

EUROPE REIMAGINED: A Liberal Road to Enlargement



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EUROPEAN LIBERAL YOUTH
LYMEF

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Project 1	
A Circular Union Built Using Liberal Tools:	
Open Market Access for Circular Products	7
Project 2	
Matchmaking In Migration: Bridging Talent, Building Europe: A smart Integration Framework for EU Candidate Countries	15
Project 3	
NextGen Western Balkans: Using EU Economic Instruments to Drive Enlargement and Inclusive Growth for Countries in the Western Balkans	23
Project 4	
STEAM EuroQuest via Interrail: A Staged Youth Mobility and Cultural Integration Model for Democratic Enlargement	29
Project 5	
EU 2.0: Streamlining Institutions for a Stronger, Expanded Europe	37
About European Liberal Forum (ELF)	44

Introduction

Following the previous editions in 2022, 2023 and 2024, the **European Liberal Forum, (ELF)** with support from the **European Liberal Youth (LYMEC)** and our Bosnian partner, the **Boris Divkovic Foundation (BDF)** organised the 'Liberal Hack Youth Event 2025', which focuses on **European Union (EU) enlargement**. A hackathon is an event with a capped time frame and typically lasts between 24 and 48 h, in which teams of professionals intensively cooperate on innovative projects. In the case of our hackathon in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was held in June 2025, our participants were allotted 24 h to develop proposals. Here, politically active young individuals—students, activists and young professionals—gathered, committed to developing concrete liberal policies that benefit the European Union as a whole.

The Liberal Hack 2025 centres on **reimagining the EU's enlargement process** in a manner that is liberal, strategic and future-oriented. Europe is navigating a new wave of enlargement amid complex challenges such as geopolitical tension, democratic backsliding, climate change and evolving migration patterns. At the same time, the EU is engaging with an extended group of candidate countries, each with its ambitions, capacities and priorities. These developments call for a renewed policy approach that ensures that the enlargement process remains credible, effective and equipped to address the realities of today's European landscape.

Teams of three tackled five key focus areas within the broad topic of EU enlargement: Climate Change; Migration; Economy and Budget; EU Institutions; and Culture and Education. These areas were selected due to their importance in ensuring a successful, inclusive and sustainable enlargement process that aligns with liberal values and principles.

The hackathon consisted of expert sessions and hacking time. During

the expert sessions, the participants gained insights into the technicalities of the EU enlargement process applied to their respective topics. They also underwent a workshop on pitching their project. Afterwards, the five groups presented their work to a jury composed of Willemijn Krans, Andrea Ugrinoska and Maartje Schulz. The groups presented innovative solutions to challenges related to EU enlargement and succeeded in designing actionable, coherent, innovative and liberal policies for tackling their selected challenges.

The subsequent pages outline the five projects and policy proposals proffered by the groups.

Project 1

A Circular Union Built Using Liberal Tools

A Circular Union Built Using Liberal Tools: Open Market Access for Circular Products

Group Members:

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Background

The European Commission adopted the new **Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP)** in March 2020, which is one of the major building blocks of the European Green Deal—Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth. Circular products, including recycled, refurbished and sustainably designed goods, typically face higher trade barriers, inconsistent standards and limited consumer awareness. As the climate crisis intensifies, the circular economy offers emission reduction potentials and adaptive benefits such as resource efficiency and localised production. To address this gap, the EU should amend the CEAP to explicitly facilitate open market access for circular products, thus embodying a strategic step for climate-smart EU enlargement.

This initiative will affect EU Member States, candidate countries and key economic actors such as small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in recycling, manufacturing and clean tech. Consumers will gain access to more sustainable products, while governments will need to align regulatory frameworks. Civil society, start-ups and academic institutions will support innovation and local implementation.

Scope

By 2050, humanity will consume resources fit for three planets despite having only one. Ninety percent of biodiversity loss is directly linked to resource extraction and processing. Today, however, only 11.8% of materials in the EU economy are circular, and nearly nine out of ten products are still not part of a circular system.

This proposal addresses the integration of circular economy practices into the EU enlargement process by promoting open market access for circular products from candidate countries. This action lies at the intersection among climate action, economic integration and regulatory alignment, which renders the circular transition open not only to current EU Member States but also to EU candidates. Transitioning to a circular economy is essential for decreasing waste, mitigating climate change, achieving energy savings and curbing greenhouse gas emissions. Candidate countries typically lack the scale, market incentive and

infrastructure to make circular production viable. By facilitating access to recycled and refurbished products in the EU single market, the EU can empower local producers, support SMEs and foster innovation that aligns with climate goals.

This proposal creates a liberal EU mechanism for the active promotion of material recycling in candidate countries, thus enabling them to join the European Green Deal at an early stage. It strengthens environmental governance and regional cohesion, offers a win-win strategy for the EU and its neighbours and demonstrates enlargement as a tool for long-term sustainability.

Stakeholder Engagement

High-power stakeholders, including the European Commission, European Council, European Parliament and governments of candidate countries, will be instrumental in the formulation of legislative frameworks, trade mechanisms and financing channels that will enable open market access for circular products from candidate countries.





High-interest stakeholders—comprising SMEs (e.g. circular economy start-ups and industry associations in EU Member States and candidate countries) and NGOs (e.g. the European Environmental Bureau and Zero Waste Europe)—are closely connected to the subject matter and are likely to actively engage in the proposed activities.

The engagement process will be conducted through a combination of informative, consultative and collaborative participation.

