

Thinking Enlarged in 2026: *Leveraging perspectives from future member states*

Johannes Greubel
Liza Saris
Vanna Curin
Talisa Mazzoni (eds.)



Table of contents

Why in 2026, we must *think enlarged*

Liza Saris 3

EU enlargement in 2026: what to expect this year

Berta López Domènech 4

Enlargement and the new MFF

Johannes Greubel 5

European Democracy: What to make of the Shield?

Giulia Torchio 6

Fixing the rule of law consultations process

Eric Maurice 7

Improving Civil Society engagement in EU reports

Marija Mirchevska 8

EU accession and rule of law in 2026: From box-ticking to credible reform

Anamarija Velinovska, Constanze Sendler, York Albrecht 9

Embedding the green transition in Europe's enlargement agenda

Ana Berdzenishvili 10

Gradual integration as a strategic pillar of the accession process

Svitlana Taran 11

Geopolitical competition and systemic rivalries as challenges for enlargement

Frauke Seebass 12

Thinking Enlarged Recommendations 2026

Johannes Greubel, Liza Saris, Vanna Curin, Talisa Mazzoni 13

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / DISCLAIMER

The support the European Policy Centre receives for its ongoing operations, or specifically for its publications, does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. Supporters and partners cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Layout and graphic design by Jessica Moss.

Why in 2026, we must *think enlarged*



Liza Saris,

Policy Analyst and Project Manager for
Connecting Europe, European Policy Centre

Over the past years, the European institutions have heralded a new momentum for EU enlargement, pledging that it is realistic for up to “[two or three](#)” new members to join during this mandate. But if the Union is serious about delivering on that ambition within the current cycle, 2026 must be the year when political rhetoric gives way to operational decisions – on funding, internal reforms and the legal preparations required for the next accession treaty.

And getting real about enlargement also requires ‘thinking enlarged’, which means embedding an enlargement dimension into current EU policy debates and involving civil society from candidate countries earlier and more systematically in the debates shaping Europe’s future.

The Policy Brief [Thinking Enlarged](#) published last year explored the potential benefits for both the enlargement agenda and EU policymaking if this approach were integrated into the EU’s internal structures.

Systematically engaging tomorrow’s members in today’s discussions can strengthen reform momentum, regional buy-in and bottom-up trust in the process. At the same time, transregional EU policies on climate adaptation, digital governance, foreign policy and the rule of law stand to benefit from the expertise offered by candidate

countries. In 2025, the Commission’s communication on the Democracy Shield and the Civil Society Strategy acknowledged that civic space is a continuum between the EU and candidate countries, and that many of the challenges faced are shared. Collaboration and cross-border networks are therefore essential for impactful policymaking, particularly in these areas.

With the Commission’s latest progress assessments and notable reform steps across candidate countries underway, the coming years will be decisive for setting priorities and securing support for the accession process. The European Policy Centre organised a Thinking Enlarged Community Meeting in December 2025 to identify realistic opportunities to strengthen the role of civil society in shaping policies on Europe’s future in 2026, thereby advancing the enlargement process. It brought together CSOs from member states, the EU level and candidate countries to exchange views not only on enlargement, but on how it links to digital governance, foreign policy, climate adaptation and rule of law reporting.

This compendium collects the reflections and recommendations that emerged from these conversations. It serves as a tool for coalition-building, messaging alignment and agenda-setting for 2026.



Thinking Enlarged Community Meeting, December 2025. PHOTO BY: EPC

EU enlargement in 2026: what to expect this year



Berta López Domènech,

Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions Programme, European Policy Centre

“2025 has been a very successful year for enlargement. But I am convinced that we can make 2026 even better”, [European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos](#) said at the end of last year.

Throughout 2025, the European Commission, and particularly DG ENEST, worked to project renewed enthusiasm behind EU widening. [The EU executive argued](#) that the process “is now moving faster than in the last 15 years” and explicitly endorsed the 2026 and 2027 target dates for closing negotiations with Montenegro and Albania.

