader democratic resilience strategies.

Policy Proposal 10: Securing citizens' oversight

The tenth proposal was the establishment of an independent body responsible for monitoring, assessing, and reporting on the implementation of citizen-generated policy recommendations. This idea was directly shaped by participants' frustration with the limited follow-up from past consultation initiatives. Many citizens expressed concern that their input, while formally collected, often fails to translate into policy change or public accountability. The proposed body would serve to close this gap by issuing annual public reports, tracking how public institutions respond to civic input and measuring progress on citizen-endorsed reforms.

Such a monitoring mechanism could be embedded within the Office of the Ombudsman, the National Audit Office, or function as a new civic observatory supported by an inter-institutional mandate. International examples include the follow-up systems developed after the UK's Citizens' Assemblies, where parliamentary committees regularly report on whether and how citizen recommendations are adopted, and France's Grand Débat, which published online dashboards to track governmental responses. These models aim to institutionalise transparency and maintain citizen engagement beyond the consultation phase.

In the Bulgarian context, the effectiveness of such a body would depend on its independence, access to government data, and public communication capacity. It should have the authority to request implementation plans from ministries and municipalities and publish performance assessments that are accessible and widely disseminated. Potential risks include duplicating the roles of existing oversight institutions or becoming bureaucratically marginalised. To avoid this, the monitoring body must be explicitly mandated to work with parliamentary committees, local governments, and civil society coalitions. It could also serve as a hub for capacity-building and knowledge exchange, providing technical support for local participatory initiatives and contributing to a culture of continuous democratic accountability.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

The final recommendations presented during the concluding plenary session in Belgrade on 18 September are the result of summarising and refining the national consultations held in each participating country under the REACH project. In Bulgaria, the process was coordinated by the Center for the Study of Democracy and included local discussions in Sofia and Plovdiv, as well as a national consultation in Sofia on 16 May 2025. These meetings brought together citizens, experts and institutional representatives who discussed three main themes: rule of law, European integration and environmental protection. Based on these discussions, ten initial proposals were developed. Between June and September 2025, they
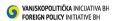
underwent a process of consolidation and alignment with the recommendations from the other countries. The aim was to achieve a coherent and transnationally applicable set of proposals while preserving the authentic voice of participants from each country.

The revisions were made to ensure greater clarity, comparability and practical applicability of the recommendations. Similar ideas, such as those concerning legal awareness, media literacy and civic education, were merged. Some of the national proposals containing very specific institutional mechanisms were reformulated to highlight shared principles such as access to justice, transparency, accountability and citizen participation. In addition, the Belgrade discussions identified inclusion, effective communication and environmental responsibility as cross-cutting priorities.

During the plenary discussions, it became clear that despite differences among countries, citizens share common concerns and expectations. First, participants emphasised that the fight against disinformation and the protection of media freedom are inseparable from the strengthening of the rule of law. For this reason, the recommendations in this area were combined. Second, they stressed that the processes of European integration, including the introduction of the euro, require open and timely communication with citizens and genuine participation in decision-making. Third, in the field of environmental protection, participants underlined the importance of local initiatives and education for sustainable development. Citizens see the key to a better environment in the work of municipalities, schools and local communities.

The national consultations in Bulgaria resulted in ten proposals, which, after the discussions and synthesis at the transnational level, were summarised in the final list of nine recommendations (see Table 3). The revision process demonstrated that citizens across member states and candidate countries share similar aspirations: greater transparency, better governance and more active participation in public life. The final list of recommendations reflects these shared goals and offers realistic directions for more responsible, open and sustainable governance at the European level.

Table 3 Revised list of policy proposals in Bulgaria

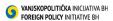| #	Recommendation	Policy Area
1	Establish a mandatory public register of media ownership and funding transparency	Rule of law
2	Adopt anti-SLAPP legislation to protect journalists from abusive lawsuits	Rule of law
3	Introduce digital open-data registers for all public procurement and asset declarations	Rule of law
4	Integrate compulsory civic and legal education in school curricula from primary to secondary level	Rule of law
5	Implement nationwide dual pricing and consumer information campaign for the euro transition	EU integration
6	Legally require a minimum 30-day public consultation period for all draft laws and policies	Rule of law
7	Introduce compulsory environmental and climate education and fund school eco-projects	Environment
8	Deploy satellite-based monitoring and electronic tracking systems to combat illegal logging	Environment
9	Launch municipal subsidy programmes for replacing wood and coal heating with clean alternatives	Environment

CROATIA

Strengthening Democracy Through Citizen Participation in Croatia and the EU

Igor Bajok, Association for Civil Society Development SMART

The participants of the national consultations, building on insights from local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin, adopted ten key policy recommendations. These reflect a citizen-driven vision for more transparent governance, inclusive participation and sustainable development. The table below displays all ten policy proposals, and the following paragraphs explore them in more detail.

Table 4 Policy proposals in Croatia

#	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Develop and improve direct communication with citizens in person, adapting language and format	European Union
2	Explain the benefits of EU membership in a simple and accessible way	European Union
3	Develop a system of small financial grants to improve quality of life in smaller communities	European Union
4	Promote and popularise existing tools for democratic oversight and public participation	Rule of law
5	Integrate principles of civic participation into formal and informal education from an early age	Rule of law
6	Continuously support CSO initiatives that strengthen youth civic competencies and update civic education content	Rule of law
7	Introduce mandatory voting over a two-day period, including one working day	Rule of law
8	Introduce reward measures for citizens who reduce waste and use sustainable packaging	Environment
9	Improve communication about the effectiveness of waste systems to counter public demotivation	Environment
10	Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models	Environment

Policy Proposal 1: Develop and improve direct communication with citizens in person, adapting language and format

One of the ten recommendations adopted at the national consultation was to strengthen direct, in-person communication between institutions and citizens, especially on topics related to the European Union. Citizens expressed that current communication is often too formal, abstract and disconnected from everyday life, relying heavily on written formats, technical language, and centralised messaging that fails to resonate with local communities.
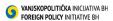
Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

This recommendation emerged clearly during the local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin, where participants across different age and education groups described the EU as "distant" or "invisible." Although many recognised the value of EU membership, they struggled to identify concrete benefits or understand how to engage with EU-related programmes. Citizens therefore called for approaches that are face-to-face, accessible and locally grounded, such as community meetings, school workshops or informal events in libraries and public spaces. They stressed the importance of using simple, inclusive language and two-way formats that allow for questions, feedback and open dialogue.

The recommendation is addressed to the European Commission (especially DG Communication), the European Parliament and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, in cooperation with local authorities and civil society organisations active in public dialogue and civic education.

Next steps for implementation could include piloting local info sessions or mobile EU corners in smaller towns and rural areas, with the goal of reaching citizens who are typically excluded from institutional communication. In parallel, it would be important to train institutional staff in citizen-friendly communication methods, enabling them to adapt language, tone and format to different audiences. Additionally, institutions should invest in visual and narrative-based materials that are tailored to specific local contexts and easily understood by non-expert audiences. Finally, to ensure continuity and effectiveness, these efforts should be backed by stable and accessible funding at both EU and national levels, allowing for long-term outreach strategies that go beyond one-off campaigns.

Policy Proposal 2: Explain the benefits of EU membership in a simple and accessible way

Citizens participating in the national consultation stressed the importance of making the benefits of EU membership clearer and more understandable. While many recognised that EU funds and policies contribute to national development, they often struggled to connect those impacts to their everyday lives. This was especially evident in the local consultations in Pazin and Rijeka, where participants voiced uncertainty about how EU programmes function and how individuals or communities can engage with them. The resulting sense of distance and scepticism weakens public support for EU initiatives.

Participants proposed that institutions should use simple, relatable language and concrete examples to explain the effects of EU membership. Rather than abstract figures or policy terminology, they want to see real-life stories how EU funding supported a new school, hospital equipment, or youth programmes in their region. This includes using visual formats and local case studies to make communication more engaging and relevant.

This recommendation is addressed to the European Commission Representation in Croatia, the European Parliament Office in Zagreb and national bodies such as the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, in cooperation with local governments and civil society organisations. To implement this recommendation, institutions should identify projects with visible, local impact and present them through storytelling formats suited to different audiences. They should also collaborate with municipalities and NGOs to ensure inclusive, decentralised communication. Most importantly, communication should be two-way, allowing citizens to ask questions and share concerns, thereby strengthening trust and engagement with the European project.

Policy Proposal 3: Develop a system of small financial grants to improve quality of life in smaller communities

During the national consultation, citizens proposed the creation of a system of small, easily accessible financial grants aimed at supporting local initiatives that directly improve the quality of life in smaller and less developed communities. This idea emerged from a shared sense that EU and national funding opportunities are often too complex, centralised, or competitive, favouring well-established organisations and urban areas.
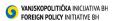
Participants highlighted that many good ideas exist at the local level, particularly among informal groups, youth initiatives and civic-minded individuals, but they often lack the capacity or legal status to access existing funding schemes. A system of micro-grants, simple in application, transparent in selection and designed for non-formal groups, was seen as a way to empower citizens and foster bottom-up development.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Ministry of Regional Development and EU Funds, in collaboration with local and regional self-government units and supported by the European Commission, particularly within cohesion and rural development policies.

Implementation would involve designing a light administrative model for grants of small financial value, accompanied by clear guidelines and minimal reporting requirements. Local authorities or regional development agencies could coordinate calls and provide mentoring or technical assistance. Civil society organisations could also serve as intermediaries or host structures for informal groups. Such a scheme would help build trust in institutions, stimulate civic engagement and ensure that EU and national support is felt more directly at the local level. Most importantly, it would send a message that citizen-led local action matters and that public funding mechanisms can be made accessible, inclusive and community-oriented.

Policy Proposal 4: Promote and popularise existing tools for democratic oversight and public participation

Citizens highlighted that while Croatia has formal mechanisms for democratic oversight, such as access to public information, public consultations and petition rights, these tools are poorly promoted, difficult to navigate and often perceived as symbolic rather than impactful. Participants in both local and national consultations described a general lack of awareness, skills and motivation to engage with these instruments, especially among young people and those living outside major cities.

The recommendation calls for a comprehensive effort to revitalise and democratise these existing tools, making them more visible, accessible and usable in practice. Citizens expressed a need for clear instructions, simplified digital platforms and public education campaigns that explain citizens' rights and how to exercise them effectively. They also stressed the importance of ensuring that public input is not only collected, but also meaningfully considered by institutions.

This recommendation is addressed to the Information Commissioner of the Republic of Croatia, the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration and local and regional authorities, with support from the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs and relevant civil society organisations. To implement it, institutions should redesign public consultation portals, ensuring user-friendliness, accessibility standards and feedback mechanisms. Schools and youth organisations could include training on how to use transparency and participation tools in practice. Local governments should proactively inform citizens about consultations and their outcomes, using multiple communication channels. By empowering citizens to use what already exists, this recommendation aims to close the gap between formal rights and lived democratic practice, increasing institutional accountability and building a more participatory political culture.

Policy Proposal 5: Integrate principles of civic participation into formal and informal education from an early age

Participants in both local and national consultations emphasised that democratic habits and values should be cultivated from an early age, not only through isolated civic education classes, but as an integral part of the entire educational experience. They highlighted the importance of embedding principles such as participation, cooperation, solidarity and trust into both formal curricula and informal learning environments throughout childhood and adolescence.
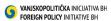
Citizens expressed concern that many young people in Croatia grow up disconnected from democratic processes, often encountering politics for the first time only as voters, without prior experience in decision-making, deliberation, or community engagement. This recommendation responds to that gap by calling for a systemic and value-based approach to civic learning, starting already in preschool and continuing through all levels of education.

In addition to strengthening values-based education, participants underlined the importance of retaining and improving existing programs and subjects, such as Politics and Economy, particularly in vocational schools, where civic content is often marginalised. They also supported the expansion of proven educational models, such as *Škola i zajednica* (School and Community), which connects school learning with community engagement through project-based methods and collaboration with civil society.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Ministry of Science and Education, in cooperation with teacher training institutions, curriculum development agencies and relevant civil society organisations active in the field of education for democratic citizenship. Implementation would involve integrating civic values and participatory methods across school subjects and daily routines, for example, through classroom voting, student councils with real responsibilities and community-based projects. Informal education providers, such as youth centres and CSOs, should also be supported as key actors in fostering participation beyond the school system. This approach aims to normalise participation as part of everyday life, fostering democratic resilience from the bottom up. Over time, it would help build a generation of citizens better prepared to engage critically and constructively in a democratic society.

Policy Proposal 6: Continuously support CSO initiatives that strengthen youth civic competencies and update civic education content

Citizens recognised the vital role that civil society organisations (CSOs) play in promoting civic awareness and participation among children and young people. While schools are central to democratic education, participants highlighted that CSOs often fill crucial gaps, especially through non-formal education, extracurricular activities and peer-to-peer learning. However, many of these initiatives are project-based and short-term, dependent on unstable funding cycles and limited institutional support. This recommendation calls for sustained and predictable support for CSOs working in the field of civic education, particularly those that innovate with new methods, reach marginalised groups, or connect schools with local communities. Citizens also called for a systematic update of existing civic education curricula, especially in secondary education, to reflect contemporary democratic challenges and participatory approaches.

This recommendation is addressed to the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Culture and Media and the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs, as well as local and regional authorities responsible for youth and education policies. To implement it, institutional stakeholders should establish multi-year funding frameworks for CSOs working on civic engagement and education. Priority should be given to programmes that build civic competencies, promote critical thinking and support active youth participation at local and national levels. In parallel, formal education curricula should be reviewed and updated in partnership with educators, researchers and experienced CSO practitioners. This recommendation aims to create stronger links between formal and non-formal education, ensuring that young people encounter democratic values and practices across different learning environments. By supporting CSOs as strategic partners, institutions can strengthen the foundation for a more participatory and resilient democratic culture.

Policy Proposal 7: Introduce mandatory voting over a two-day period, including one working day

To address persistently low voter turnout in Croatia, especially among young people and disenfranchised groups, participants at the national consultation proposed the introduction of mandatory voting, combined with a two-day voting
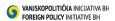
period, including one working day. The recommendation reflects a desire to reaffirm voting as a civic duty, while also addressing practical barriers that prevent participation—such as time constraints, work schedules, or lack of transport.