Consultative engagement will involve structured regional dialogues, surveys and feedback channels to construct incentive structures and implementation tools. In parallel, collaborative participation will include the co-creation of pilot activities, the joint development of circular infrastructure and active involvement in peer-learning settings through twinning partnerships and regulatory sandboxes.

Main Provisions

A large circular market stimulates innovation and decreases costs for consumers and producers, thereby strengthening the entire EU value chain. Moreover, the transition to a circular economy presents a unique opportunity for driving sustainable growth, mitigating environmental impact and fostering innovation across Europe. This proposal outlines key policy measures for harmonising standards, lowering trade barriers and encouraging



cooperation, investment and transparency, which positions this initiative as a cornerstone of Europe's green future.

- **Harmonise** standards by developing EU-wide criteria and certification schemes for circular products to ensure quality, safety and environmental integrity, thus lessening fragmentation across markets;
- **Reduce** trade barriers and regulatory obstacles that disproportionately influence circular goods, thereby facilitating smooth cross-border trades within the EU and candidate countries. Grant early, conditional access to the EU single market for certified circular products from candidate countries;
- **Educate** the general public to raise awareness and explain the necessity of the circular economy and encourage demand for circular products;
- **Reward** innovation in waste sorting, reuse technologies and secondary material upcycling;
- **Enable** candidate countries to establish legal sandboxes for the testing of innovative recycling models under simplified conditions that align with the EU with a focus on high-potential sectors such as plastics, textiles and electronics;
- **Encourage** joint ventures between local actors and leaders in the EU circular economy, including public–private cooperation groups for joint infrastructure development;
- **Actively involve** NGOs, environmental organisations, academic institutions and civil society actors in the design, monitoring and promotion of circular economy initiatives;
- **Launch** regional working groups and circular economy twinning partnerships, pairing EU regions or cities with counterparts in candidate countries to share best practices, technologies and governance models related to waste prevention and material recovery;
- **Develop** visibility tools, such as public dashboards, to assess and visualise the progress of each country in implementing the principles of circular economy. This tool could present relevant rates and indicators and serve as a voluntary alignment mechanism with the EU acquis, thereby increasing transparency and attracting investor engagement;
- **Encourage** investment in circular infrastructure to promote resilience

and energy efficiency, thus supporting candidate countries in transitioning towards sustainable growth models; Reward innovation in waste sorting, reuse technologies and secondary material upcycling;

- **Build** transparent monitoring systems to ensure compliance and attract green investment by reinforcing trust among stakeholders.

Implementation Roadmap

- **Policy harmonisation and assessment** of current legal and administrative frameworks/negotiations and technical dialogues between EU institutions, candidate countries and relevant stakeholders;
- **Introduction of amendments to EU trade and environmental, climate and customs frameworks** to incorporate circular product protocols that are applicable to candidate countries. These legislative updates will ensure a consistent treatment of circular goods and facilitate market integration;
- **Establishment of a coordination mechanism** to streamline implementation across institutions and regions. Technical and financial assistance will be provided, including support through environmental NGOs and civil society organisations such as the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. This aspect will be complemented by stakeholder engagement and capacity-building initiatives for workers;
- **Public awareness campaigns** that target training programmes developed for SMEs to support circular product compliance and export readiness;
- **Pilot phase and trial period:** a trial period will be initiated for selected product categories to assess certification processes and market access mechanisms. Digital infrastructure, including product passports and eco-labelling platforms, will be developed to support traceability and transparency;
- **Second legislative phase (post-consultation revisions):** after stakeholder consultations and initial trials, a second legislative phase will address any identified gaps or barriers, thus refining the legal framework for improved functionality and inclusiveness; Launch regional working groups and circular economy twinning partnerships,

- **Market access and integration:** access to the EU single market will be granted to certified circular products from candidate countries. This process will be supported through public–private partnerships, twinning projects and the formation of regional working groups to encourage collaboration and knowledge transfer;
- **Monitoring, Evaluation and Supervision:** periodic evaluations will be conducted to assess policy effectiveness and inform necessary adjustments. Joint monitoring bodies between the EU and candidate countries will be established to monitor implementation. A structured feedback system will support continuous learning and responsive policy development.

A Liberal Approach

The proposal is rooted in a liberal approach that emphasises open markets and growth drive by innovation. It supports access to the EU single market by eliminating unnecessary barriers and creating pathways to enable early entry for circular products from candidate countries. This market-oriented model fosters Europe’s economic self-sufficiency, strengthens regional resilience and decreases dependency on global supply chains, particularly in resource-intensive sectors.

The approach emphasises freedom paired with responsibility and focuses on enabling incentives instead of imposing restrictions. By prioritising the needs and potential of candidate states, especially SMEs, the framework encourages a bottom-up transition to circularity. Instead of viewing the circular economy as a compliance-heavy obligation, it is positioned as a platform for sustainable entrepreneurship, clean-tech investment and competitive advantage. Innovation is viewed as the primary driver of environmental and economic progress across Member States and candidate countries and not a by-product of regulation.



Project 2

Matchmaking In Migration

Matchmaking In Migration: Bridging Talent, Building Europe: A smart Integration Framework for EU Candidate Countries

Group Members:

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Kamel Joy (Jeunes MR, Belgium)

Calvin Nixon (JuLis, Germany)

Background

While EU Member States retain full competence over the admission of legal migrants, the EU supports them through harmonised frameworks and operational tools that target the facilitation of legal pathways, reduction of administrative burden and promotion of equal treatment. Despite these efforts, structural gaps persist. Many EU countries face critical shortages in labour, while talent across neighbouring and candidate countries remains underutilised due to fragmented channels and limited coordination.