Yet 2026 will be key to determining whether these ambitions will materialise. Podgorica must still close almost two-thirds of the acquis within 10 months while Tirana must now meet the fundamentals’ interim benchmarks to start closing chapters.

The ball is not only on the court of EU aspirants. The Council must draft the Accession Treaty for Montenegro – a process Cyprus committed to start during its Presidency in the first half of 2026. This document will both determine the conditions of Montenegro’s entry and set precedents for future accessions.

But the ball is not only on the court of EU aspirants. The Council must draft the Accession Treaty for Montenegro – a process Cyprus committed to start during its Presidency in the first half of 2026. This document will both determine the conditions of Montenegro’s entry and set precedents for future accessions. However, member states remain cautious. In some cases, domestic considerations continue to shape national positions. Concerns about the durability of accession reforms have also brought discussions about safeguards into focus.

At the same time, the Commission has yet to present a comprehensive assessment of how enlargement would affect EU policies and which internal reforms are needed for a Union of more than 30 members.

To the east, 2026 opened with Ukraine requesting membership by 2027. While the Commission maintains that the process remains strictly merit-based, evolving geopolitical dynamics, including the US-brokered peace talks, could accelerate Kyiv’s bid. Against this background, the “[reverse enlargement](#)” concept has started to circulate. Nonetheless, overcoming opposition from Hungary and securing consensus for a fast-tracked enlargement will remain a challenge.

Whether 2026 becomes the ‘better year’ Kos envisages will depend on candidates delivering reforms, the Commission kicking off serious discussion on internal adaptation, and the Council moving decisively on the final stages of accession. All of this will unfold amid a turbulent geopolitical context in which the EU struggles to have a voice.

Enlargement and the new MFF



Johannes Greubel,

Head of the Transnationalisation Programme & Connecting Europe Project Leader, European Policy Centre

Following the publication of the European Commission's proposal on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) in July 2025, the EU has entered one of its most consequential negotiations. Setting out the long-term budget for 2028–2034, these talks will define the Union's spending priorities for the next decade. For enlargement countries, the outcome will be decisive, as this period coincides with efforts to take significant steps towards EU membership.

The proposal appears compelling at first sight. President Ursula von der Leyen [pledged to raise the EU's budget to almost €2 trillion](#) over the seven-year period. Enlargement countries are mainly covered under the new Global Europe heading, the budget's foreign policy basket, which the Commission proposes to double to €215 billion over seven years.

While this sounds like good news, stakeholders from enlargement countries should approach it with caution. First, this proposal is only the start of negotiations among co-legislators. Several member states have already questioned the ambitious size of the proposal and called for cutbacks. As governments seek to limit spending and shield domestic priorities, Global Europe may become a target for cuts.

Second, Global Europe reorganises foreign policy spending from thematic clusters to regional envelopes. In this setup,

the Commission proposes allocating €43.2 billion to the [‘Enlargement and Neighbourhood East’](#) region. Yet concrete earmarks beyond these broad categories are largely missing, reducing predictability for beneficiaries.

Without clear spending targets for democracy and the rule of law, reform paths in candidates risk weakening.

This issue is compounded by the fact that throughout the Global Europe proposal, [democracy is largely omitted](#). Without clear spending targets for democracy and the rule of law, reform paths in candidates risk weakening. A lack of dedicated earmarking for civil society support could also constrain the development of a sustainable civic space and democratic culture in future members.

As negotiations continue, 2026 will be decisive in shaping the Union's spending priorities. It is crucial that co-legislators (1) maintain the Commission's ambitious spending targets in Global Europe, (2) introduce concrete earmarking for spending priorities beyond regional clusters and (3) anchor democracy firmly within the instrument.



PHOTO BY: CANVA

European Democracy: What to make of the Shield?