This proposal was debated extensively. While some participants questioned the appropriateness or feasibility of mandatory voting in the Croatian context, the majority supported it as a way to signal the importance of democratic engagement and to stimulate a broader public conversation on electoral participation. The inclusion of a working day was considered essential to increase accessibility, particularly for working parents, people in precarious employment, or those living far from polling stations.

The recommendation is primarily addressed to the Croatian Parliament, the State Electoral Commission and the Ministry of Justice and Public Administration, with the possible involvement of the Ministry of Labour and Pension System to ensure legal and logistical alignment with labour regulations. Implementation would require a legal and constitutional review of mandatory voting, followed by public consultation and debate. A pilot programme at the local or regional level could test the two-day voting model without introducing the obligation immediately. Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns should accompany any legislative change, explaining the rationale and benefits to the public.

During the consultation, other proposals for increasing voter turnout were also discussed, such as digital voting, lowering the voting age to 16, or introducing voting incentives. However, after careful deliberation, these ideas were not retained as part of the final set of adopted recommendations. While not without controversy, this recommendation opens a conversation on how to revitalise democratic participation through both symbolic and practical measures. It highlights the need to make voting not just a right, but a habit and a shared responsibility.

Policy Proposal 8: Introduce reward measures for citizens who reduce waste and use sustainable packaging

Citizens expressed strong interest in shifting from a punitive to a motivational model of environmental policy, particularly in the area of waste reduction. Instead of focusing solely on penalties and enforcement, participants proposed the introduction of reward schemes that would recognise and encourage individuals, households and businesses that actively contribute to reducing waste, separating recyclables properly, or using sustainable packaging.

This idea was especially present during the local consultation in Rijeka, where participants highlighted distrust in the effectiveness of the current waste management system and expressed fatigue with constant appeals to responsibility that lack clear incentives. Citizens noted that when people perceive that their efforts make a difference and that they are acknowledged for it, they are more likely to adopt long-term sustainable behaviour.

The recommendation is addressed to the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund and local and regional self-government units, particularly through their public utility services and communal systems. Implementation would require defining a set of measurable and verifiable indicators of environmentally responsible behaviour (e.g. volume of waste reduced, frequency and quality of separation, return of reusable packaging). Local authorities could pilot incentive schemes such as discounts on waste collection fees, vouchers for eco-products, or public recognition programmes. Collaboration with schools, CSOs and businesses would be key to ensuring outreach and transparency. This approach aims not only to improve environmental outcomes, but also to rebuild public trust in local systems and to create a sense of shared ownership over environmental goals. By recognising positive action, institutions can foster a more cooperative and citizen-centred path toward sustainability.

Policy Proposal 9: Improve communication about the effectiveness of waste systems to counter public demotivation
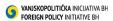
One of the most frequently voiced frustrations during the local consultations was the widespread distrust in local waste management systems. Citizens expressed scepticism that waste separation leads to any meaningful environmental outcome, with comments like "it all ends up in the same truck anyway" reflecting a broader sense of demotivation and resignation. This perception undermines public willingness to participate in recycling and other sustainability efforts.

In response, participants proposed that public institutions and utility companies significantly improve the transparency and communication around how waste is actually processed, where it goes, and what impact separation has. They called for regular, clear and locally relevant updates, not just about rules and penalties, but about results, success stories and system improvements.

The recommendation is addressed to local and regional self-government units, particularly municipal public utilities, as well as the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development and the Environmental Protection and Energy Efficiency Fund. Implementation could involve publishing periodic data reports in user-friendly formats (e.g. infographics, short videos), organising public briefings or site visits to waste processing facilities, and ensuring two-way communication channels where citizens can ask questions or express concerns. This should be done in cooperation with CSOs and local schools, to increase outreach and public understanding. By providing evidence that citizen efforts are meaningful and that the system is functional, this measure aims to restore trust, increase motivation and encourage wider participation in environmental practices. Without transparent and proactive communication, even well-designed systems risk failing due to citizen disengagement.

Policy Proposal 10: Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models

Citizens participating in the REACH consultations expressed strong support for strengthening local food systems as a way to promote sustainability, support rural development and improve public health. They highlighted the need to move away from large, centralised supply chains toward shorter, more transparent, and community-based food production and distribution models.

This recommendation builds on concerns raised during the Pazin consultation, where participants discussed the negative environmental and social impacts of mass tourism, overdevelopment and agricultural industrialisation. Citizens called for a shift toward local food sovereignty, where communities have greater control over how their food is produced, distributed and consumed. They emphasised the importance of linking local producers with public institutions, such as schools, kindergartens, and hospitals, through prioritised procurement.

The recommendation is directed to the Ministry of Agriculture, in cooperation with local and regional governments, as well as public institutions and relevant CSOs working in sustainable agriculture, food justice and environmental protection. Implementation would involve reforming public procurement rules to allow preferential treatment for local producers and cooperatives, supporting the development of producer cooperatives and investing in local food infrastructure (e.g. distribution centres, community markets). Educational campaigns could promote seasonal and local food consumption, while municipalities could provide technical assistance to small-scale farmers and food initiatives. This recommendation aims to reduce dependence on global supply chains, lower the environmental footprint of food systems and reinvigorate local economies. By strengthening the link between food, community and sustainability, it reflects a broader citizen desire for resilient and self-determined local development.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

During the transnational event held in Belgrade on 18 September 2025, the Croatian delegation participated online and engaged in structured exchanges with delegates from six other countries. Each Croatian delegate individually
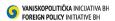
presented the set of recommendations developed through local consultations in Rijeka and Pazin and the national consultation in Zagreb. After these presentations, they received comments, questions, and suggestions from peers and stakeholders, which shaped the revision of the recommendations that were later presented in the final plenary session. The revision process was motivated by two main drivers: (1) the feedback received from international peers, who raised questions about clarity, applicability, and scope of certain recommendations, and (2) the internal deliberation within the Croatian delegation after the group work, where members reflected on the advice and agreed which recommendations should be strengthened.

Several insights from the Belgrade discussions proved particularly influential:

1. Communication about the EU

The recommendation on improving communication with citizens about the EU was one of the most frequently debated. Delegates from multiple countries stressed that citizens often do not feel sufficiently informed about the tangible benefits of EU membership, regardless of whether their countries are members or still in the accession process. Croatian delegates took note of these observations and agreed to strengthen their recommendation, making it clearer and more actionable: "Present to Croatian citizens, in a clear and accessible way, the benefits of EU membership as well as the opportunities for citizens to engage in EU policy-making processes."

2. Civic participation in education

Another key revision was made to the recommendation concerning civic education. Discussions emphasized that civic competences should be developed from the earliest age, starting in kindergarten, and that such education should integrate the fundamental values of civic participation. Feedback from other delegations underlined that this was not only a Croatian challenge but a European one. Consequently, the recommendation was revised to explicitly mention trust, solidarity, cooperation, (co-)engagement, community, and EU values, and to extend the scope to both formal and non-formal education programs.

3. Mandatory voting and alternative measures

The Croatian recommendation to consider mandatory voting sparked the most intensive debates. While some participants recognised its potential to increase turnout, many questioned its feasibility and democratic quality. This exchange did not lead to a revision of the recommendation itself, but it provided the Croatian delegation with valuable insights on how this issue is perceived across Europe, and how the recommendation may need further reflection and justification in the future.

4. Environmental recommendations

The proposal to introduce incentives and rewards for citizens and producers to reduce waste and adopt sustainable practices was another recurring "hot topic". Delegates compared their own national experiences with reward and penalty systems. The Croatian delegation decided to keep the original recommendation, while recognising the need to link it with broader EU-wide discussions on environmental policy and public trust in waste management systems. During the discussions, it was proposed – and later accepted – to replace the word "sovereignty" with "self-sustainability" in the recommendation "Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models."

5. Other deliberation topics

Additional exchanges also addressed the use of EU funds, the introduction of the euro in Croatia and its impact on citizens and the economy, the state of civil society and institutional frameworks, as well as broader questions of inclusiveness and
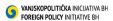
democratic trust. These topics did not directly change the wording of the recommendations but provided important context and validation for their relevance.

In conclusion, the revision process resulted in three recommendations being improved (communication about the EU, civic participation in education and local food self-sustainability), while others were retained with reinforced justification. The dialogue with other delegations - especially the exchange with Kosovo - proved invaluable in clarifying and testing the Croatian proposals. The final revised recommendations therefore, reflect not only national-level deliberations but also the transnational dialogue and mutual learning that took place in Belgrade.

Table 5 Revised list of policy proposals in Croatia

#	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Develop and improve direct communication with citizens in person, adapting language and format	European Union
2	Present to Croatian citizens, in a clear and accessible way, the benefits of EU membership as well as the opportunities for citizens to engage in EU policy-making processes	European Union
3	Develop a system of small financial grants to improve quality of life in smaller communities	European Union
4	Promote and popularise existing tools for democratic oversight and public participation	Rule of law
5	Integrate the core principles of civic participation – such as trust, solidarity, cooperation, (co-)engagement, community, and other EU values – into both formal and non-formal education programs starting from early childhood, including preschool.	Rule of law
6	Continuously support CSO initiatives that strengthen youth civic competencies and update civic education content	Rule of law
7	Introduce mandatory voting over a two-day period, including one working day	Rule of law
8	Introduce reward measures for citizens who reduce waste and use sustainable packaging	Environment
9	Improve communication about the effectiveness of waste systems to counter public demotivation	Environment
10	Support local food sovereignty by encouraging short supply chains and cooperative models	Environment

FRANCE

From Citizen Consultations to Bold Transformations: French Views on a Stronger, Fairer and More Democratic European Union

Benjamin Couteau, Jacques Delors Institute

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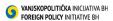
and public disillusionment. The opportunity to voice their views on EU-related matters, combined with the perceived geopolitical pressure facing the EU and rising Euroscepticism at home, steered citizens towards policy proposals focused on these concerns. As a result, issues more closely tied to their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

There was broad support for a renewed European narrative, one rooted in tangible, everyday experiences — such as the euro, mobility, public services, and shared infrastructure — and complemented by stronger civic education, especially in schools. This narrative should reflect the EU s diversity, include popular culture, and foster a sense of multiple, complementary identities rather than replace national ones. A weakened sense of European belonging, especially among socially and geographically marginalised groups, was linked to poor communication, lack of visibility, and limited access to European opportunities. Citizens emphasised the need to give substance to European citizenship, through symbolic and practical tools like transnational electoral lists and expanded civic initiatives. Establishing European citizens' convention was also proposed, on the condition that it be inclusive, well-structured, and lead to real institutional impact.

At the heart of the debate was the call to align enlargement with democratic legitimacy, ecological transition, and social justice. While gradual integration was seen as a pragmatic path forward, it raised concerns about ambiguous membership statuses. Participants insisted that new accessions must go hand in hand with strengthened governance, transparency, and cohesion. Ultimately, participants envisioned a more credible, accessible, and democratic EU, one capable of fostering shared belonging, enabling fair transitions, and grounding its vision in the realities of its citizens' daily lives. These considerations have translated into the policy proposals described below.

Table 6 Policy proposals in France

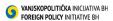| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Enhance awareness about the European Union by promoting civic initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and civic service	EU integration
2	Improve rail network and public transport to ensure social justice, housing access, and climate action (e.g. suburbs to city centers)	Environment
3	Establish European citizens' conventions, offering a deliberative democratic space for dialogue and proposals, especially on climate and citizenship	EU integration
4	Introduce transnational electoral lists for the European Parliament to foster a shared political space	EU integration
5	Enhance education about the EU by improving the teaching of its history, and organising school activities dedicated to discovering Member and candidate States	EU integration
6	Reform the EU's decision-making and enlargement processes by expanding qualified majority voting and limiting veto powers, in order to reduce blockages	EU integration

7	Enhance the visibility of EU funding and financed projects, e.g. by highlighting "Funded by the EU" mentions	EU integration
8	Provide EU-focused training for elected officials	EU integration
9	Carry out an inquiry into the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements	EU integration
10	Implement a gradual EU accession process	EU integration

Policy Proposal 1: Enhance awareness about the European Union by promoting civic initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and civic service

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

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

Policy Proposal 2: Improve rail network and public transport to ensure social justice, housing access, and climate action (e.g. suburbs to city centers)

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

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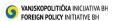
infrastructure development, coordination between Member States, and competition from carbon-intensive sectors like aviation and road transport. Sustaining affordability will require long-term financial commitment and closer cooperation between EU institutions, national governments, and private operators.

Policy Proposal 3: Establish European citizens' conventions, offering a deliberative democratic space for dialogue and proposals, especially on climate and citizenship

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

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

Policy Proposal 4: Introduce transnational electoral lists for the European Parliament to foster a shared political space

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

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

Policy Proposal 5: Enhance education about the EU by improving the teaching of its history, and organising school activities dedicated to discovering Member and candidate States

Participants highlighted the persistent lack of public awareness and the limited accessible, transparent information concerning the EU and its actions. It was agreed that this challenge should be addressed from an early age and sustained throughout life, by ensuring that all individuals have the opportunity to engage in meaningful civic education, both within and beyond their professional contexts.
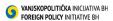
To this end, EU-related education should be systematically integrated into school curricula from the primary level onwards. A harmonised approach to European studies across all Member States was recommended, supported by more accessible and interactive educational programmes. French institutions, alongside all Member States, should place emphasis on shared European symbols and values, with the aim of reinforcing a collective identity and a sense of belonging among citizens. In parallel, it was stressed that teachers must be equipped with enhanced training in European affairs, enabling them to deliver this content in an engaging, relevant, and practical manner. Furthermore, lifelong learning opportunities in this area should be made widely available to workers across all sectors, ensuring continuous access to civic education throughout the life course.