In response, the **Speed Dating Initiative** proposes a targeted, data-driven mechanism for connecting the needs of the EU labour market with the skills and aspirations of individuals in the wider EU neighbourhood and EU candidate countries. By aligning legal migration with economic priorities and regional partnerships, the initiative advances the strategic objectives of the EU on legal migration, talent attraction and inclusive growth. Thus, it embarks towards the united goal of living fulfilled lives—a core principle of the EU.

Scope

The EU underscores the positive power and value of immigrants and thrives and flourishes due to their courage and commitment. Despite right-wing rhetoric on uncontrolled mass immigration, many Member States are in dire need of immigration. Simultaneously, a number of candidate countries are experiencing high rates of emigration; as a consequence, their economic stability is suffering.

Thus, although conditions differ, the consequences are of a similar nature: a number of states lack an adequate or have an overqualified workforce, while others lack work opportunities and innovation. This proposal aims to foster collaboration and partnership that is mutually beneficial for Member States and candidate countries, which, in turn, fosters EU enlargement while addressing immigration.

Currently, member countries are forced to reconsider the *open door* policy, and cases are rejected or diverted to countries such as Turkey or Tunisia. However, this *third-country* partnership has been existing. The **Speed Dating Initiative** creates partnerships with candidate countries—

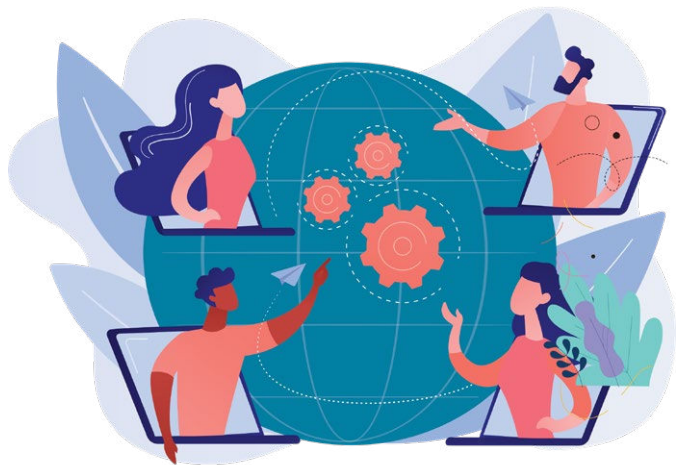


especially those experiencing citizens leaving in droves. Immigrants intend to work and create prosperity in many sectors. By focusing on *matchmaking*, we work to alleviate issues in candidate as well as member countries through catered bottom-up approaches. This enables a natural process of enlargement through mutually assured partnerships, thus establishing *power couples* who are impactful, empowered and individual pillars of strength.

Stakeholder Engagement

The key stakeholders are as follows:

- **EU Institutions and agencies:** They are central to the implementation of the plan. The Commission needs to lead the efforts; the European External Action Service (EEAS) provides support and public diplomacy outreach when the need emerges for implementing partner countries. Meanwhile, EU agencies need to be experts in touch with partners on all sides. Encourage joint ventures between local actors and leaders in the EU circular economy, including public–private cooperation groups for joint infrastructure development;
- **EU business and industry:** EU policymakers must address the EU and national chambers of commerce as well as regional forums in partner regions, and the EU must identify their business needs to include such needs into the matchmaking profiles of EU Member States;
- **Governments of candidate countries:** they must be primary external dialogue partners. Relations with the EEAS and EU missions in their countries are crucial for obtaining products for their populations;
- **Research institutes:** the programme depends on research institutes to conduct polls that provide primary data on the population of candidate countries, as they are part of *Freedom Zones*. They must act as dialogue and implementing partners to attract innovative EU businesses to candidate countries;
- **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):** they are important in ensuring that the programme maintains its connection with societies. They must employ a bottom-up process that considers the diverse interests of countries. CSOs are essential for the establishment of tailored approaches.



Main Provisions

- **Smart talent mapping:** Under the European Research Mission and European Innovation Agenda, a data-finding mission will be launched to map the working-age population across candidate countries to provide details on age, level of education, language skills, income and sectoral experience. This will provide the foundation for evidence-based labour matchmaking and investment strategies;
- **Labour market matchmaking engine:** In coordination with EU Member States, business sectors and Chambers of Commerce, a matchmaking mechanism will be implemented to link EU labour demands with available talent in Candidate Countries. This will not only address skill shortages but also strengthen institutional and economic ties across borders;
- **Pathways to Contribution:** new pathways for underutilised or excluded migrant populations, including individuals whose asylum claims were not accepted, will be created by integrating them into workforce development and mobility programmes in their countries of origin or neighbouring candidate countries. This reframes migration as an engine of economic development and inclusion, while addressing labour gaps in a constructive, human-centred manner;
- **Public Diplomacy 2.0:** Through a digital-first public diplomacy campaign, the cultural and economic attractiveness of the EU will be promoted, thus helping people across candidate countries to 'feel the EU' not only politically but also personally and economically.

Implementation Roadmap

Phase 1: Evidence Mapping and Stakeholder Mobilisation

- Comprehensive, verifiable data collection (within employment agencies, universities, diaspora networks and civil societies) across candidate countries to map skills, professional aspirations, drivers of migration and economic gaps;
- LinkedIn for EU enlargement;
- Development of a sector-specific, EU-linked digital platform that aggregates real-time data on labour and educational needs;
- Identification of labour shortages among EU Member States through existing platforms with a focus on critical sectors such as healthcare, ICT, green energy, transport and construction.