Giulia Torchio,

Former Policy Analyst in the Europe's Political Economy Programme, European Policy Centre

The establishment of the European Democracy Shield (EUDS) and the Civil Society Strategy (EUCSS) represents a critical juncture in the EU's democratic and digital governance frameworks. However, as geopolitical pressures mount and EU enlargement nears, these instruments must evolve beyond unilateral, reactive tools for internal protection. To safeguard its democratic foundations and preserve the credibility of the accession process, the EU should transform the EUDS and EUCSS into two-way forums for strategic, inclusive exchange of expertise and coalition-building with prospective Member States.

Countries in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, particularly Ukraine and Moldova, have long functioned as the front line against sophisticated hybrid and digital threats. Their civil society organisations (CSOs) have demonstrated high-level and grassroots innovation in countering disinformation and securing digital space – expertise that could benefit some EU member states. The EUDS and EUCSS should recognise the digital strengths of enlargement countries and integrate their expertise as strategic partners. This is especially vital where EU conditionality may weaken or where external actors seek to consolidate influence.

To achieve this, the following structural shifts are proposed:

(1) An inclusive policy architecture: Adapt recently unveiled mechanisms into a “coalition of the willing” that includes member states, candidate countries and CSOs to reframe participation from voluntary to strategic.

(2) Promote digital monitoring integration: Utilise digital tools to streamline the monitoring of democratic requirements, ensuring a common understanding of findings across all actors.

(3) Ensure sectoral consolidation: Anchoring democratic resilience within the EU's economic security and digital agenda would support societal consolidation and reduce geopolitical uncertainty as integration advances.

Ultimately, a thriving and integrated civic space is non-negotiable for a successful, fair and inclusive digital transition across Europe. Without institutional mechanisms that protect the exercise of democracy and channels that allow candidate-country CSOs to plug evidence into EU decision-making, the EU risks diluting its democratic model precisely in its darkest hour.

A thriving and integrated civic space is non-negotiable for a successful, fair and inclusive digital transition across Europe.



PHOTO BY: JONATHAN NACKSTRAND / AFP

Fixing the rule of law consultations process



Eric Maurice,

Policy Analyst in the European Politics and Institutions Programme, European Policy Centre

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) from candidate countries already contribute actively to several EU reports and processes. They are closely involved in the European Commission's annual enlargement report, and since 2024, the EU's annual Rule of Law report has also covered Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. However, several structural shortcomings persist in both frameworks.

The reports are prepared by two different directorate-generals. As a result, reports are not always aligned, particularly on rule of law assessments, which makes it harder for CSOs to monitor findings and governments to implement recommendations.

First, the drafting processes are lengthy and communication with the Commission is limited. As a result, CSOs often feel that the reports do not reflect their findings nor capture the fast-moving developments in certain countries.

In addition, the reports are prepared by two different directorate-generals – DG Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood and DG Justice – which operate with different mandates. Consultations with CSOs are disconnected and follow different timelines. As a result, the reports are not always aligned, particularly on rule of law assessments, which makes it harder for CSOs to monitor findings and governments to implement recommendations.

In 2026, the Commission should therefore streamline consultation and drafting processes across the two reports. It should improve coordination between DG ENEST and DG JUST and [better integrate CSOs from candidate countries in these EU processes](#). It should also better synchronise various consultation processes with CSOs. At the political level, the Commission should better link its enlargement and rule of law strategies and align the findings and recommendations.

The Commission could also develop tools, possibly driven by AI, to provide a better overview of the various reports. This would improve rule of law monitoring by both CSOs and the Commission itself. Further down the process, EU institutions should state more clearly how recommendations should be implemented. Clearer guidance would increase accountability in candidate countries and enhance monitoring by CSOs and the EU.

Improving civil society engagement in EU reports



Marija Mirchevska,

Head of the Centre for Good Governance,
Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje

The opportunity to participate in the preparation of the Enlargement Reports and, where applicable, the Rule of Law Report is valued by civil society. It is particularly appreciated that the contributions are explicitly recognised through footnote references in the Rule of Law Report. This best practice should also be adopted in the Enlargement Report. At the same time, CSOs should be given the option to opt out of public attribution where operating environments are hostile and association with these processes may expose them to political or institutional pressure.