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

Policy Proposal 6: Reform the EU's decision-making and enlargement processes by expanding qualified majority voting and limiting veto powers, in order to reduce blockages

While participants recognised EU enlargement as a strategic instrument for promoting peace and stability, many expressed concerns regarding the pace and consequences of the process. Citizens emphasised the importance of clear, harmonised, and consistently applied accession criteria, particularly in light of the enlargement process's complexity and the unexpected obstruction faced by some candidate States due to domestic political considerations within certain member states. These concerns, combined with the perceived uneven enforcement of EU law, were viewed as undermining the Union's credibility. Member States, following the lead of Germany and Slovenia, which secured the support of nearly two-thirds of Member States, should promptly activate these clauses. However, concerns among some countries about losing leverage within the EU's decision-making process make this unlikely in the short term.

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

Policy Proposal 7: Enhance the visibility of EU funding and financed projects, e.g. by highlighting "Funded by the EU" mentions

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

To counter this, the proposal calls for a more prominent and consistent display of EU involvement in funded projects. It is essential that local communities are able to clearly identify and appreciate the advantages and opportunities brought about by EU integration. At the same time, national and regional governments must be held accountable for visibly and transparently communicating the EU's role in these initiatives. The enhanced visibility of such mentions should be required by the EU, with national and local institutions made responsible for their implementation. A potential challenge, however, lies in the possibility that these institutions may seek to downplay the EU's role in order to highlight their own actions to their constituents.
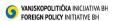
Policy Proposal 8: Provide EU-focused training for elected officials

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

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

Policy Proposal 9: Carry out an inquiry into the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements

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

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

Policy Proposal 10: Implement a gradual EU accession process

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

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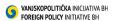
public, limiting their effectiveness in generating popular support. To address this, participants called for the use of powerful symbolic measures to create genuine political momentum and public engagement. One such proposal could be the introduction by the EU of an "Associated State" status, granting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

Lessons learned from the transnational event

The revised recommendations emerged from a collaborative deliberation process within our national group, after a discussion with peers from other participating countries. We first presented our national-level proposals in these exchanges, then compared priorities, identified overlaps, and addressed points that lacked sufficient clarity or ambition. The discussions in Belgrade acted as a catalyst: by confronting diverse national perspectives, we refined our ideas so they could gain interest and support at the continental level rather than remain isolated national demands.

Many changes were therefore driven by the need to make our proposals both more inclusive and more implementation-oriented. For example, the original recommendation on civic engagement implicitly focused on young people. Discussions with other delegations made clear that European identity and participation cannot be restricted to a single age group if we strive for a truly inclusive society. This led us to call for a civic service and programmes such as the European Solidarity Corps to be open to all citizens.

Debates on transport and climate reinforced our initial intuitions: sustainable rail and public transport systems are unattainable without guaranteed accessibility and affordability. Participants from different socio-economic backgrounds highlighted that ambitious green policies will only secure public support if perceived as fair and realistic, placing less pressure on individual citizens and more responsibility on governments. This justified the stronger emphasis on cost, access, and social justice in mobility.

The proposal to institutionalise European citizens' conventions was also reinforced to underline their permanent nature: consultations showed that temporary or one-off formats fail to build lasting democratic ownership. We also acknowledged the importance of including citizens from candidate states, to avoid repeating the mistake of the 2021-22 Conference on the Future of Europe. On governance and enlargement, participants stressed that understanding the real implications of enlargement is vital for public legitimacy. This led to the call for an annual — not merely occasional — EU inquiry of the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements, involving civil society stakeholders. In parallel, debates on conditionality and fairness supported a merit-based rather than only gradual accession process, with incentives such as inclusion in the Foreign Affairs Council for candidate States fully aligned with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union.

Finally, it became clear that EU-focused training for elected officials must explicitly target both national and local levels. Many decisions are taken locally or nationally without sufficient understanding of EU mechanisms, making this clarification essential.
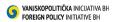
Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

Table 7 Revised list of policy proposals in France

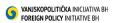| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Enhance awareness about the European Union by promoting civic initiatives such as the European Solidarity Corps and a European civic service open to all citizens — not just youth	EU integration
2	Improve rail network and public transport to ensure social justice — accessibility and affordability, while advancing sustainability	Environment
3	Institutionalise European citizens' conventions as a permanent deliberative democratic space for dialogue and proposals, especially on climate and citizenship	EU integration
4	Introduce transnational electoral lists for the European Parliament to foster a shared political space	EU integration
5	Enhance education about the EU by improving the teaching of its history, and organising school activities dedicated to discovering Member and candidate States	EU integration
6	Reform the EU's decision-making and enlargement processes by expanding qualified majority voting and limiting veto powers, in order to reduce blockages	EU integration
7	Enhance the visibility of EU funding and financed projects, e.g. by highlighting "Funded by the EU" mentions	EU integration
8	Provide EU-focused training for elected officials at national and local levels	EU integration
9	Carry out an annual EU inquiry into the costs and benefits of past and future enlargements	EU integration
10	Implement a gradual, merit-based EU accession process	EU integration

GREECE

Greece's Youth as Changemakers

Ioanna Giakoumopoulou, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

The national consultation in Greece, held in Athens on 5 May 2025, represented the culmination of the citizen engagement efforts under the REACH project. It brought together citizen delegates from the local events and thematic experts and stakeholders to collaborate and produce policy proposals rooted in the previous discussions in Athens and Thessaloniki.

The group of experts included some notable mentions, which enhanced the conversation and offered insightful points. For example, Dr Ritsa Panayiotou, Senior Researcher at the Center for Planning and Economic Research (KEPE) and Professor at the University of Athens, who is readily involved in youth initiatives, was greatly engaged and the discussions surrounding how to combat youth disillusionment with the EU. Mrs Anna Bampili, who runs the non-profit organisation SEE in Action, brought to the discussions critical insights on encouraging cross-border collaboration and connecting youth groups. Alexandros Koutras, working at Electra Energy Cooperative in Ioannina, brought the perspective from outside the metropole, explaining the differences between environmental action in rural and urban spaces and analysing the differences between the two. Ioanna Theodoropoulou from the EUHub, joined by Myrons Papaderos, project manager of Erasmus+ in Greece, spoke animatedly about the positives and limitations of creating spaces of unity and solidarity across European borders. Lastly, the presence of consultants and evaluation experts like Dr Athina Markantoni allowed the proposals to remain realistic and grounded in actionable change.

The result was a set of ten proposals that encompassed the collective concerns, aspirations, and ideas of the participants, both for the future of Greece and the European Union. These proposals reflected national particularities as well as a broader European outlook, highlighting the citizens' ability to engage in complex policy debates when given the space and opportunity to do so.

Table 8 Policy proposals in Greece

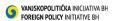| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Launch transnational regional youth groups for EU-wide cooperation	EU integration
2	Create early-age curricula on EU institutions, functioning and values	EU integration
3	Develop national programs for media literacy	Rule of law
4	Establish regional EU knowledge hubs	EU integration
5	Create Erasmus-style exchange programs for schools	EU integration
6	Establish local youth groups for environmental collaboration	Environment
7	Bigger focus on LGBTQIA+ rights in the curriculum	Rule of law
8	Organise culturally rooted green lifestyle seminars	Environment
9	EU-centred festivals and annual exhibitions	EU integration

10	Develop a European Citizens' Dialogue on Security and Defence	EU integration

Policy Proposal 1: Launch transnational regional youth groups for EU-wide cooperation

One of the most prominent recommendations was the creation of transnational regional youth groups aimed at strengthening civic cooperation across European borders. Specifically, this was mentioned in relation to the Balkan region, but participants were open to extending it. They envisaged these groups as spaces for intercultural dialogue, youth-led initiatives and collaborative problem-solving, bringing young people together from EU member states and candidate countries. Acting almost like a summer camp, these groups would foster a shared sense of identity and also provide a space for young voices to be heard in transnational discussions. These groups could function in a combination of annual forums but also more often policy- themed workshops or work together on advocacy projects across borders.

Initiatives like these could be implemented by NGOs, however, they would ideally be supported by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and co-funded through Erasmus+. In line with this, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and local youth councils, could coordinate applications and ensure inclusive participation from various regions of the country, including rural and island communities that are often excluded from such cross-border opportunities.

Policy Proposal 2: Create early-age curricula on EU institutions, functioning and values

In a similar vein to the previous policy recommendation was the proposal to introduce comprehensive curricula on the EU in primary and secondary education. Citizens expressed concern about the growing disconnect between the EU, its values, institutions, and its young citizens and pointed to formal education as a long-term investment. The early exposure to the meaning and history of EU institutions, values, symbols and aims was seen as an important way of overcoming both Euroscepticism, resistance to enlargement and misinformation. These teaching materials could also include simulations of European institutions to allow students to learn more about the everyday running and the importance of these events. On top of this, they would focus, of course, on European values, aiming to strengthen solidarity and unity.

The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs would be the lead institution responsible for embedding such content into the national curriculum. However, it would certainly involve collaboration with an EU institution, potentially the European Parliament's Liaison Office in Greece, which could provide updated resources and institutional support for EU-themed education.

Policy Proposal 3: Develop national programs for media literacy

The issue of misinformation also featured prominently in the third proposal, which advocated for national programs dedicated to media literacy. Participants called for public training centres in partnership with local governments to provide education in digital safety. With rising concern over polarisation in society and a declining trust in public institutions, these programmes could be fundamental in protecting the integrity of democratic dialogue. The training provided could include how to identify bots, evaluate sources, and challenge disinformation narratives. Another key point to relay would be the understanding that social media algorithms reinforce echo chambers.

Whilst it tends to be the younger generations who spend most of their time online, the point was made that this training should be mostly targeted at middle-aged people. After all, younger generations have grown up with technology and are much more adept at using it, whilst those older are not digital natives. In fact, those belonging to the middle group, however, can easily become the targets of misinformation and false narratives. Furthermore, these ages tend to be the
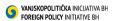
decision-making group, the powerful age group. Therefore, when they are fed misinformation online, they may go on to make policies and choices based on false and extremist content.

The Greek Ministry of Digital Governance could oversee the development of centres dedicated to this. Implementation would also require input from local municipalities, and even civil society organisations, and universities. In order to avoid these centres becoming politicised, citizens stressed that those working there should not be tied to local representatives or national members of parliament. Instead, they should be experts in the field. On the European level, such initiatives could benefit from coordination with the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), ensuring alignment with wider EU efforts against disinformation.

Policy Proposal 4: Establish regional EU knowledge hubs

In parallel, the citizens recommended the establishment of EU knowledge hubs in rural and semi-urban areas. These hubs would serve as decentralised hotspots for information and public engagement, aiming to act against geographic disparities in access to EU-related resources. Citizens noted that while major urban centres often benefit from institutional proximity, rural populations remain under-informed and under-represented in EU debates. These hubs could be coordinated by think tanks or NGOs in partnership with the European Commission Representation in Greece. Their function would not only be informative but participatory: acting as meeting points for citizens, educators, NGOs, and EU officials to engage in dialogue, learning, and awareness-building on EU rights and programmes. The aim of this decentralisation would be to start countering political disengagement in non-metropolitan areas and improving the perceived legitimacy of the EU in smaller cities and towns.

However, several implementation challenges were noted. Citizens acknowledged the uneven capacity of local governments in Greece, particularly in rural, island, or economically weaker regions, which may lack the staff or infrastructure to sustain such initiatives. There is also a broader risk of low visibility or insufficient uptake if the hubs are not well-promoted or integrated into existing community structures. Involving government ministries could potentially help in the issue of promotion and low visibility. Yet, as with some other recommendations, the participants were adamant on keeping them depoliticised. They were keen that these initiatives should not be dependent on whichever party is in power and subsequent subject to change with each cabinet.

Policy Proposal 5: Create Erasmus-style exchange programs for schools

Education and cross-border exposure also came together in the proposal to extend Erasmus-style exchange programs to secondary schools. Building on the success of Erasmus+, participants suggested early intercultural experiences to foster a stronger sense of European belonging and cooperation from a younger age. Students aged 14 to 17 were seen as the ideal target group. Hosting arrangements could involve short-term school residencies, summer exchange programmes, or host family stays. These experiences could act against nationalist tendencies and promote a shared understanding amongst future citizens. At the European level, this would require budgetary support from DG EAC. At the national level, implementation would probably be assigned to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, specifically through the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY), which acts as the national agency for Erasmus+ in Greece.

What makes this proposal particularly innovative is its focus on engaging students at an earlier stage than existing schemes typically allow. While most EU-funded exchange programmes target university-level students, this initiative would open the door to teenagers aged 14–17, a group often excluded from European initiatives focusing on unity. Participants stressed that adolescence is a formative period for shaping civic identity and values, and that exposure to different cultures and perspectives during these years could have a lasting impact on students' understanding of European citizenship and history.
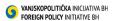
This proposal is important for Greece nationally because, although school exchanges are already well-established in several other European countries, they remain particularly rare in Greece. Where they do exist, they are typically organised by private schools with access to exclusive networks and resources, meaning that most Greek students—especially those in public education—are left without such opportunities. This proposal seeks to address that gap and ensure that intercultural exchanges and connections become a normalised and inclusive part of the Greek secondary education system, rather than a privilege only a few can afford.

Policy Proposal 6: Establish local youth groups for environmental collaboration

The environment was the topic that young participants seemed most keen to discuss during the consultations, and their interest is evident in this suggestion. Participants recommended the setting up of local youth groups focused on environmental sustainability. The groups could consist of secondary school students, university students, and young professionals aged 15–25 with an interest in sustainability, environmental policy, or community organising. Hopeful applicants would apply through their local government and would then be selected based on their motivation and interest in environmental issues. Once formed, the group would work together as a team to represent youth perspectives and propose initiatives or improvements in local environmental policy. On top of this, groups would collaborate with municipal and national authorities directly to give the youth more of a voice on climate governance. These grassroots initiatives would allow young people influence over a topic they are very passionate about, ensuring that green efforts are inclusive and bottom-up.

The recommendation does not require major legislative change, but it may require local authorities to adapt or establish a basic framework for recognising and supporting these groups. Once established, the groups could operate with a degree of self-sufficiency—advocating for their own funding, proposing campaigns or local events, and acting as a creative engine for sustainability-focused initiatives in their borough. They might lead school-based campaigns on recycling, climate-friendly commuting, or water conservation. Ideally, one youth group would be formed per borough or municipality, serving as a formal yet flexible link between local councils and the young people in their area. The Ministry of Environment and Energy, in cooperation with the Ministry of Interior and local governments, would be responsible for facilitating such initiatives. Schools, universities, and youth centres would play a key role in encouraging people to join these groups and shaping agendas tailored to local environmental challenges.