Phase 2: Bilateral Frameworks and Platform Development

- Launch a first wave of coordination agreements between the EU and partner countries to define migration frameworks and legal responsibilities;
- Build and test a matchmaking platform to enable need-based pairing between migrant profiles and benchmarks of the EU labour market;
- Design a flexible, criteria-driven opportunity visa tracking that includes language thresholds, professional qualifications and skills relevance;
- Identify *Freedom Zones* in candidate and neighbourhood countries for targeted EU-backed investment in sectors linked to emigration.

Phase 3: Pilot Implementation and Communication

- Initiate pilot projects within relevant power couples with controlled volumes and independent monitoring;
- Match selected migrant cohorts with EU employers via the Speed Dating platform; integrate with pre-departure training;
- Operationalise the first Freedom Zones using regulatory facilitation, startup incentives and public-private coordination;
- Launch a regional public diplomacy campaign that promotes the commitment of the EU to legal mobility, fair labour pathways and investment-driven development.

Phase 4: Expand, Evaluate and Establish

- Expand participation to all interested neighbourhoods and candidate countries;
- Broaden focus to include circular migration, youth mobility and entrepreneurship;
- Integrate the **Member State Position in the Screening (MPIS)** and Speed Dating platform into EU Talent Partnerships, **Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance III** and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument.
- Establish an annual 'EU–Neighbourhood Forum on Mobility and Investment' to evaluate and adopt mechanisms and ensure long-term policy alignment.

A Liberal Approach

The Matchmaking Migration initiative offers a smart, liberal alternative to current migration stagnation by aligning the needs of the EU labour market with the untapped talent of candidate countries. Using data-driven matchmaking and targeted legal pathways, it reduces labour shortages in the EU while offering meaningful prospects to underemployed populations.

By fostering economic integration via Free Enterprise Zones and public–private partnerships, it intends to redefine migration as a tool for shared prosperity, thus rejecting the populist narrative of division.

The initiative champions economic empowerment as a driving force for stability and opportunity with a focus on the creation of conditions that render regions more attractive for investment and entrepreneurship. By defending freedom of movement and personal dignity, it supports individuals in their pursuit of better economic prospects across borders. It challenges fear-based narratives with fact-based cooperation and practical reforms, such as decreasing bureaucratic barriers and taxes,



to stimulate local growth and incentivise EU businesses to engage. Promoting voluntary, regulated migration over forced displacement, the initiative helps align labour mobility with market needs. Ultimately, it aims to deepen solidarity not only between states but also among people by fostering shared prosperity through economic opportunities.

Project 3

NextGen Western Balkans

NextGen Western Balkans: Using EU Economic Instruments to Drive Enlargement and Inclusive Growth for Countries in the Western Balkans

Group Members:

Leahrose Davis (Ógra Fianna Fáil, Ireland)

Shura Muyshondt (Jongliberalen, Belgium)

Andrei Tatur (Attīstībai Youth, Latvia)

Background

This proposal puts forward a bold and forward-looking investment framework that is designed to accelerate EU accession for countries in the Western Balkans by strengthening economic and institutional foundations. Inspired by the Next Generation EU Fund, the NextGen Western Balkans Facility will provide targeted financial support through loans and grants for structural reforms, sustainable development and inclusive growth.

By incentivising fiscal transparency, anti-corruption measures, youth engagement and cross-border cooperation, the facility will act as a tool for transformation and a pathway to in-depth integration. The primary beneficiaries will include national and local governments as well as civil society organisations, youth networks and private sector actors committed to European values. The goal is to render the benefits of EU membership tangible prior to formal accession, thus fostering a shared momentum for reform within the region and renewed trust in enlargement among the current Member States.

Scope

The frustration of candidate countries, on the one hand, and the cautiousness of the current Member States regarding the function of the enlarged EU; however, demand a revised approach to accession negotiations in their timelines. When the European Commission adopted the Revised Enlargement Methodology in 2020, the objective was for it to drive fundamental political reforms in Western Balkan countries and, thus, address the lack of progress. Apart from the grouping of chapters into six clusters, the new methodology has lacked further elaboration in practice and failed to result in fundamental changes in the accession process.

The greatest beneficiaries of the staged accession model will be the citizens of candidate countries. The business community will also benefit, because the model enables early access to EU funds. However, a need persists to address the heterogeneity of the effects of cohesion policy on regional growth, which have been occurring over the past three decades in the EU. We propose that specific conditions, such as national contexts, quality of regional institutions and level of assistance, are key factors for elucidating the positive role of cohesion policy in EU regions and candidate states in the future.

Stakeholder Engagement

Key stakeholders in this proposal include the European Parliament; national governments of countries in the Western Balkans; local and regional authorities in the Western Balkans; and civil societies and youth groups.

The engagement and structure of stakeholders will focus on inclusive, regular and transparent consultations led by **the European Parliament and supported by EU delegations. National governments** will co-develop investment plans under the proposed NextGen Western Balkans Facility, thus ensuring alignment with national strategies. **Local and regional authorities** will play a vital role in the design and implementation of projects on the ground, especially in terms of fiscal transparency and public accountability reforms. **Civil societies and youth groups** will be actively consulted through forums, digital platforms and budgeting exercises, which are vital in ensuring that the policy reflects the emerging needs of people from these countries and especially key issues such as

youth unemployment and brain drain. The proposed engagement process will foster local ownership of reforms and prepares candidate countries in the Western Balkans to embrace the different multi-level government structures within the EU, which will build trust in the accession process and will be crucial for sustaining support for enlargement at the domestic and international levels for the EU.