Participating in multiple consultations can be burdensome particularly for organisations under pressure. By rationalising the number of consultation processes and encouraging relevant EU institutions to coordinate and participate jointly, the EU can reduce duplication and improve the efficiency of engagement with civil society.

When EU representatives such as European Parliament rapporteurs or Commission officials conduct country visits, consultations with CSOs are often scheduled toward the end of the agenda. It would be beneficial to organise these exchanges earlier during visits, allowing civil society to raise key and potentially sensitive issues that could subsequently inform discussions with government counterparts.

To increase transparency and accountability, formal responses submitted by governments to the EU in relation to these reports should be made publicly available. In addition, EU delegations in enlargement countries should organise public presentations and discussions of both reports to increase their visibility, strengthen public understanding and encourage stakeholder engagement.

Finally, including all enlargement countries in the Rule of Law Report would improve its impact. Currently, enlargement candidates do not participate in the EU Justice Scoreboard, despite its value as a comparative tool for assessing the functioning of judicial systems and rule of law performance. Their inclusion would strengthen monitoring, improve comparability and support reform efforts across candidate countries.

Participation of enlargement candidates in the EU Justice Scoreboard would strengthen monitoring, improve comparability and support reform efforts across candidate countries.

EU accession and rule of law in 2026: From box-ticking to credible reform



Anamarija Velinovska,

Head of Centre for European Integration at Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” Skopje



York Albrecht,

Research Associate in the RESILIO-ACCESS project, Institut für Europäische Politik; re:constitution Fellow 2025/2026



Constanze Sendler,

Research Assistant in the RESILIO-ACCESS project, Institut für Europäische Politik

RESILIO-ACCESS project: the project investigates the resilience of the rule of law EU accession candidates. The project explores how to measure resilience and analyses the potential of the EU’s enlargement policy toolbox to foster a resilient rule of law in the region.

2026 will be decisive for getting EU accession underway. Still, severe challenges persist, particularly with respect to the rule of law.

First, rule of law reforms in candidate countries often remain performative, with [box-ticking too often prioritised over implementation](#). Second, the judiciary faces limited institutional capacities and checks and balances remain weak. Third, regression of the rule of law in many EU member states weakens the credibility of EU conditionality to candidates.

In the next MFF, the Commission should condition “Global Europe” disbursements on measurable progress on rule of law reforms, based on binding recommendations in the Rule of Law and Enlargement reports. Stakeholders in member states should intensify debates about enlargement to tackle disinformation and increase political and public support for future accession. Candidate countries must refrain from eroding the rule of law and democratic standards, particularly judicial interference. European players must respond firmly and decisively to transgressions. For instance, in July 2025, pressure from Ukrainian civil society and EU institutions [curbed attempts to undermine the independence of anti-corruption bodies](#).

In this process, CSOs serve as an alarm for democratic backsliding and accountability mechanisms by identifying risks, raising public awareness, monitoring implementation and sustaining reform momentum. In 2026, CSOs should push to strengthen the Rule of Law Report by conditioning disbursement of funds on reform progress. The rule of law must not be treated as a procedural condition for accession alone, but as the foundation for accountability, justice and liberty across a united Europe.

In 2026, CSOs should push to strengthen the Rule of Law Report by conditioning disbursement of funds on reform progress.

This contribution draws on discussions from the RESILIO-ACCESS Civil Society Forum held in Berlin in November 2025 and applies the [RESILIO-ACCESS analytical model](#). The model explores the resilience of rule of law systems in candidate countries by examining the interaction between institutional capacities, societal resources and external stressors.



PHOTO BY: CANVA

Embedding the green transition in Europe's enlargement agenda



Ana Berdzenishvili,

Junior Policy Analyst in the Sustainable Prosperity for Europe Programme, European Policy Centre

EU institutions are increasingly [framing](#) enlargement around balancing urgency with the credibility of the green transition. As accession timelines accelerate, environmental ambition must be structurally embedded in the process – not treated as secondary.