Policy Proposal 7: Bigger focus on LGBTQIA+ rights in the curriculum

Participants also touched upon systemic inequalities and proposed mandatory LGBTQIA+ rights education to be added to the national curriculum. They argued that civic education needs to move beyond its current state and actively promote empathy, diversity and acceptance. Given rising discrimination and the persistence of stereotypes, especially in conservative communities, this proposal sought to address these. The aim is to help build a culture of inclusion through structured, formal education. Whilst citizens were adamant about this proposal, and many participants felt very passionate, implementation unfortunately raised a few issues.

Firstly, the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs should hypothetically once again serve as the lead institution. However, there would be problems here because of religious influence. Civil society organisations with experience in LGBTQIA+ advocacy could lead workshops in schools, as this would be something easier to get past any religious fanatics. These organisations could work in partnership with the Greek Ombudsman's Office and the Ministry of Justice, which has a human rights portfolio and might be more in touch with the theme. As well as this, participants acknowledged that Greek society has traditionally leaned toward more conservative values, especially when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, and that efforts to introduce LGBTQIA+ topics into education could provoke public backlash not only from
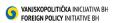
religious institutions but also from parent associations. The participants mentioned that when the Greek government legalised same-sex marriage in February 2024, a general moment of euphoria for most, the backlash was still substantial.

However, this only strengthened the case for the proposal in the eyes of most participants. The consensus was that silence or avoidance perpetuates stigma. Several participants mentioned specific incidents—such as the 2018 homophobic attacks on LGBTQIA+ activists during Pride events in Athens and Thessaloniki, or the ongoing lack of legal protections for trans rights (almost completely non-existent in Greece)—as evidence of the pressing need for change. Ultimately, the recommendation was adopted not only as a way to educate, but also to protect.

Policy Proposal 8: Organise culturally rooted green lifestyle seminars

Environmental action was also closely linked to cultural identity through the recommendation for culturally rooted green lifestyle seminars. These would attempt to bridge the gap between traditional practices and sustainable values, showing people that climate action does not have to mean a rejection of all tradition. Particularly, this was mentioned in regard to Greek cuisine and culinary traditions that environmentalists might look down on. This approach would address resistance to the green transition by anchoring it in what is already familiar to Greeks. The primary goal would then be to dismantle the common stereotype that Greek traditions and eco-friendly living are mutually exclusive.

These seminars could be organised on a quarterly basis, allowing enough time in between so that they don't become tiring and instead keep momentum and interest going. To encourage active participation, the seminars could combine educational content with hands-on activities, such as cooking demonstrations of eco-friendly traditional dishes or community challenges promoting plant-based meals. Additionally, tapping into the increasing environmental awareness among younger generations and involving schools and universities could create a ripple effect, motivating families and communities to engage. These seminars should be formed through a collaboration of civil society organisations, think tanks, and NGOs with the local government. They took take place in public buildings where other such clubs are already hosted. Ideally, the Ministry of Environment and Energy, working in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, would also be involved.

Policy Proposal 9: EU-centred festivals and annual exhibitions

Furthermore, citizens called for more informal public engagement with the EU. They would do this by organising festivals and moving exhibitions celebrating European identity. Designed to be accessible and engaging, these events would combine culture, education and entertainment to bring EU topics into everyday life. Activities could include cultural booths with food and music from different EU countries, storytelling sessions about the EU's history, children's games and interactive stations about Erasmus and the importance of unity and solidarity. The aim would be to counteract apathy and disconnect, particularly among young people who may feel alienated from formal political processes.

This moving exhibition distinguishes itself from existing cultural events by its dynamic nature—traveling across Greece with a special focus on rural areas and islands that are often underserved by large-scale EU initiatives. Unlike formal, lecture-style presentations and events, this would be designed as a lively, festival-like experience, blending culture, education, and entertainment into an immersive event that feels more like a summer fair than a traditional exhibition.

By targeting schools and communities directly, it would be making EU themes accessible and engaging through a mix of music, theatre, dance, and interactive performances. This concept could be expanded into a framework that supports a variety of similar moving cultural events across the EU—creating a network of traveling festivals that celebrate European identity, unity, and diversity through innovative, community-based programming. Implementation would involve the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with municipalities, the European Commission Representation in Greece, and local
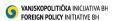
cultural organisations. The events could coincide with Europe Day (9 May) or local civic celebrations, making them visible but embedded in existing community traditions.

Policy Proposal 10: Develop a European Citizens' Dialogue on Security and Defence

Finally, participants stressed concerns around the EU's defence policy and suggested the creation of structured dialogues on EU security and defence policy. In the context of increasing geopolitical complexity post-2022 and Russian aggression on Ukraine, citizens argued that security strategies must take humans as the referent object and prioritise human security. On top of this, was the added stress around Greek-Turkish relations and what many view as an impending danger. Whilst some definitely emphasised this threat more than others, it remained something that many were concerned about, regardless of how much urgency they assigned to it.

The dialogues in general could help highlight what citizens wanted or feared, such as the abovementioned topics. Topics could include cybersecurity, the EU–NATO relationship, military spending, disarmament, and the impact of defence policy on climate and migration. Hosting such dialogues in universities, municipal centres, or through digital platforms would help democratise foreign and security policy, an area traditionally insulated from public scrutiny. These citizen dialogues could be initiated under the Conference on the Future of Europe follow-up mechanisms.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

After a productive day of discussions, the main takeaway was that our ten initial policy proposals, though well-aligned with our priorities, were much too broad and aspirational. They lacked sufficient detail on implementation and measurable outcomes, making them seem more like rough ideas rather than concrete policy suggestions. Engaging with both European citizens and experts was helpful in bridging this gap. Through the discussions that took place in the Belgrade conference, it became clear that many of our proposals centred on educational initiatives and awareness-raising efforts. Particularly, we were focused on increasing EU visibility in order to strengthen public support and engagement. While participants appreciated the direction of the proposals, they stressed that effective policies must be grounded in tangible incentives and opportunities for said engagement. This feedback encouraged us not to completely discard our ideas, but to rework them so that they were more achievable and focused on feasibility, participation, and impact.

For instance, several citizens highlighted the importance of ensuring all our proposals focused on bottom-up approaches. A healthy distance between government bodies and civil society, would encourage more active engagement and also ownership of the initiatives. Creating and supporting transnational youth organisations that inspire a sense of collaboration and unity across EU borders (Proposal 1) or local environmental groups that get involved in their communities (Proposal 6) were reworked to include specifically cascade funding mechanisms. These would enable smaller organisations to access EU funds more easily and adapt these initiatives tailored to lived experiences and local issues. Similarly, discussions around Erasmus-style exchange programmes for public schools (Proposal 5) and EU knowledge centres (Proposal 4) revealed concerns about funding transparency and accessibility. Existing schemes can sometimes seem opaque or somewhat politicised because of their roots in national ministries. In response, we considered how to make EU funding streams more visible and directly accountable. This would entail detaching Erasmus-style funding from the Ministry of Education so that the agency stands as an independent body, accessible to all, despite political beliefs and current administration priorities. In addition to providing a way for children to understand and experience directly the advantages of the EU, this would detach the union's image from government, perhaps making it more appealing to all.

When it came to EU-centred exhibitions, as well as encouraging active citizen dialogues on EU topics (Proposals 9 and 10), participants pointed out that abstract teaching about EU values and organised consultations might not resonate deeply with the public. Instead, they suggested more experiential approaches, such as school excursions to EU-funded
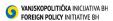
sites, showcasing in this way tangible European contributions. In line with this, cultural excursions for schools could also make a point of how much EU funding supports them and allows their existence. These ideas would allow citizens, especially young people, to see and experience the EU's impact firsthand.

In terms of encouraging consultations (Proposal 10), an outline of how this could happen was proposed. Constituency representatives would need to organise citizen consultations and fulfil a certain quota of signatories three times a year. This should push boroughs to seek the direct engagement of their population in order to create a more direct line of feedback.

Lastly, discussions on the eco-friendly lifestyle seminars (Proposal 8) prompted us to think about motivation and incentives. Participants proposed linking participation to small financial benefits. For example, offering deductions on municipal taxes for those attending sustainability-related seminars could make the approach both educational and personally rewarding. This would, rather cynically, aid in getting people more involved.

Overall, the dialogue with European citizens helped us revise our proposals from general concepts into actionable and citizen-informed plans. The process reminded us that effective policymaking must be participatory, transparent, and firmly anchored in clear steps. After the discussions in Belgrade, our revised proposals are more realistic and inclusive, as well as more likely to foster genuine engagement with the European project.

Table 9 Revised list of policy proposals in Greece

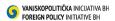| #	Policy Proposal	Description	Policy Area
1	Establish transnational youth organisations	Establish EU-funded, bottom-up youth organisations with to promote cross-border collaboration and civic participation.	EU integration
2	National programme for media literacy	A bigger focus in schools to act against the modern threats of misinformation but also introduce courses in public centres, accessible to those over the school age, to provide education in digital safety.	Rule of law
3	Detach Erasmus-style funding from the Ministry of Education	Ensure funding transparency and accessibility for all citizens, making sure that the agency stands as an independent body, accessible to all despite political beliefs and current administration priorities.	EU integration
4	Politically-independent EU knowledge centres	Create autonomous knowledge hubs in communities to provide impartial information about EU opportunities (e.g. funds for projects, grants for new work etc) and policies.	EU integration
5	Erasmus-like exchange for public schools	To increase EU visibility, give opportunities to children at an earlier age, and not only those in privileged private education.	EU integration
6	Cascade funding for local environmental Initiatives	Fund small-scale, community-led environmental projects through cascade funding mechanisms to encourage bottom-up action.	Environment

Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

7	Bigger focus on marginalised communities in the curriculum	A bigger focus on all marginalised communities should be encouraged from early age curriculum. Adopting aspects of education in other countries (e.g. Black History Month, Pride Month) could help to make Greek youth more accepting.	Rule of law
8	Introduce culturally rooted green lifestyle seminars working in parallel with municipal tax deductions	Introduce small tax deductions for citizens participating in sustainability seminars or eco-friendly educational activities.	Environment
9	Increase EU visibility through tangible excursions and exhibitions	Hold public exhibitions showcasing locally funded EU projects to increase awareness and connect citizens to tangible outcomes. Organise educational trips and visits to EU-funded projects so citizens can directly experience the Union's tangible impact.	EU integration
10	Launch regular citizen consultations	Require constituency representatives to host citizen consultations three times a year, making it obligatory to attain a certain number of signatures and ensuring continuous public input in policymaking.	Rule of law

KOSOVO

Citizens Shaping Kosovo's Future: Rule of Law, EU Integration, and Environment

Jon Limaj, Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)

At the end of the national consultation in Kosovo, the ten policy proposals that had been selected and produced by citizens during the debates were adopted. This is done with the support of experts who helped shape, reformulate and specify the proposals to make them viable. The recommendations are a compromise between the urgency of short-term changes and more ambitious long-term demands, and a reflection of how the challenges in the area of the rule of law, EU integration and the environment are intertwined. The participants in the process have prioritised the recommendations in the final outcome according to the strength of the support and the potential impact of each proposal, in a way that captures the group consensus while being mindful of the institutional realities in the country.

Table 10 Policy proposals in Kosovo

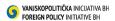| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	A comprehensive plan for environmental infrastructure aligned with EU standards	Environment
2	Concrete projects for sewage networks and sustainable drinking water access	Environment
3	A national public communication strategy on EU integration	EU integration
4	A harmonised criminal and administrative code	Rule of law

5	Incentive schemes and clarification programs for businesses meeting environmental standards	Environment
6	Mandatory training for public officials on integrity and good governance	Rule of law
7	Provision of translators in multi-ethnic courts	Rule of law
8	Institutionalised participation of marginalised groups in policymaking	Rule of law
9	Strengthening the Kosovo Judicial Council's monitoring system	Rule of law
10	Digital platforms for transparent reform monitoring	EU integration

Policy Proposal 1: A comprehensive plan for environmental infrastructure aligned with EU standards

Drafting and implementing a comprehensive national plan for environmental infrastructure was the most strongly supported recommendation from the national consultation. Citizens emphasised that piecemeal projects and cosmetic interventions were not enough to address Kosovo's environmental problems, and pointed to the absence of wastewater treatment, the mismanagement of landfills, and unsafe levels of air pollution as proof of systemic failures. A comprehensive national plan could provide strategic guidance, help coordinate between ministries, and help connect reforms to the EU Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Consultation participants acknowledged that this would take time, donor support and significant financial resources, but consensus was that only an integrated and comprehensive approach could address the root causes of environmental problems. North Macedonia's National Environmental Action Plan was highlighted as a model for effectively using donor coordination and conditionality to align external support with domestic priorities and achieve measurable results. Strengths of this proposal lie in vision; a clear weakness lies in susceptibility to political turnover. Risk factors also include institutional capacity: the Ministry of Environment is still significantly underfunded and many municipalities have limited or no expertise in this area. However, participants were clear that inaction is more costly in the long run; without a plan, fragmented measures will continue to fail to reduce pollution or improve public health.