Main Provisions

The proposal introduces a comprehensive framework to economically and institutionally prepare countries in the Western Balkans for EU Accession. A major recommendation is the establishment of a **NextGen Western Balkans Facility**, which is a targeted investment instrument inspired by the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the EU. This is tailored to the unique and specific issues of enlargement, in particular the Western Balkans.

- **Creation of the NextGen Western Balkans Facility:** The EU, European Investment Bank and national governments will co-fund this Facility. It will offer funding through grants and loans to strategic projects in the areas of digitalisation, green transition and public administration reform. Funding will be modelled on the Recovery and Resilience Facility of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) and will be co-financed by the EU, EIB and national governments;
- **Fiscal and governance reforms:** Access to the facility will be conditional on commitment to the fiscal and governance standards of the EU. These standards include transparent budgeting, anti-corruption frameworks and independent auditing. These reforms will prepare institutions for the financial oversight required within the EU. By embedding these standards during the pre-accession phase, we will prepare these countries to commit to fiscal reforms that are in line with EU standards through practices such as the transparent use of money and anti-corruption measures, among others;
- **Youth inclusion strategy:** This policy will introduce a dedicated youth investment pillar that will address youth unemployment and prevent brain drain from the region. This will include funding for projects such as digital skills training, as well as educational schemes modelled after the Erasmus scheme. This policy will also include

the youth in project planning via consultations and regional youth councils. Empowering the next generation of Western Balkans will expand the talent pool and ensure that future EU citizens are actively shaping their societies;

- Cross-border projects: This policy will prioritise cross-border projects that promote economic cooperation such as joint transport infrastructure and climate adaptation initiatives. These projects will help the Western Balkans to overcome historic divisions, which would be an important foundation in their journey in becoming an EU Member State.



Implementation Roadmap

The first step of the implementation of the policy would be to **connect with Members of the European Parliament** involved in issues related to the EU enlargement to outline the foundation of the NextGen EU Western Balkans Facility. Upon discussion, a general strategy should be developed for properly obtaining funding for the correct stakeholders in the countries under study.

However, the Cohesion Policy previously proved that a one-size-fits-all-solution should be avoided at all costs given its heterogeneous effects; hence, **a tailored approach** will be formulated for each of the countries in the Western Balkans. This tailored approach will involve national governments in co-developing investment plans under the proposed Facility, thus ensuring alignment with national strategies. Local and regional authorities will then **co-design and implement projects on the ground**, particularly those related to reforms in fiscal transparency and

public accountability. Furthermore, civil societies and youth groups will be actively consulted through various platforms, including forums, digital platforms and budgeting exercises, to ensure that the policy reflects the emerging needs of the people, especially regarding youth unemployment and brain drain.

Access to the Facility will be conditional on commitment to **the fiscal and governance standards of the EU**, such as transparent budgeting, anti-corruption frameworks and independent auditing. The Facility will then offer means for funding strategic projects. This stakeholder engagement and conditional funding mechanism will foster local ownership of reforms and prepare the candidate countries for the multi-level government structures within the EU, thus establishing trust in the accession process. This staged integration process will involve the gradual and conditional allocation of structural funds, which are tied to measurable progress in reforms.

A Liberal Approach

This policy is grounded in core liberal principles such as transparent governance, market development and inclusion of all citizens in public life. It strengthens democratic institutions by investing in people, particularly youth and marginalised communities, thereby empowering them to take ownership of reform agendas and to participate meaningfully in their societies and future EU membership.

By enabling the participation of candidate states in EU frameworks prior to formal accession, they will be empowered to internalise key democratic norms, adopt transparent governance practices and build institutional resilience. This proposal advances economic liberalism (through support for open markets and private sector development) and social liberalism (through inclusive, people-centred investments).

Economically, the NextGen Western Balkans Facility will promote market-oriented reforms, innovation and fiscal responsibility, which echoes the liberal economic model of the EU. From the social perspective, it will target young people to ensure sustainable, inclusive growth. By gradually aligning candidate countries with the rules and funding instruments of the EU, this policy will prepare them to join the EU as equal, capable and committed members.

Project 4

STEAM EuroQuest via Interrail

STEAM EuroQuest via Interrail: A Staged Youth Mobility and Cultural Integration Model for Democratic Enlargement

Group Members:

Vesta Juodonyte (Lithuanian Liberal Youth, Lithuania)

Hena Fajic (Youth Forum Nasa Stranka, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Vinayakan Sajeev Beena (LYMEC Individual Member, Italy)

Background

Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) EuroQuest via Interrail is a staged mobility and cultural diplomacy programme that connects all EU Member States with the nine candidate countries through youth-led collaboration in STEAM. Using a two-phase selection and travel model, young people from both regions form multinational teams and travel across Europe using Interrail, thus undertaking civic-tech and cultural missions in diverse settings.

The value-conditional structure of the programme will render it distinct: in-depth participation is tied to adherence to liberal democratic standards, thereby rewarding measurable progress in the rule of law, freedom of speech and support for cultural and creative sectors (CCSs). At the same time, the initiative will enhance local cultural infrastructure by incentivising cities to host public cultural events and emerging artist residencies, thereby boosting regional visibility and cultural identity. The primary beneficiaries—young innovators, artists, municipalities and cultural institutions—will help build a scalable, bottom-up blueprint for grassroots-driven EU enlargement.