With renewed geopolitical attention to enlargement, expectations for progress are intensifying. The accession process requires candidate countries to align rapidly with the EU's [climate and environmental acquis](#) despite energy and industrial dependencies, outdated infrastructure and weaknesses in governance and the rule of law. As legislative alignment advances, the challenge shifts from formal adoption to implementation and enforcement.

This pressure materialises through large-scale [strategic projects](#) and investment partnerships between the EU and candidate countries. Within the enlargement framework, extraction projects are framed as gateways to deeper EU integration, [most visibly in Ukraine](#).

As the green transition becomes increasingly articulated through competitiveness and security imperatives, environmental and social safeguards risk being sidelined in favour of expediency unless governance and civic accountability keep pace.

In Serbia and parts of the Western Balkans, however, similar projects have fuelled public resistance and concerns about [democratic backsliding](#). The [2024 arrests of activists in Belgrade](#) illustrate how quickly civic space can come under pressure when resources central to the green transition are elevated to “strategic” status without transparency and oversight.

A broader tension therefore emerges for 2026: as the green transition becomes increasingly articulated through competitiveness and security imperatives, environmental and social safeguards risk being sidelined in favour of expediency unless governance and civic accountability keep pace. The risk is compounded by uncertain [pre-accession funding](#) and the [growing influence of external actors](#) as EU conditionality weakens.

As such, civil society will be decisive in managing the implementation pressures shaping enlargement. Where institutional capacity remains uneven, CSOs sustain oversight, accountability and public trust. The priority now is to embed this role structurally within accession frameworks. Strategic projects must therefore integrate robust impact assessment, rule-of-law conditionality and community consultation. Without sustained backing for independent institutions and direct financing for watchdogs, accelerated enlargement risks diluting the Green Deal and undermining EU credibility where it seeks to export its model.

The message for 2026 is that bridges cannot be improvised. The EU needs standing channels that let civil society plug evidence into decision-making. A thriving civic space must be treated as non-negotiable in the accession process; otherwise, the green transition risks becoming a negotiable objective rather than a shared baseline.

Gradual integration as a strategic pillar of the accession process



Svitlana Taran,

Policy Analyst in the Europe in the World Programme, European Policy Centre

As the EU seeks to mitigate growing security and geopolitical risks while safeguarding the credibility of the enlargement process, the gradual integration of candidate countries into the EU Single Market and selected EU policies has gained renewed strategic importance. As an [integral part of the accession process](#), gradual integration can deliver tangible benefits, familiarise candidates with EU rules and practices, and deepen cooperation during negotiations.

Implemented on a merit-basis, gradual integration can sustain reform momentum, support regulatory alignment and facilitate progress in accession talks, allowing gradual integration and formal enlargement to reinforce each other.

This approach is particularly relevant for Ukraine and Moldova, given their exposure to Russia's military and hybrid pressures. Gradual integration can help reduce structural dependencies on Russia and strengthen resilience, with integration into the EU energy system a prominent example. This is especially important in the event of continued political blockages by certain member states, as deeper sectoral integration can help prevent backsliding, support societal and institutional consolidation and reduce geopolitical uncertainty in Moldova and Ukraine.

In Ukraine's case, EU accession is widely viewed as a long-term security guarantee. Accelerated integration into the EU Single Market in key sectors such as energy, transport, digital, payments and industrial value chains will also be [central to Ukraine's economic recovery](#).

Importantly, gradual integration must support and accelerate EU membership, not replace it. To be effective, it should be clearly linked to accession, guided by priorities and benchmarks, and communicated through concrete benefits for citizens and businesses. Anchoring the gradual integration of candidate countries more firmly within the EU's economic security, competitiveness and security agendas can deliver mutual benefits and strengthen the strategic relevance of enlargement.

Gradual integration can help reduce structural dependencies on Russia and strengthen resilience, with integration into the EU energy system a prominent example.