Policy Proposal 2: Concrete projects for sewage networks and sustainable drinking water access

Related to the foregoing was the citizens' proposal to engage in the design of concrete projects for sewage networks and sustainable access to drinking water. This was presented as an issue of basic dignity, a very material preoccupation on a daily basis, particularly in rural areas. Participants in the group recounted both the practice of direct discharge of untreated wastewater into rivers and the fact that many neighbourhoods only periodically have access to clean drinking water. They felt that these were not only technical questions, but matters of human dignity and public health. The proposal was a very large-scale one, involving investment in wastewater treatment plants and in sustainable and continuous access to clean water, financed by a combination of state and municipal resources and international aid. Institutions involved included the Ministry of Environment, municipal utilities, and the National Audit Office, with the last as a condition to avoid corruption. Despite the expense and complexity, it was clear to participants that this was a high-impact investment that could be made with rapid results that visibly and directly impact people's lives, while also offering the potential to rebuild some trust in institutions. Croatia was referenced as an example of a state that made pre-accession investments in precisely this type of water infrastructure, and that Kosovo should learn from and adopt a similar, phased approach, which guarantees donor assistance and local ownership. Participants noted that such investment should be planned and executed with equal access for all as a central guiding principle. Rural areas should not be left behind for urban centres, and environmental standards must be applied equally and not selectively.
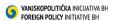
Policy Proposal 3: A national public communication strategy on EU integration

A third important topic was related to the need to draft a national public communication strategy on EU integration. This issue was highlighted by citizens who, on numerous occasions, expressed their dissatisfaction with how reforms are constantly communicated as something that Kosovo needs to do for Brussels or as an obligation derived from negotiations, instead of being priorities of Kosovo itself, which in turn does not appeal to citizens and weakens the support of integration. In the proposal, the elaboration of a communication strategy was recommended under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Office in coordination with civil society and academic institutions and with a special focus on schools, municipalities and groups at risk of exclusion. Citizens noted that people need to be informed about where we are, what is next and how reforms will affect their day-to-day lives, but, on the other hand, they were also concerned that a communication strategy like this could easily be instrumentalised for political or party purposes. To ensure credibility, they thus stressed the need for shared ownership between institutions and independent actors. The example of Montenegro, which approached communication on EU integration through communication strategies that combined the use of mass media and civic education, was put forward for comparison. The strength of this proposal is the potential to reduce mistrust and scepticism, while the weakness is in the fact that this could not continue with the change of governments. Without institutionalisation and unless there are appropriate mechanisms in place, it could be dropped with a change of political leadership or even hijacked and politicised. Citizens insisted on shared ownership that would be as wide and non-partisan as possible, and with the inclusion of civil society as a safety net.

Policy Proposal 4: A harmonised criminal and administrative code

Justice system reform was a priority in this area as well. Respondents called for a new harmonised criminal and administrative code to be drafted. Discrepancies between the codes, according to the citizens, generate legal confusion, provide space for corruption and lead to inconsistent penalties. Citizens want a predictable and clear legal framework in which the law is applied equally to all. The Ministry of Justice and the Kosovo Judicial Council are the institutions that, together with parliamentary committees, would have to take the initiative for this kind of reform. The strength of this recommendation is that it directly corresponds to the EU accession benchmarks on the rule of law, whereas a weakness is that the legislative process is time-consuming and subject to political capture at the drafting stage. Participants mentioned the pre-accession experience of Albania, for example, where the harmonisation of codes was among the most important demands. This could be a way for Kosovo to harmonise its codes, with public consultations being part of the drafting process and thus strengthening the legitimacy of the new codes. Another strength is that such a reform could help reduce case backlogs by clarifying procedures, but there is a risk that the implementation will be obstructed by political interests in preserving grey areas. Citizens perceived this reform as important for restoring trust in the justice system and ending the widespread feeling of selective justice.

Policy Proposal 5: Incentive schemes and clarification programs for businesses meeting environmental standards

A further proposal tying environmental and economic reform recommended the establishment of incentive schemes and annual certification programs for businesses that incorporate environmental standards. Participants argued that an improved environment cannot be delivered through state regulation alone, as businesses also need to be incentivised to 'do their part'. Incentives could come in the form of tax reductions, subsidies or preferential treatment in public procurement, for example. Certification schemes would identify responsible companies and enable them to be more competitive in regional and European markets. The Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Environment were identified as the two institutions that could implement this proposal, in partnership with chambers of commerce. Although there were some concerns over the fiscal sustainability of such a program, international donor co-financing was seen as a way to reduce pressure on the state budget. Participants also cited Slovenia as a comparative practice in this area, where
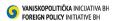
certification schemes have helped to improve the competitiveness of green SMEs in the country. Citizens further noted that this reform would also create jobs in green sectors, and this would be a positive message to Kosovo's youth who may be considering emigration. However, they also noted that the risk of corruption in certification schemes is a serious concern, which is why oversight would need to be by an independent institution.

Policy Proposal 6: Mandatory training for public officials on integrity and good governance

Citizens also recommended to reform the public sector, in particular to introduce mandatory trainings for all public officials on integrity, human rights and good governance. Many participants believed civil servants and staff of the justice sector were not aware of the ethics and rules that should be followed, which led to corruption and inefficient public services. Mandatory trainings would also help in promoting professionalism and creating a culture of accountability. It would also ensure that public officials and civil servants would treat citizens with respect and professionalism. Institutions that would be primarily responsible for the implementation of this proposal would be the Ministry of Public Administration and the Civil Service Agency. The greatest strength of this proposal is the fact that it is less expensive than the previous reform on infrastructure. However, the effectiveness and the compliance of this reform would need to be independently monitored and evaluated. A model of mandatory trainings for public officials could be Estonia's digital training modules that contributed to increasing institutional trust. Citizens claimed that this proposal could be relevant for young people entering the civil service and other public institutions in order to create a new culture of integrity. The main weakness of this proposal is the difficulty in changing people's attitudes, which can often be resistant to mandatory training.

Policy Proposal 7: Provision of translators in multi-ethnic courts

A different popular recommendation sought to improve access to justice in multiethnic areas by providing a legal basis for regular translators at courts and other justice institutions. Citizens contended that language barriers often result in the exclusion of minority communities and jeopardise equality before the law. As such, translation by professionals should be ensured. This suggestion obliges the Kosovo Judicial Council and Ministry of Justice to ensure translation services are available at all courts in multiethnic municipalities. This recommendation is very much in line with EU human rights standards and could have a direct positive effect on vulnerable communities. The citizens noted that there would be a few issues to consider, in particular, on how this would be funded and the quality control would be ensured. They also presented North Macedonia's system of state-financed translation services in court as a best practice example. Citizens also considered that ensuring translation is not only a legal and practical necessity, but also a symbolic expression of equality and inclusion. The cost would be relatively minor compared to other reforms, but there may be some issues in quality and consistency.

Policy Proposal 8: Institutionalised participation of marginalised groups in policymaking

Another important pillar of the citizens' approach to reform was participation and inclusion. They proposed the creation of formal consultative committees to institutionalise the participation of marginalised groups in policymaking. Citizens noted that while such consultation mechanisms are already in place in Kosovo, they lack clear mandates and thus serve a largely symbolic and powerless function. Consultative committees with a clearly defined mandate, representation of marginalised groups and an effective monitoring mechanism would be an important way to guarantee inclusivity and accountability. Citizens identified the Ministry of Local Government as the key actor to design and implement such consultative structures in cooperation with the Prime Minister's Office, with the municipalities themselves ensuring that the committees work properly. As a positive example, participants cited Finland's experience with citizens' councils, which have given a long-term voice to marginalised groups in legislative processes. Citizens felt that the proposal would be particularly relevant for young people and persons with disabilities who are excluded from formal decision-making processes. The strength of the proposal lies in its inclusive nature, while its weakness lies in the potential for tokenism, in
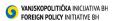
the form of consultative bodies being created, but ultimately ignored. Citizens insisted that such structures would need to be given clear mandates, including reporting obligations.

Policy Proposal 9: Strengthening the Kosovo Judicial Council's monitoring system

The last concern raised about inequality of sentence and selective justice was approached through another proposal for reform, which aimed to improve the monitoring system of the Kosovo Judicial Council in order to ensure equal judgment in court decisions. Citizens explained that even in similar cases, a range of punishments can be awarded, which results in many citizens feeling that the judiciary is corrupt and discriminatory. Better monitoring would ensure that decisions were consistent and fair, while also helping Kosovo meet accession criteria set by the EU. The reform has a strong potential for implementation as it was the responsibility of the Kosovo Judicial Council with support of the Ministry of Justice and oversight bodies. It is directly linked to rule of law benchmarks, while a key challenge to implementation identified was the resistance of the judiciary. The example of Croatia and its monitoring systems as part of EU accession process were presented, including its performance indicators and system of publishing regular reports. The participants noted that transparency in the judiciary was the first step towards regaining trust, and that even incremental change in consistency would result in a major credibility gain.

Policy Proposal 10: Digital platforms for transparent reform monitoring

Citizens finally proposed digital platforms for transparent reporting of progress in reforms. They were dissatisfied with the absence of accessible information on the government's promises and results and wanted a mechanism to monitor reforms in real time and hold institutions accountable for their commitments. This option would see the Prime Minister's Office and Ministry of Information develop digital platforms in consultation with civil society, which would publish regular updates, timelines and data on implementation. Issues of sustainability and credibility were acknowledged, but participants felt that digital transparency could help recalibrate the relationship between citizens and government. Estonia's e-governance platforms, which enable citizens to monitor the progress of laws and track public spending, were raised as an example of a best practice Kosovo could emulate. Beyond a transparency measure, participants also saw digital monitoring as a means of furthering civic education, helping Kosovars to see how reforms are put into practice and where blockages occur.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

After the Kosovo delegation's presentation online in the REACH Transnational Consultation, our team hosted an internal debrief meeting to review the constructive feedback that it received during the event with partner organisations and determine which recommendations Kosovo could revise to reflect the inputs that were discussed during the event. In small groups, the delegations had the opportunity to discuss each country's recommendations, following the conclusion of the presentations. Our delegation was made up of Jon Limaj, Adelina Hasani, Jeta Loshaj, Vesa Shatri, Shend Boshnjaku, and Erion Zejnullahu, all of whom played an active role during the meeting and discussions. Recommendations were reviewed by Shend Boshnjaku with an environmental background to help ensure they are practical and implementable in reality. Adelina Hasani and Jeta Loshaj were also instrumental in providing input and feedback on recommendations that better touch upon EU integration and the rule of law. Vesa Shatri, Erion Zejnullahu and Jon Limaj were also consulted for their civic participation and public policy background, in which they helped better shape the recommendations to include civic participation and engagement elements. The team reached an agreement to improve the recommendations to better represent the feedback gathered from Belgrade, as well as the national consultation in Kosovo.
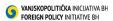
Environmental Recommendations (1, 2, and 5)

When it came to environment, regional partners stressed the need for a focus on building on what is already there in terms of national strategies, rather than producing a new document. With that feedback in mind, the recommendation on environment (Recommendation 1) was amended to more explicitly reflect that Kosovo already has environmental action plans in place which need to be harmonised, and to which measurable implementation steps need to be added. The amendments to Recommendation 2 on sewage networks and access to drinking water were also taken on board, as the regional partners found it too specific, and it was agreed that it remains a good, specific, and achievable recommendation. The wording of Recommendation 5 on incentive schemes for environmentally friendly businesses was also not amended, but was highlighted by the minister as a key part of Kosovo's effort to align with the EU Green Agenda.

Rule of Law Recommendations (4, 6, 7, and 9)

The additional input of the regional partners in the final round was the need for more clarity and institutional ownership in the recommendations for justice reforms. On the other hand, the main additional input related to the inclusivity of these recommendations. As a result of this feedback, it was decided to amend Recommendation 4 to clearly indicate that the harmonisation of the criminal and administrative code should be done by Kosovo's institutions. The main additional input for Recommendations 7 and 8 was on specifying the terms certified interpreters and "marginalised groups," respectively. In response to this input, it was agreed upon that the term certified translators was more appropriate in the context of multi-ethnic courts. Recommendations 6 and 9 were also reaffirmed as important institutional reforms and, therefore, not altered.

EU Integration Recommendations (3 and 10)

Under the EU integration theme, partner organisations widely supported Kosovo's initial recommendations. Recommendation 3, which suggests the development of a national public communication strategy on EU integration, was left unchanged because it had already formulated a key priority with strong resonance in the delegations. Recommendation 10 was expanded slightly, on EPC and CSD's suggestion, to also include evaluation tools in addition to monitoring platforms.

Table 11 Revised list of policy proposals in Kosovo

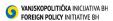| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	A comprehensive plan for environmental infrastructure aligned with EU standards with measurable steps added	Environment
2	Concrete projects for sewage networks and sustainable drinking water access	Environment
3	A national public communication strategy on EU integration	EU integration
4	A harmonised criminal and administrative code	Rule of law
5	Incentive schemes and clarification programs for businesses meeting environmental standards	Environment
6	Mandatory training for public officials on integrity and good governance	Rule of law
7	Provision of certified translators in multi-ethnic courts	Rule of law

Funded by the European Union

Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

8	Institutionalised participation of marginalised groups in policymaking	Rule of law
9	Strengthening the Kosovo Judicial Council's monitoring system	Rule of law
10	Digital platforms for transparent reform monitoring with evaluation tools	EU integration

SERBIA

Towards Trust and Reform: Citizen-Driven Policy Proposals for Strengthening Rule of Law, EU Integration and Environmental Governance in Serbia

Miloš Pavković, European Policy Centre (CEP)

Following the consultative events, citizens, in cooperation with experts, were able to develop twelve concrete policy proposals (four per each thematic area). The policy proposals are aimed at the Government of Serbia, different ministries, the National Assembly of Serbia, and different EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, High Representative, etc.). These twelve proposals represent the result of comprehensive consultation efforts and the voting process. As such, their aim is to guide future policy making or targeted institutions, and influence them in order to be more aligned with citizens' needs and aspirations. The policy proposals are elaborated in the following sections.