Scope

The EU has made strong rhetorical commitments to the importance of culture and education in fostering unity and democratic resilience. However, these sectors remain disconnected from enlargement policy and under-leveraged in candidate countries. While Erasmus+ and Creative Europe exist, access continues to be unequal, fragmented and rarely linked to civic well-being. CCSs in candidate countries also suffer from limited exposure, mobility barriers and lack of funding for emerging talent.

This proposal will address these gaps by introducing a carrot-and-stick cultural mobility mechanism that is aligned with the strategic priorities of the EU. Participating youth will gain hands-on experience in democratic cooperation through STEAM and cultural challenges. Cities that will host the programme will benefit from increased access to European cultural platforms, including integration into cultural data spaces, opportunities to host regional cultural events and funding to support local and emerging artists originating from neighbouring countries. The programme proposes a three-tiered integration model that links extensive participation and hosting rights to civic performance metrics. It promotes not only freedom of movement but also freedom of creation, participation and expression across emerging and established democracies in Europe.

Stakeholder Engagement

STEAM EuroQuest Via Interrail engages stakeholders across EU institutions, national governments, civil society and CCSs. At the EU level, the European Commission (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood) will lead coordination and funding, while the Committee on Culture and Education and Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament will offer political support and policy mainstreaming.

At the national and municipal levels, Ministries of Culture, Education and Youth in EU and candidate countries will act as delivery partners by mobilising applicants; co-hosting STEAM and CCS missions; and aligning the programme with national reform priorities. Participating cities will be



incentivised through tiered “Cultural Hosting” grants and integration into the cultural data space.

The civic and youth sector will include NGOs, universities, art collectives and STEAM hubs, which co-design and evaluate missions. The programme will also target emerging artists and underrepresented youth, who will benefit from subsidised travel and residency opportunities. All participants will engage through a transparent **Civic Readiness Index (CRI)** framework. This will promote accountability and enable countries and institutions to progress through incentive-based stages. Ultimately, the target will be to create a self-reinforcing ecosystem comprising youth, artists and local actors to drive integration from below, anchored in liberal values.

Main Provisions

To render EU enlargement more inclusive, tangible and youth-driven, this proposal introduces **a staged cultural and civic integration programme** that centres on mobility, innovation and democratic values. The initiative leverages the power of STEAM and CCSs to foster cross-border collaboration between EU and candidate countries.

1. Three-Tier Staged Integration Model

A progressive, performance-based model will determine the level of access and benefits for countries and cities, thus rewarding civic progress and cultural openness.

- **Tier 1: Civic entry and digital collaboration**

- ☞ Youth from all eligible countries, including all EU Member States and the nine candidate countries, will submit collaborative proposals and engage in virtual activities. Cities may apply to host future STEAM or CCS events.
- ☞ Eligibility requires basic civic standards, including guarantees for free expression and academic freedom.

- **Tier 2: Interrail+cultural mobility:** Countries that meet the core democratic benchmarks are eligible for the physical EuroQuest Interrail route. Youth teams will travel across borders to complete

themed STEAM and cultural missions, thus combining civic-tech with creative expression. The participating cities will receive:

- ☞ Cultural hosting grants to support public events that will showcase emerging artists from EU and candidate countries;
- ☞ Access to the Cultural Data Space pilot of the EU, thus enhancing visibility and connectivity across regions.
- **Tier 3: Cultural integration and governance participation:** Cities and countries that demonstrate strong democratic performance will gain the following:
 - ☞ Priority funding for CCS platforms, youth-led cultural incubators and cross-border artist fellowships;
 - ☞ Representation in cultural governance structures in the EU, such as Creative Europe policy groups and European Capitals of Culture networks;
 - ☞ The label ‘**Trusted Cultural City**’, which will enable them to host high-impact, cross-national cultural events.

2. STEAM and Cultural Challenges

Each city on the Interrail route will host a mission that integrates technological and artistic problem-solving. Examples include:

- Co-creation of **a digital memory archive** in Albania using oral history and coding workshops;
- Prototyping of **inclusive regional festival models** with artist collectives in Montenegro;
- Building **a public art trail with augmented reality** in Serbia, thus merging STEAM creativity with local heritage.

3. Mobility Scheme for Emerging Artists

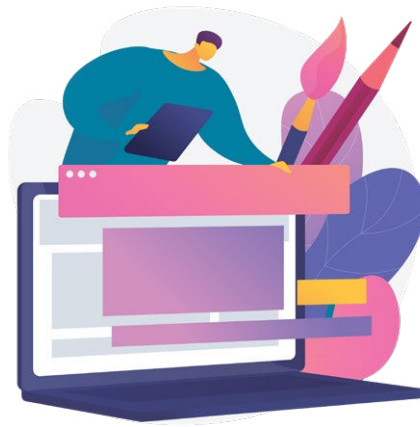
Cities will collaborate to host residencies and co-productions between local and regional emerging artists.

- Special grants will support participation for **marginalised groups and civic-performing countries**;
- Joint exhibitions will strengthen **local cultural scenes** and create long-term ties across European borders.

4. Conditional Access via the Civic Readiness Index (CRI)

An annual CRI will determine access levels and funding eligibility based on the following elements:

- Artistic and academic freedom;
- Media pluralism;
- Civic participation infrastructure;
- Transparency in cultural funding.