Table 12 Policy proposals in Serbia

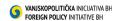| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Adopt the Vetting Law and establish a system of vetting judges and prosecutors	Rule of law
2	Establish judicial police	Rule of law
3	Establish a special prosecution for fighting corruption from the existing Department for the fight against corruption	Rule of law
4	Reform the electoral system to strengthen direct democracy at the local level and participatory democracy at all levels	Rule of law
5	Increase transparency and communication of the EU in Serbia	EU integration
6	Increase transparency in allocation and spending of IPA	EU integration
7	Provide the accession date for Serbia	EU integration
8	Include Western Balkan projection in the next MFF	EU integration
9	Further develop recycling infrastructure	Environment

10	Adopt the Spatial Plan and Development Plan through broader public dialogue	Environment
11	Additional research on critical materials	Environment
12	Introducing a system of rewards and punishments for environmental protection	Environment

Policy Proposal 1: Adopt the Vetting Law and establish a system of vetting judges and prosecutors

One of the key issues within the rule of law thematic area recognised by citizens was the election and work of judges and prosecutors. Citizens discussed how to address the problem of officials who are often seen as politically compromised and lacking the integrity or expertise required for their roles. Building upon this, participants pointed out the lack of trust in the main judicial institutions. To address this issue, participants agreed that some kind of vetting process of judges and prosecutors is necessary. They referred to the Vetting Law[7] adopted in Albania in 2016, which allowed re-evaluation of judges by the Independent Commission. The Commission conducted checks on the moral character, professional performance, and wealth of judges and prosecutors in Albania, with other bodies responsible for monitoring the process and handling appeals.[8] In the citizens's opinion, a similar model should be applied in Serbia with the support and involvement of the EU, whose role should focus on overseeing and supporting the work of an independent commission.

The main responsibility for implementing Proposal 1 would be on the Ministry of Justice of Serbia. However, other bodies need to be involved, such as the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) and the High Judicial Council (HJC) and the National Assembly, as well as EU bodies, in the first place European Commission. They need to operationalise the work of the future independent commission, secure its legal basis, as well as smooth operation and financing. Every member of the judiciary and prosecution would need to pass the vetting process by this commission to stay in the system. The greatest challenge for implementing this policy proposal is the lack of trust in the current government, the ongoing political crisis, and the method for electing members of the independent commission. Existing and documented political pressures in the work of the judiciary make the current institutional set-up unfit to start such a reform and deliver concrete results. In order to overcome these challenges, the EU needs to step up, use the existing tools at its disposal, such as the Commission's annual country report (used for monitoring progress across 35 negotiating chapters), the Rule of Law Report, and the general framework of the accession process, to steer this reform.

Policy Proposal 2: Establish judicial police

Inefficiency of the judiciary and excessive influence of the executive branch prompted participants to recommend establishing the judicial police to mitigate these issues. Experts and citizens agreed that the Romanian example under the chief prosecutor Laura Kovesi is the model Serbia should look at. Judicial police would end the dependence of the judiciary on the Ministry of Interior to execute warrants, thereby increasing efficiency and limiting the influence of the government on prosecution. In Romania, this reform significantly strengthened the independence of prosecutors and enabled more effective action against high-level corruption. In Serbia, a similar model could be tailored to the local institutional framework by ensuring coordination with existing prosecutorial offices while safeguarding against political capture.

---

[7] *Law on the Transitional Re-evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors in the Republic of Albania*, Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, no. 84/16.
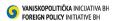
[8] See more on this reform in Albania at: Andrea Mazelliu, "Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of EU Accession Process", *Regional L. Rev.* (2022): 71.

At present, Serbia's judiciary faces structural and political obstacles that hinder the rule of law and undermine public trust. A central challenge is that the Ministry of Interior continues to control the execution of judicial decisions, leaving courts and prosecutors vulnerable to delays, selective enforcement, or political interference. Establishing a judicial police would require not only a robust legal framework but also significant resources, training, and safeguards to prevent politicisation of this new institution. To overcome these challenges, Serbia could build on EU best practices and ensure that recruitment and oversight of the judicial police remain fully independent from the executive. International monitoring and civil society engagement in the design and implementation phases could help guarantee transparency, while phased introduction, starting with pilot projects in higher courts, would mitigate risks and demonstrate early successes to strengthen legitimacy.

Policy Proposal 3: Establish a special prosecution for fighting corruption from the existing Department for the fight against corruption

Widespread corruption, a phenomenon recognised in Serbia by both citizens, policy experts and international institutions, cannot be tackled by existing weak institutions. Therefore, a very important recommendation was that a new institution needs to be established within the existing judicial system – a special prosecution for fighting corruption. Coupled with the judicial police and with prosecutors who passed the vetting process, this prosecution could effectively deal with grand corruption. Comparative practice shows that similar bodies, such as the Special Prosecutor's Office in North Macedonia or Croatia's USKOK (Office for the Suppression of Corruption and Organised Crime), have achieved significant progress in pursuing high-level corruption when backed by strong mandates and political independence. In Serbia, this approach could be adapted by transforming, restructuring and expanding the powers of the existing Department for the Fight against Corruption, while introducing stricter safeguards to ensure prosecutorial autonomy.

Currently, Serbia's anti-corruption framework suffers from fragmentation, insufficient independence, and political interference that prevent meaningful investigations into cases involving powerful actors. Existing departments often lack resources, specialised training, and the authority to act decisively in complex financial investigations. Recently announced and launched wave of fight against corruption failed to build citizen trust despite the high number of arrested[9] of people, among them active politicians. This can be attributed to the persistent political influence, as arrests were announced directly by the President of Serbia[10], leaving citizens with the conclusion that these arrests are part of a political show rather than a step in a genuine anti-corruption effort. Establishing a special prosecution would require legislative reform, transparent selection of vetted prosecutors, and mechanisms for accountability that prevent political misuse of the institution itself. To overcome these challenges, Serbia should ensure that the special prosecution enjoys budgetary independence, has access to advanced investigative tools, and cooperates closely with the future judicial police. EU integration conditionality and monitoring could play a crucial role in shielding the institution from political pressures, while a phased rollout starting with high-profile corruption cases would both test the system and send a strong message of political will.

Policy Proposal 4: Reform the electoral system to strengthen direct democracy at the local level and participatory democracy at all levels

Weak accountability of institutions was a recurring theme, while citizens often referred to the example of the National Assembly, describing it as being under the full control of the executive. The parliament plenary sessions have become very rare, the opposition is silenced by limiting their participation, and the rules of procedure are often violated.

---

[9] Insajder, *MUP: U akciji borbe protiv korupcije od početka godine uhapšeno 657 osoba, pričinjena šteta 5,7 milijardi dinara*, 30. June 2025.
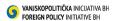[10] RTS, *Vučić: U borbi protiv korupcije neće biti zaštićene ni stranke*, 20. January 2025.

Consequently, facing such constraints, this institution is rendered ineffective in overseeing independent state bodies. Moreover, though parliament is required to debate reports from watchdog agencies, in practice, these discussions are symbolic at best. Participants suggested introducing mandatory, meaningful discussions on such reports, with citizen involvement, to expose hidden systemic failures. The problem of weak institutions must be understood in the broader context of the student protests that have been ongoing since December 2024, sparked by the judiciary's ineffective handling of the Novi Sad Railway Station case. Yet, citizens emphasised that the root of this weakness lies in the state of democracy itself, with the current functioning of the national parliament serving as a clear illustration.

Citizens highlighted the need to engage in reforming the electoral system. Although different proposals surfaced, the consensus was that the existing model favours strong parties, encourages further centralisation of power, and depersonalises the process in the eyes of citizens. Therefore, some kind of mixed electoral system which would include open lists with preferential voting or electing one part of deputies in majority and the other in a proportional electoral system, could satisfy the citizens' needs. In order to address government accountability, during government formation, citizens suggested adopting a clear rulebook for ministerial appointments to reduce political opportunism and ensure basic competency. This reform should be implemented at the national, as well as at the local level. However, direct citizen participation can be better exercised at the local level, focusing on petitions and initiatives, referenda, public consultations, participatory budgeting, and citizens' forums. For most of these existing forms of participation, both a more proactive and educated citizenry and more engaged local governments are necessary.

The key institution identified for implementing Policy Proposal 4 is the National Assembly, as this proposal requires substantial legislative changes. The Government of Serbia, with the leading role of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Governance, would need to engage in reforming the electoral system, keeping in mind that the process should stay open for wider public: citizens, policy experts, and academia. Having an inclusive process where active participation of all interested parties is encouraged and their views and recommendations are taken into account is a necessary prerequisite for a successful electoral reform. However, what is challenging with this proposal is the lack of political will for such reform among the political elite, as political parties enjoy the benefits of the existing electoral system. Reluctance to finalise the Voter Registry reform[11] for more than a year, despite the fact that it was adopted in Serbia's Reform Agenda,[12] speaks volumes about how unpopular reforms of this type are with the government and how reluctant to pursue them politicians generally are. Therefore, in order to overcome this significant challenge, a strong push from citizens (bottom-up) with the support of civil society, academia, experts, and ideally some political parties, can successfully drive this reform.

Policy Proposal 5: Increase transparency and communication of the EU in Serbia

The joint observation of citizens and experts is that the popularity of the EU has been decreasing in Serbia recently, as many public opinion polls confirm, all the while support for Serbia's EU accession is lowest in the region.[13] In order to reverse this negative trend, the EU needs to change its communication strategy in Serbia. The communication was done mainly through the EU Delegation in Serbia (DEU) and three Europe Houses, in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš. Thus, the efforts of DEU need to be complemented with key EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European

---

[11] The government of Serbia created in 2024 the Working Group for Improving Electoral Process, which was presided over by Nemanja Nenadić (Transparency International Serbia) – a civil society representative. However, representatives of ruling parties and opposition could not reach an agreement on how to proceed with the reform of the Voter Register, and in 2025, the opposition left the Working Group.

[12] Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, *Instrument za reformu i rast za Zapadni Balkan: Reformska agenda Republike Srbije*, 2024.
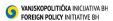
[13] See more at: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID), *Javno mnjenje i Evropska unija: Odnos u doba krize*, Izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja, 2025.

Council, Council, etc.) directly engaging in Serbia. More visits by EU officials with more direct engagement and open communication are necessary for improving the EU's standing in Serbia. However, the focus of high-level visits should be on other branches of government besides the executive, civil society, university, etc. In that regard, citizens and experts asked for more transparency, in the sense that criticism, especially in the rule of law area and EU integration, should be publicly stated, instead of delivering the message behind closed doors, which was the practice so far. This will also convey a positive message to the political leadership in the country and influence it to adopt more positive rhetoric when it comes to the EU.

A key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in overcoming the deeply entrenched scepticism toward the EU among Serbian citizens, which is not only the result of insufficient communication but also shaped by domestic political narratives, regional relations and geopolitics. While greater visibility of EU institutions and officials could improve perceptions, such efforts may be undermined if Serbian political elites continue to use Eurosceptic rhetoric for domestic gain. Additionally, coordinating consistent and tailored communication across multiple EU institutions, while ensuring messages resonate with diverse audiences in Serbia, is complicated given the institutional autonomy and different political interests within key EU institutions. At the same time, the EU would need to abandon its 'business as usual' approach with Serbia and showcase its long-term commitment to integrating Serbia by being ready to take a more critical stance when needed. Finally, all this needs to be implemented by the EU simultaneously keeping the ability to counter misinformation and competing influences, particularly from other international actors active in the region. However, the EU has proven resilient in the past, and with the right approach, a cross-institutional strategy for enlargement and Serbia as well, and a clear goal on integrating Serbia as a fully-fledged member state, this policy proposal can be implemented and yield significant results.

Policy Proposal 6: Increase transparency in allocation and spending of IPA

Both citizens and experts acknowledged the significant economic benefits Serbia has derived from the accession process, particularly through access to EU funding and structural support. However, they also raised concerns regarding the allocation and spending of funds under the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) and the Reform and Growth Facility, pointing to insufficient oversight and a lack of transparency in reporting mechanisms. Participants highlighted that opaque processes create room for inefficiency and potential misuse of funds, ultimately undermining the intended developmental impact. They stressed that without clear, accessible, and timely information on how funds are distributed and used, citizens remain sceptical of whether the EU's financial assistance is truly serving the public interest.

A key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in aligning EU transparency efforts with domestic governance practices, which often lack accountability and are prone to political influence. Even if the EU communicates more openly about its allocations, public trust may not significantly improve unless Serbian authorities and local beneficiaries demonstrate the same level of openness in reporting expenditures. Ensuring consistency across all levels, including EU institutions, national government, and local implementers, will require stronger monitoring mechanisms, independent oversight, and active involvement of civil society in tracking IPA funds. Without these safeguards, the risk of political misuse or mismanagement could continue to erode both the perceived and actual benefits of EU financial support in Serbia. Adoption of the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and new instrument, Global Europe, intended to replace the existing IPA, represents a great opportunity to revise it along the lines of Policy Proposal 6.

Policy Proposal 7: Provide the accession date for Serbia

People in Serbia are widely disappointed and disillusioned with the EU accession process. Citizens see it as an everlasting negotiation with too many political conditions, leading a relative majority of people with a conclusion that Serbia
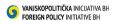
might never join the EU.[14] Therefore, the most effective step to counter stereotypes and disprove Eurosceptics would be for the EU to commit to a concrete accession date for Serbia - naturally tied to the country's progress in implementing reforms. Since the European Commission has already endorsed Montenegro and Albania's aspirations to join the EU by the end of the current mandate (i.e., by 2029), providing a year for Serbia would serve as a strong incentive for reforms, or at least help identify where accountability lies if the opportunity is missed.

In that sense, the European Commission may propose, and the European Council can endorse in its conclusion, 2030 as the year designated for Serbia to join the EU. Of course, the actual accession will depend on delivering necessary reforms across all six clusters and 35 chapters of accession negotiations, and the accession date can be postponed in the case of stagnation or backsliding. However, in case Serbia's accession is delayed, which is probable given the current stagnating trend, it will be clear that accountability lies with the Serbian government. A clear accession date would give a tangible sense of direction to both citizens and institutions, create a stronger reform momentum, and enhance accountability by making it evident whether delays stem from EU hesitation or domestic inaction. If framed carefully, it could reinvigorate Serbia's accession process and improve the EU's image as a credible and reliable partner.

The main challenge of this proposal lies in the fact that many EU member states remain divided on further enlargement and reluctant to commit to fixed dates, especially in light of Serbia's slow reform record and foreign policy misalignments. Setting a date without credible reform progress could undermine the EU's conditionality principle and expose Brussels to accusations of double standards, while the risk of Serbia missing the deadline could reinforce, rather than dispel, Euroscepticism.

Policy Proposal 8: Include Western Balkan projection in the next MFF

As the current Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) nears its end and negotiations on the next EU budget (2028–2034) are already underway, the upcoming MFF should explicitly reflect the EU's commitment to enlargement. In practical terms, this means earmarking additional funds for the prospective integration of new member states from the Western Balkans. Such a step would send a strong signal that the EU is serious about enlargement, while also providing tangible incentives for governments in the region to accelerate reforms and finalise accession negotiations. The European Commission is expected to come up with such a proposal, while cooperation with other EU institutions (European Parliament, European Council, EU Council), including in drafting and adopting the MFF, is necessary.

The main challenge in implementing this proposal is political: several member states remain cautious about enlargement, and convincing them to commit budgetary resources for potential new members before accession is finalised could prove difficult. Budget negotiations are already highly contentious, and allocating funds for countries not yet in the Union risks pushback from net contributors who fear overstretching EU finances. Furthermore, if enlargement stalls or is delayed, pre-allocated resources might appear wasted, potentially fuelling further scepticism inside the EU. Nevertheless, the proposal carries significant strengths. It would anchor enlargement within the EU's financial planning, making the process more credible and predictable for candidate countries. By showing foresight and readiness to integrate Western Balkan states, the EU would not only increase its leverage over reform processes but also counter competing external influences in the region. In this way, projecting Western Balkans membership within the next MFF could strengthen both the EU's strategic credibility and the reform momentum in the region. Finally, early calculations show that the Western Balkan

---

[14] According to the latest public opinion poll, 47% of Serbia's population believes that accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU will never come to an end. See more at: Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID), *Javno mnjenje i Evropska unija: Odnos u doba krize*, Izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja, 2025.
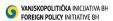
enlargement would cost ordinary EU citizens a cup of coffee on an annual basis. [15] Thus, this should not represent an enormous financial burden to the EU budget, especially compared to additional funds dedicated to Ukraine. With the strong political will for prioritising engagement, the Western Balkan projection in MFF could be easily implemented.

Policy Proposal 9: Further develop recycling infrastructure

Additional investments and systemic support are needed to improve recycling infrastructure, including expanding capacity, supporting local initiatives, and education. Serbia's recycling system remains underdeveloped, with limited facilities, low collection rates, and insufficient integration of local initiatives into a national framework. Additional investments and systemic support are therefore urgently needed to improve recycling infrastructure. This includes expanding the capacity of existing facilities, building new recycling plants, and developing an efficient waste separation system at the municipal level. Main institutions targeted by this policy proposal are the Ministry of Environmental Protection and local self-government units (i.e. towns and municipalities). At the same time, supporting grassroots initiatives and civil society organisations working in the field of waste management is crucial, as they often fill gaps left by the state. Education and awareness-raising campaigns should also be prioritised, given that public knowledge about recycling practices is low and citizen participation remains inconsistent. Together, these measures would not only help Serbia meet EU environmental standards but also reduce pollution, improve public health, and create new economic opportunities in the green sector.

The key challenge for implementing this proposal lies in Serbia's weak institutional framework and limited political prioritisation of environmental issues, which often translates into insufficient budget allocations and fragmented policies. Moreover, corruption and lack of transparency in public procurement may undermine large-scale infrastructure investments, while entrenched habits and low public awareness hinder citizen participation. However, the proposal also has important strengths. It aligns closely with the EU Green Agenda priorities, meaning that substantial funding and technical assistance would be available to support reforms if Serbia demonstrated political will. Improving recycling infrastructure would also yield visible, tangible results for citizens in their daily lives—cleaner cities, healthier environments, and potential job creation in waste management and the circular economy. If implemented effectively, the proposal could strengthen both Serbia's environmental performance and public trust in the EU accession process.

Policy Proposal 10: Adopt the Spatial Plan and Development Plan through broader public dialogue

Participants emphasised the importance of adopting key strategic documents, such as the Spatial Plan and the Development Plan of the Republic of Serbia, through an inclusive process that ensures the active involvement of experts, local communities, and civil society. These documents are critical for guiding the country's long-term development, shaping infrastructure priorities, urban planning, environmental protection, and regional growth. To ensure legitimacy and effectiveness, their adoption must not remain a top-down exercise but should actively involve experts, local governments, civil society organisations, and local communities who are directly affected by spatial and development policies. A broad dialogue, organised by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, would allow for the integration of diverse perspectives, reduce the risk of politically motivated decision-making, and increase public trust in state institutions. Such inclusiveness would also help align Serbia's long-term planning with EU standards and principles of participatory governance.

The main challenges in implementing this proposal stem from Serbia's traditionally centralised decision-making culture, where strategic planning often occurs behind closed doors with limited public consultation. However, these centralised practices have been taken to a whole new level, especially in the cases where party interests have a potentially

---

[15] See more at: Strahinja Subotić and Ana Milinković, *On financial and economic implications of the Staged accession model on the EU budget, and on acceding countries' budgets*, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2023.
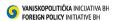
direct benefit (which is more often than not the case). Political elites may resist broader participation, viewing it as a constraint on their control over development priorities, while civil society and local communities often lack the institutional mechanisms to effectively influence the process. Ensuring meaningful dialogue requires both political will and institutional capacity to manage consultations in a transparent and inclusive manner. Thus, the will has to come through bottom-up pressure. Nonetheless, the proposal has significant strengths. A participatory approach would improve the quality and sustainability of the Spatial and Development Plans by incorporating local knowledge and expertise, while also reducing the risk of future conflicts around contested infrastructure or environmental projects. Moreover, it would signal Serbia's commitment to good governance and EU accession values, strengthening both domestic legitimacy and international credibility.

Policy Proposal 11: Additional research on critical materials

Citizens and experts recognised that lithium mining and mining in general are one of important issues, and they jointly agreed on one key policy recommendation in this area. Since there is a lot of confusing information, no clear picture of the potential consequences of mining, the recommendation to the government of Serbia is that additional research on critical materials and their potential exploitation is required before permissions are granted. They therefore recommended that the Government of Serbia commission additional, independent, and comprehensive research on critical materials and their potential exploitation before any new mining permissions are granted. Such research should not only examine economic benefits but also assess environmental sustainability, health risks, and the long-term impact on local communities. This research would need to go through a broad dialogue of multiple institutions, such as academic (universities, faculties, institutes), expert (agencies, directorates, etc) and civic (CSOs, think tanks, etc.). Followed by open public, online and televised debates in order to give citizens oversight. Making findings publicly available would be essential to ensuring transparency and building trust among citizens.

The main challenge for implementing this proposal lies in the strong political and economic interests tied to mining projects, which may discourage authorities from commissioning truly independent research or from acting upon its results if they prove unfavourable. There is also a risk that research could be instrumentalised to justify pre-determined outcomes rather than to inform evidence-based decision-making. Furthermore, additional research on the potential negative effects of lithium mining can be costly, as the main argument in favour of mining is that it will bring huge economic opportunities for Serbia and the automobile industry. At the same time, the proposal has notable strengths. It directly responds to public demands for greater transparency and accountability, and it could help depoliticise the debate by grounding it in facts and scientific expertise. Independent research would also align Serbia with EU standards on environmental protection and sustainable resource management, while showing citizens that their concerns are taken seriously. If implemented credibly, this approach could reduce tensions, prevent future conflicts, and pave the way for more balanced and informed policymaking in the field of critical materials.

Policy Proposal 12: Introducing a system of rewards and punishments for environmental protection

Participants highlighted that Serbia's environmental performance remains below EU standards, with persistent problems such as poor air quality, low energy efficiency, and underdeveloped recycling systems. This recommendation is closely related to energy efficiency and the targets of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, and overall environmental protection and recycling efforts. Namely, in order to stimulate all these activities, the government should introduce tax incentives for businesses and individuals, and strict fines for those who are negligent towards the environment. Such a system would not only encourage positive behaviour but also create a level playing field where environmentally responsible actors are rewarded rather than disadvantaged. Over time, it could help transform the culture of environmental governance in Serbia by linking compliance directly to financial consequences and benefits.
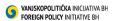
The key challenge in implementing this proposal lies in Serbia's weak enforcement capacity and the lack of institutional independence in environmental oversight. Without robust monitoring mechanisms and transparent criteria, fines could be selectively applied, while tax incentives risk being captured by politically connected businesses rather than driving genuine green investments. Public resistance may also arise if fines are introduced without first ensuring affordable alternatives for households and small businesses. On the other hand, the proposal has significant strengths. It directly ties environmental protection to concrete economic incentives, which can be a powerful motivator for both citizens and companies. Moreover, it is fully aligned with EU climate and energy policies, meaning that Serbia could access EU funding and technical support for implementation. If applied consistently and fairly, the system could deliver visible improvements in air quality, waste management, and energy use, while also strengthening Serbia's credibility in the EU accession process.

Lessons learned from the transnational event

The transnational event proved very useful for the Serbian delegation. Six rounds of exchanges resulted in valuable comments, proposals and input collected and opened for discussion. Following internal consultations within the Serbian delegation, substantial changes to the initial list of policy proposals have been made. Revisions varied from terminological adjustments, merging some of the proposals, and more substantial changes to the recommendations themselves and to which institutions they are aimed at. The final count after the revision is ten policy proposals (see Table 13), four in the rule of law area, three in the EU integration, and three in the environment policy areas.

Rule of law revisions

Discussions on the rule of law sparked lively debate on key issues in Serbia, with some notable proposals integrated in the final list of recommendations. When it comes to recommendation 1, on adopting the vetting law, the suggestion that it should be aimed at the National Assembly primarily was accepted and implemented. With recommendation 2, terminological revision has been made; instead of "judicial", the aim is to establish "prosecutorial" police, a separate police unit under the management of the prosecution, in order to strengthen the prosecution's independence from the executive. Furthermore, while the recommendation on special prosecution for fighting corruption was met with positive comments, no changes were made to this particular proposal. Finally, reform of the electoral system was discussed at length, with the agreement that any changes to the electoral system need to be preceded by the establishment of electoral integrity in the sense of free and fair elections.

EU integration revisions

The transnational event provided a unique opportunity for discussing EU enlargement between member states and candidate countries. It proved as a fruitful platform for deliberation. As a result, recommendations on increasing overall transparency and communication of the EU in Serbia and transparency of allocation and spending of IPA and New Growth Plan funds were merged into one single policy proposal. When it comes to the accession date, comments were mixed, pointing out that there have been promised dates in the past which proved futile. However, the delegation decided to stick with the recommendation as it strongly believed and argued that it can indeed help Serbia's EU integration. Another remark on this recommendation that it should be addressed both to the EU and the Serbian government was approved. Finally, the proposal on MFF and inclusion of the whole WB in the calculation as future members was welcomed by other participants, thus remaining valid and unchanged.

Environment

Environmental debates revealed key shortcomings of environmental governance in Serbia, with several notable revisions of previously developed policy proposals. When it comes to the recommendation on further developing recycling
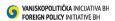
infrastructure, two major points of discussion arise. First, the existing infrastructure is seriously underdeveloped; thus, the term "further" makes no sense in this context. Second, recycling is just one part of the wider waste-management area, which is, in general, quite problematic. Thus, the proposal, which was adopted by the delegation, was that a general improvement of the waste-management infrastructure needs to be carried out. Furthermore, the recommendations on the adoption of the spatial and development plans are closely related to conducting additional research on critical raw materials. Therefore, the decision was made to merge these two recommendations, with the addition that it should be addressed, along with others, to the Agency for Spatial and Urban Planning with the task of producing cost/benefit and cost/effectiveness analyses.

Additional rounds of deliberation on national policy proposals proved in the Serbian case to be as much needed and useful. With wider regional and European perspectives included, as well as with more experts involved, the original list of 12 recommendations was amended to improve both the quality and efficiency of the policy proposals. More importantly, citizens engaged in yet another exercise of exchange of views and constructively and collaboratively working with their peers on concrete policy issues and recommendations. This kind of consultative process is invaluable for strengthening democratic culture and process, as well as a sense of mutual understanding and trust between citizens of different countries.

Table 13 Revised list of policy proposals in Serbia

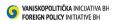| #	Policy Proposal	Policy Area
1	Adopt the Vetting Law and establish a system of vetting judges and prosecutors	Rule of law
2	Establish prosecutorial police	Rule of law
3	Establish a special prosecution for fighting corruption from the existing Department for the fight against corruption	Rule of law
4	Reform the electoral system to strengthen direct democracy at the local level and participatory democracy at all levels, including electoral integrity (free & fair elections)	Rule of law
5	Increase transparency and communication of the EU in Serbia including the allocation and spending of IPA and New Growth Plan funds	EU integration
6	Provide the accession date for Serbia	EU integration
7	Include Western Balkan projection in the next MFF	EU integration
8	Improve waste-management infrastructure	Environment
9	Adopt the Spatial Plan and Development Plan through broader public dialogue, which includes conducting additional research on critical raw materials	Environment
10	Introducing a system of rewards and punishments for environmental protection	Environment

AN OVERALL OUTLOOK OF REACH – COMMON PATTERNS AND KEY DIFFERENCES

As already mentioned previously, the REACH project can be seen as a direct democracy exercise on a large scale. Having organised a consultative process that included more than 400 citizens in 16 cities across seven countries offered a unique opportunity to obtain relevant findings. At the same time, due to the fact that every consultative event was implemented using the same methodology, the findings and conclusions were cross-country comparable. The REACH project's transnational consultations revealed a strong convergence of citizen perspectives across diverse national contexts. Despite varying political systems, EU status (member states and EU candidates), and institutional capacities, participants in all seven participating countries demonstrated a shared understanding of the deep interconnection between democracy, the rule of law, EU integration, and environmental sustainability. Citizens from both EU Member States and Western Balkan aspirants consistently viewed these three domains not as separate policy areas, but as mutually reinforcing pillars of a just and functional society.

COMMON PATTERNS MAPPED

Across all participating countries, citizens consistently emphasised that the **rule of law stands as the cornerstone** upon which all other progress must rest. No matter the national context, people saw corruption, political interference in the judiciary, and opaque decision-making as the main obstacles to trust and fairness. From France to Greece and across the Western Balkans, participants called for judicial reform, merit-based appointments, and legal services that are not only functional but accessible to everyone. Their message was clear: accountability should not be left to institutions alone. For instance, the tragic accident at the Novi Sad railway station was the main driver for citizens in Serbia to demand accountability, stronger institutions, and fight against corruption. Citizens demanded new forms of independent monitoring – public registers of officials' assets, civic oversight councils, and transparent vetting systems – demonstrating a deep and genuine appetite for participatory oversight rather than passive observation.