Implementation Roadmap

2025: Design Phase

- CRI finalised with input from experts from the CCSs and youth CSOs. A call for city missions and youth applicants will be published under the Erasmus+/Creative Europe umbrella;
- Pilot 'Cultural Hosting Grants' will be launched in three candidate countries;

2026: Delivery Phase

- A total of 200 youth will participate in 10-country Interrail missions with mixed-nationality teams;
- Cultural events will be hosted in participating cities with CCS partner institutions;
- Artists in residence will initiate collaboration across borders;
- Interim CRI assessment will be published, which will affect future participation tiers;

2027: Showcase Phase and Policy Uplift

- Final Summit and EuroQuest Exhibition will feature civic-tech outputs and artistic work;
- Participating artists and youth will present a 'Civic Cultural Enlargement Charter' to the EU;
- The programme will be integrated into the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework with sustained cultural tiers.

A Liberal Approach

This proposal reflects the core principles of European liberalism: decentralisation, civic empowerment and protection of individual freedom. By shifting agency to young people, local authorities and cultural actors, it supports a bottom-up model of European integration, which is a defining feature of liberal youth policy. Participation in the programme is voluntary and merit-based, with greater access granted to countries that uphold freedom of expression, academic independence and democratic accountability.

Instead of using conditionality as coercion, this model rewards reform and encourages inclusive progress, especially in regions that are traditionally sidelined in enlargement debates. Subsidised access for emerging artists and marginalised communities ensures equal opportunity beyond capital cities, which leaves space for diverse forms of expression.

This proposal is a liberal vision of Europe—open, pluralistic and citizen-led—where cooperation is not imposed from above but cultivated through shared values, creativity and democratic engagement across borders.



Project 5

EU 2.0

EU 2.0: Streamlining Institutions for a Stronger, Expanded Europe

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Background

This proposal outlines a liberal, flexible model for EU enlargement that addresses key flaws in the current process: binary membership logic, enlargement fatigue and veto-based blockage. It introduces four gradual phases, namely, building the European identity, institutionalising, pre-membership integration, trial membership and full membership—thus enabling countries to access rights and responsibilities in a progressive manner. This aspect helps avoid the eternal candidate trap and fosters early citizen engagement through EU programmes, mobility and institutional visibility. The model is accompanied by structural reforms to the EU law, especially those related to voting procedures and institutional adaptation, thus ensuring that the EU can absorb new members in a democratic and efficient manner, while maintaining relationships with countries that are not part of the accession process. It empowers reform-minded governments and civil societies by rewarding tangible progress instead of making vague promises. This proposal primarily benefits candidate countries, particularly in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership, while reinforcing trust and stability for the existing EU citizens. It reflects core liberal values: openness, civic empowerment, flexible solidarity and a reformed EU fit for future enlargement.

Scope

This proposal addresses one of the most pressing and politically sensitive issues encountered by the EU today: how to make enlargement viable, credible and beneficial for candidate countries and current Member States. It tackles the structural paralysis of the current accession process, which is frequently described as extremely rigid, slow and politically toxic and has led to frustration for countries in the Western Balkans and other neighbouring regions. By proposing a phased, merit-based integration model, the plan deviates from the binary in-or-out framework and introduces a flexible, trust-building approach.

It is especially relevant to the broad challenge of safeguarding liberal democracy, strengthening geopolitical resilience and revitalising the credibility of the EU abroad. The most innovative feature of the proposal is Phase 3.5: a 'trial membership' with full institutional participation prior to formal accession, which allows both sides to test the realities of integration prior to making the final decision. It offers the EU an opportunity to examine the behaviour of a candidate state with full powers, while giving its population tangible access and incentives. This scheme helps rebuild trust and foster a stronger political and civic alignment even before legal accession.



Instead of waiting for perfect alignment before opening the door, this model invites countries to transition into membership through practice, participation and responsibility. It reframes enlargement as a shared journey and not only a test to pass but also a space to transform. By doing so, it makes the EU enlargement process more adaptable, democratic and capable of facing the political realities of the 21st century.

Stakeholder Engagement

The key stakeholders in the context of this plan to streamline EU institutions are as follows:

- **EU Member States:** Governments and policy makers who will be directly impacted by institutional changes should be engaged through consultations and negotiations to ensure the representation of their interests;
- **EEA, candidate and potential candidate countries** denote nations in the EEA or aspiring to join the EU (or both) whose integration depends on the effectiveness of these streamlined processes;
- **European Commission:** As the executive arm, its departments will be pivotal in the implementation of reforms. Regular coordination meetings and task forces will be essential. The College of Commissioners will also be shrunk; therefore, they will need to be engaged through this process;
- **European Parliament:** It pertains to the engagement of MEPs to ensure legislative support for changes. Briefings and hearings will be used to communicate the plan;
- **Civil society organisations and businesses:** Non-governmental actors that advocate transparency, accountability and inclusiveness, including companies affected by regulatory changes, will need to be included in roundtables and impact assessments;
- **Citizens of EU and candidate countries:** They will be the ultimate beneficiaries of these changes; thus, they must be consulted. The engagement process should prioritise transparency, inclusivity and dialogue and present clear targets such as securing approval from Member States, aligning candidate countries with institutional reforms and fostering public trust.

Main Provisions

Gradual access to rights and responsibilities will be outlined in the following paragraphs. Instead of delaying benefits until the final step, this process will generate early incentives, restore political credibility and reduce the risk of blockages.