This desire for accountability was inseparable from a broader **expectation of openness and communication from those in power**. Participants across Europe repeatedly criticised the lack of clarity, feedback and opportunity to participate in decision-making processes effectively. Many felt excluded because they were rarely informed or invited to take part in shaping policies, or they did not believe their voices would actually be heard. Proposals such as real-time online platforms to track EU funds in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, or efforts to humanise communication about the EU in Croatia, France, and Serbia, echoed a shared conviction: governments must "speak human." Citizens want policies explained in plain language, through direct dialogue and tangible examples that demonstrate how decisions improve everyday life.

Amid these calls for transparency, **education emerged as a central theme and the most sustainable route to democratic renewal**. Across all national consultations, citizens linked the future of democracy to how younger generations are educated about rights, institutions, and the environment. From proposals to integrate lessons on the rule of law and climate change in Bulgaria and Croatia to efforts in France and Bosnia and Herzegovina to strengthen awareness of the EU and its values, the message was unified. Education, they argued, is the antidote to disinformation, apathy, and environmental neglect. Citizens recognised that a resilient democracy cannot be built overnight – it must be nurtured through informed, critical, and responsible citizenship, starting in schools and continuing throughout life.

Environmental awareness, too, was a **cross-cutting concern**, tied closely to governance and fairness. Citizens did not see the environment as an isolated technical issue, but as a reflection of how well institutions function and whether justice is truly applied. They drew connections between pollution, mismanagement, and corruption, insisting that environmental responsibility must begin with transparency and public participation. Whether through local eco-councils in Bulgaria, reforms to waste management systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, or incentives for clean
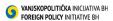
energy and sustainable transport in France, citizens made clear that environmental progress is both a moral and political test of credibility. When it comes to environmental issues, there were more commonalities between Balkan countries, despite some of them are EU member states. For instance, multiple policy proposals in the Balkans targeted resolving concrete environmental projects, such as building sewage networks and sustainable water access (Kosovo), reducing firewood use (Bulgaria), or modernising and improving waste-management infrastructure (Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina). This confirms shared problems in the region and the need for EU support in this area.

Above all, the consultations revealed that **citizens no longer view democracy as something that happens only at the ballot box**. Across all seven countries, participants demanded opportunities for ongoing, meaningful participation – spaces where their voices could shape policies and monitor outcomes. They called for citizens' conventions, standing consultation mechanisms, and systematic follow-ups that ensure public input does not vanish after the meeting ends. This growing impatience with symbolic engagement underscores one of the REACH project's central findings: when citizens are genuinely included, they do not merely express opinions, they co-create informed, practical, and consensus-driven solutions that strengthen democracy itself.

KEY DIFFERENCES AMONG THE COUNTRIES AND REGIONS

The divide between EU member states and those still on the path to accession inevitably shaped the tone and priorities of the consultations. In countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, European integration was seen as a promise of transformation. A pathway to cleaner governance, higher institutional standards, and environmental progress. Citizens in these contexts viewed the EU not just as a political goal, but as a framework for hope: a system that could help break old patterns of corruption, inefficiency, and isolation. Meanwhile, in member states such as Bulgaria, Croatia, France, and Greece, the conversation turned inward. Citizens there did not question the EU's value but rather its performance. They called for a more transparent, democratic, and socially just Union, one that truly listens to its people and honours the principles it promotes abroad. Though their starting points differed, both groups expressed the same aspiration: a Europe that is responsive, fair, and accountable.

This **contrast was also visible in how citizens approached the rule of law**. In the Western Balkans, discussions revolved around building institutions that could stand independently of political influence. Participants in Serbia placed particular emphasis on judicial vetting and fighting corruption, while their Bosnian and Kosovar counterparts voiced similar frustrations about the capture of public institutions by narrow interests. In EU member states, where the formal structures of democracy already exist, the emphasis shifted toward media literacy, fighting disinformation and general civic participation and education in this area (Greece and Croatia). Bulgarian citizens, for example, focused on expanding access to constitutional justice and defending media freedom. Across all these settings, a common frustration surfaced – the vulnerability of democracy even within the EU, and that the credibility of democratic systems depends on informed and active citizenry. A notable difference between EU members and WB candidates in the rule of law area remained obvious in the case of institutions, as the transformative process towards strong and independent institutions has not been finished yet in the eyes of the REACH consultations participants.

The way citizens conceived participation also **reflected different stages of democratic maturity**. In newer democracies, civic engagement was often understood as a corrective tool – a way to compensate for exclusion and mistrust in formal politics. In more established democracies, participation was seen as a means of renewal, a way to reinvigorate a system that feels increasingly distant from the public. Croatian and French citizens, for instance, explored innovative models of participation such as mandatory voting, transnational electoral lists (for European Parliament elections), and permanent citizens' conventions. Their debates echoed a broader European concern: how to make democracy feel alive again. In contrast, citizens in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo concentrated on the basics, such as free and fair
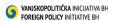
elections, reforming the electoral system, transparency, inclusion, and the restoration of trust between institutions and society. Despite their different democratic experiences, all groups shared the conviction that participation must be continuous, not confined to election days.

Environmental concerns revealed similar patterns of divergence grounded in local realities, such as a lack of drinking water, polluted air, or mining projects, yet they ultimately converged on shared ambitions of a clean environment and citizens' inclusion in shaping environmental policies. In heavily industrial or polluted areas such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the focus fell on the urgent need for monitoring and strict enforcement. Citizens demanded visible action against polluters and greater transparency in environmental management in Serbia. Meanwhile, in EU member states, the conversation turned to behavioural change and community-based sustainability. Croatian citizens proposed reward systems for reducing waste and using sustainable packaging, while French participants linked environmental reform to transport, housing, and social equity. Moreover, environmental education was a prominent recommendation in Bulgaria, while in Croatia, food sovereignty was seen as an important environmental measure. Despite these variations, the underlying message was remarkably consistent: environmental protection is not an isolated policy goal but a test of justice, responsibility, and institutional integrity. In every context, citizens recognised that a cleaner environment begins with clean governance, and that both depend on the same democratic principles of transparency, accountability, and participation.

***

In conclusion, the REACH project has demonstrated that, despite the political, economic, and institutional differences among participating countries, **citizens across the EU and the Western Balkans share a strikingly unified vision of what democracy should look like in practice**. Their voices, gathered through a deliberative process grounded in equal participation, revealed that the rule of law, transparency, education, and environmental responsibility are seen not as isolated priorities, but as interdependent foundations of a fair and sustainable society. What distinguishes the participating countries is not the substance of citizens' aspirations, but the stage at which they find themselves on the path toward realising them – some striving to build the institutions that others are seeking to reform or renew. Yet across all borders, the message was the same: democracy must be lived, not merely promised. Citizens are ready to participate, to hold institutions accountable, and to co-create the policies that shape their future. The challenge now lies in ensuring that decision-makers listen, respond, and transform this collective engagement into lasting democratic progress.
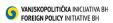
CONCLUSION

The REACH initiative has shown that citizens across Europe and the Western Balkans are not only willing but eager to participate in shaping the future of their societies. Far from being passive observers, participants demonstrated a high level of knowledge, commitment, and creativity in deliberating on issues that define the continent's democratic and developmental trajectory. Their readiness to engage in structured consultations confirms that when citizens are given the opportunity, resources, and respect to be part of the policy process, they rise to the occasion with insight and responsibility.

This large-scale exercise in **direct democracy** reaffirmed that democratic renewal in Europe must come from the bottom up. The citizens who took part in local, national, and transnational consultations did not only identify problems – they co-created realistic policy solutions grounded in lived experience. Their proposals reflected a sophisticated understanding of the interdependence between **the rule of law, environmental protection, and EU integration**, showing that democracy cannot thrive without transparency, justice, and sustainability. The process itself, anchored in dialogue, inclusion, and evidence-based reasoning, embodied the very principles of deliberative democracy that Europe needs to reinvigorate.

Across all participating countries, whether EU member states or candidates, remarkable **similarities** emerged. Citizens consistently called for more transparent institutions, depoliticised public administration, protection of media freedom, and accessible civic education. They expressed frustration with political elites who often monopolise the reform agenda, and they demanded to be recognised as legitimate partners in governance. This convergence of views across borders demonstrates a shared European democratic culture and a collective desire for accountable leadership. It also confirms that citizens in the Western Balkans and the EU alike are motivated by the same aspirations: justice, democracy, and a liveable environment for future generations.

In the context of **EU enlargement**, REACH has been an invaluable exercise. It bridged the gap between citizens of member and candidate countries, showing that the transformative power of the enlargement process extends beyond institutions – it strengthens democratic participation itself. By integrating citizen voices into policy debates on the rule of law and environmental governance, the project provided a model for how enlargement can be made more inclusive, participatory, and credible. It reminded both the EU and national governments that accession is not merely a bureaucratic checklist, but a democratic journey rooted in civic empowerment and shared values.

Ultimately, the REACH consultations stand as a call to action for policymakers, institutions, and civil society alike to preserve and expand the democratic space in Europe. In an era when disinformation, apathy, and authoritarian tendencies threaten democratic life, the REACH experience proves that citizens are ready to defend and renew democracy if they are trusted and included. Europe's future will depend not only on the strength of its institutions but on the resilience of its citizens. Their voices, heard through REACH, must now become a permanent part of the European policymaking process. Only by sustaining this dialogue can Europe remain a continent of free, informed, and engaged citizens capable of shaping a fairer, greener, and more democratic Union for all.
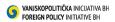
Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)

ANNEX

Table of all citizen consultations organised as part of the REACH project

#	City	State	Type of consultation	Date
1	Belgrade	Serbia	Local	3 October 2024
2	Novi Sad	Serbia	Local	15 November 2024
3	Niš	Serbia	Local	21 November 2024
4	Plovdiv	Bulgaria	Local	22 October 2024
5	Sofia	Bulgaria	Local	6 March 2025
6	Athens	Greece	Local	25 November 2025
7	Thessaloniki	Greece	Local	15 February 2025
8	Banjaluka	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Local	17 December 2024
9	Mostar	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Local	20 February 2025
10	Tuzla	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Local	17 March 2025
11	Pristina	Kosovo	Local	30 January 2025
12	Gjakove/Đakovica	Kosovo	Local	20 February 2025
13	Dijon	France	Local	24 January 2025
14	Paris	France	Local	3 March 2025
15	Pazin	Croatia	Local	22 February 2025
16	Rijeka	Croatia	Local	8 February 2025
17	Belgrade	Serbia	National	9 April 2025
18	Sofia	Bulgaria	National	16 May 2025
19	Athens	Greece	National	5 May 2025
20	Vogošća	Bosnia and Herzegovina	National	8 August 2025
21	Pristina	Kosovo	National	22 May 2025
22	Paris	France	National	26 May 2025
23	Zagreb	Croatia	National	6 June 2025
24	Belgrade	Serbia	Transnational event	18 September 2025

LIST OF REFERENCES

Centar za slobodne izbore i demokratiju (CeSID), *Javno mnjenje i Evropska unija: Odnos u doba krize*, Izveštaj iz istraživanja javnog mnjenja, 2025.

Couteau, Benjamin, *From citizen consultations to bold transformations: French views on a stronger, fairer and more democratic European Union*, Institut Jacques Delors, September 2025

Ćutahija, Haris, *Bridging Divides, Building Trust: Citizen Vision for a European Future in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Foreign Policy Initiative BiH (FPI BiH), 2025.

European Policy Centre (CEP), *Reinventing Engagement through Affirmative Citizen Consultations (REACH)*, 2024.

Giakoumopoulou, Ioanna, *Greece's Youth as a Changemakers*, South-East Europe Programme of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), September 2025.

Insajder, *MUP: U akciji borbe protiv korupcije od početka godine uhapšeno 657 osoba, pričinjena šteta 5,7 milijardi dinara*, 30. June 2025.

Limaj, Jon, *Citizens Shaping Kosovo's Future: Rule of Law, EU Integration and Environment,* Kosovo Center for Security Studies *KCSS), August 2025;

Law on the Transitional Re-evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors in the Republic of Albania, Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, no. 84/16.

Mazelliu, Andrea, "*Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of EU Accession Process*", *Regional L. Rev.* (2022): 71.

Ministarstvo za evropske integracije, *Instrument za reformu i rast za Zapadni Balkan: Reformska agenda Republike Srbije*, 2024.

Mineva, Daniela & Nikolov, Tsvetomir, *Rule of Law, Environment and EU Integration as a Central Priorities for Bulgarian Citizens*, Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD), 2025;

Pavković, Miloš, *Towards Trust and Reform: Citizen-Driven Policy Proposals for Strengthening Rule of Law, EU Integration and Environmental Governance in Serbia*, European Policy Centre (CEP), September 2025;

RTS, *Vučić: U borbi protiv korupcije neće biti zaštićene ni stranke*, 20. January 2025.

Subotić, Strahinja and Milinković, Ana, *On financial and economic implications of the Staged accession model on the EU budget, and on acceding countries' budgets*, European Policy Centre (CEP), 2023.
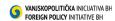
About European Policy Centre - CEP is a non-governmental, non-profit, independent think tank, based in Belgrade. It was founded by a group of professionals in the areas of EU law, EU affairs, economics and public administration reform, with a shared vision of changing the policy making environment in Serbia for the better – by rendering it more evidence based, more open and inclusive and more substantially EU accession driven. Profound understanding of EU policies and the accession process, the workings of the Serbian administration, as well as strong social capital combine to create a think-tank capable of not only producing high quality research products but also penetrating the decision-making arena to create tangible impact. Today, CEP organises its work into four programme areas:

1) Good Governance
2) Internal Market and Competitiveness
3) Regional Policy, Energy and Environment
4) Our Europe

For more information, please visit: www.cep.org.rs.