The first phase is called **'building the European identity'** and will require a candidate to demonstrate basic democratic standards, thus following the political criteria of the 1993 Copenhagen Agreement, that is, having a functioning market economy and a democratic system with free elections, universal suffrage and real opposition. Compliance with the criteria of this phase will enable access to EU programmes such as Erasmus+ or Horizon Europe. These instruments will enable citizens, students and researchers to reconnect with Europe culturally and intellectually, thus laying the emotional and social foundations of integration.

After progress is made, the second phase **'partial institutionalising'** will be launched. This phase demands in-depth legal changes towards a formally liberal regime with real separation of powers, including an independent judiciary, media freedom and anti-corruption clauses. In exchange, a candidate will be included in advisory bodies such as the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee and invited to conferences and dialogues at the EU level. This phase will ensure institutional familiarity and create political visibility as a partial membership.

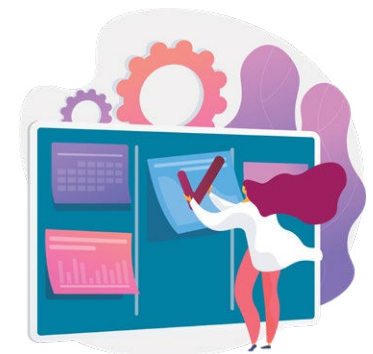
The third stage is called **'pre-membership integration'** and represents a legal shift. The country must align with the core policies of the EU, especially in the internal market, migration and justice. As a reward, states will gain a chair in the European Council and Council of the EU and will be given the ability to speak but not vote. Pre-members will get a Commissioner in the European Commission and participate in high-level political meetings and begin to influence debate, although without voting rights.

The most innovative step is **'trial membership'**. In this context, the country will receive temporary full rights for one year; thus, it will hold policy making power but without formal accession. This reversible stage enables the EU and the candidate to test real-world behaviour, thus fostering accountability and confidence with the assurance of the reversal of application if necessary. After the trial period unanimously the formal acceptance of the state will be voted in the Council.

Finally, if the trial is successful, then **'full membership'** will be granted through unanimity voting. The candidate will accede through treaty to gain equal rights and obligations. In contrast to the current model, this approach will render enlargement more dynamic, democratic and based on mutual trust. To function, however, it must be accompanied by institutional reforms. The informal practice of unanimous voting in every step of enlargement must be eliminated to formally comply with the TEU, and unanimous voting will only be conducted at the opening and closing of negotiations. Voting in the rest of steps will be changed to qualified majority voting. The number of Commissioners must be reduced to 17 according to an alphabetically rotating commissioner model. Furthermore, EP committees must align with the roles of the Commissioner to increase efficiency.

Implementation Roadmap

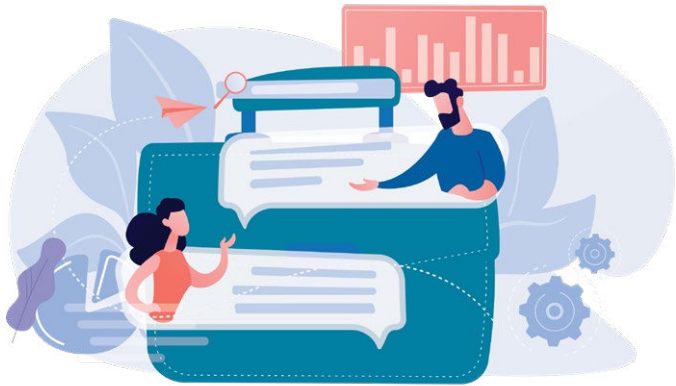
This proposal presents a drastic change in contrast to the approaches used by the EU in its relationships with non-EU members. The first stage is obtaining buy-in from the European Council to reduce the size of the Commission from the full 27 to a (treaty mandated) 2/3 of Member States (Article 17(5) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union).



- Eliminate informal unanimity practices to formalise voting procedures under the TEU, thus limiting unanimous voting to the opening and closing of negotiations;
- Commissioners to 17: implement the alphabetically rotating commissioner model, which will require amendments to the treaty (i.e. Article 17 of the TEU);
- Align EP Committees with Commissioners: restructure committees in the European Parliament to align directly with Commissioner portfolios, thus increasing efficiency.

A Liberal Approach

The policy recommendations align with liberal principles due to their focus on efficiency, inclusivity and democratic governance through the following ways:



- **Promoting transparency and accountability:** Liberal policies emphasise open governance and citizen participation. Streamlining institutions will ensure transparent processes, thus decreasing bureaucratic complexity and enhancing accountability to stakeholders, including citizens and member states. All European states—regardless of which track they are on (e.g. EEA and candidates) will know their specific status;
- **Facilitating enlargement:** Liberals support integration and cooperation, which encourages the expansion of the EU as a means of fostering peace, economic interdependence and shared values. Streamlining institutions will ensure that the EU can effectively accommodate new members while maintaining its democratic foundations;
- **Encouraging participation:** Liberals value the inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making and recognise that no *one-size-fits-all* solution exists. Recommendations involve the engagement of various stakeholders, such as candidate countries, civil societies and businesses, which reflects the liberal principles of participatory governance;
- **Strengthening democratic frameworks:** Liberal policies prioritise the rule of law and democratic institutions. The proposal will ensure that EU governance remains efficient, responsive and adherent to its foundational values as it grows.

European Liberal Forum

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. With over 50 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard.

ELF was founded in 2017 to strengthen the liberal and democrat movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen.

We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of actors

Published by the European Liberal Forum in cooperation with the European Liberal Youth (LYMEC). Co-funded by the European Parliament. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the European Parliament and/or the European Liberal Forum.

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