PHOTO BY: CANVA

Geopolitical competition and systemic rivalries as challenges for enlargement



Frauke Seebass,

Associate Researcher, think nea | New Narratives of EU Integration, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

The current enlargement unfolds under drastically different geopolitical conditions. Europe faces renewed military and hybrid aggression, intensified power politics within the EU and its neighbourhood, and growing influence from illiberal actors. While these dynamics make enlargement more urgent, they also reduce the EU's leverage to enforce accession conditionality. Candidates like Georgia and Serbia resist aligning with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and increasingly rely on third countries to undermine democratic standards at home.

Illiberal influences also affect member states, shaping policies and public opinion and fostering cooperation among anti-democratic forces. As enlargement requires unanimity, rising Euroscepticism heightens the risk of bilateral vetoes. Strengthening cooperation among democratic actors and empowering civil society will therefore be crucial to enhancing Europe's resilience.

A narrative and strategic shift is needed to unlock the benefits of successful enlargement for Europe's strategic goals. Candidates should be more systematically included in debates and policies already prior to accession. These narratives can improve

public communication in the EU and candidate states, especially when combined with direct language addressing misinformation and local spoilers.

Civil society actors across Europe are key to promoting enlargement. Through political and cultural engagement, they make the process tangible for citizens and demystify the EU and candidates. CSO inclusion can serve as a reality check and provide early warnings of backsliding. Cross-sector platforms, including on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), promote best practices and joint strategies to increase societal resilience.

Civil society actors across Europe are key to promoting enlargement. Through political and cultural engagement, they make the process tangible for citizens and demystify the EU and candidates.



PHOTO BY: CANVA

Thinking Enlarged Recommendations 2026



Johannes Greubel,

Head of the Transnationalisation Programme & Connecting Europe Project Leader, European Policy Centre



Vanna Curin,

Programme Assistant within Connecting Europe, European Policy Centre



Liza Saris,

Policy Analyst and Project Manager for Connecting Europe, European Policy Centre



Talisa Mazzoni,

Programme Assistant within Connecting Europe, European Policy Centre

Enlargement is [increasingly inseparable](#) from internal EU debates on democratic resilience, digital governance, competitiveness, the climate transition and Europe's geopolitical positioning. Yet candidate-country civil society is still too often at the margins of these conversations, consulted on an ad hoc basis rather than embedded structurally. The absence of systematic consultation mechanisms within EU institutions, combined with weak linkages between candidate-country CSOs and wider EU policy networks beyond enlargement-dedicated avenues, leaves funding fragmented and access to decision-making limited.

This disconnect weakens both sides. It deprives the EU of expertise from regions already navigating democratic resilience under pressure and reinforces scepticism in enlargement countries about the EU's willingness to treat them as future insiders.

Enlargement can no longer be siloed as a technical file handled by a narrow institutional circle. Framing enlargement exclusively as a DG ENEST issue risks detachment from the policy areas that will define membership readiness.

EU institutions must think enlarged – not as an outreach exercise, but as preparatory governance. Candidate countries must align not only with the *acquis*, but with the EU's broader ambitions. The Community Meeting confirmed [this need to think enlarged](#).

Recommendations for 2026

1. Safeguard civil society funding in the next MFF

As argued by Johannes Greubel, the European Parliament and Council must secure protected funding lines for civil society, including candidate-country organisations, within the next MFF, preserving allocations under AgoraEU and Global Europe.

The budget design must prioritise core institutional funding, cross-border cooperation instruments and rapid-response support for organisations under political pressure, recognising democracy and democratic

institutions as strategic investment. The co-legislators should assess how the entire budget design affects civil society inclusion and embed smart conditionality to prevent political gatekeeping, as Eric Maurice writes in his contribution.

2. Anchor candidate countries earlier in EU policy ecosystems

In 2026, the Commission should accelerate structured inclusion of candidates in core policy mechanisms and toolboxes. This includes ensuring their CSOs are involved at different stages of drafting the Rule of Law Report (see contribution by Eric Maurice), extending the Justice Scoreboard to candidate countries (see contribution by ResilioAccess), and granting early access to selected Green Deal and competitiveness instruments (see contribution by Ana Berdzenishvili). The Democracy Shield and the EU Civil Society Strategy must be implemented equally in member states and candidate countries (see contribution by Giulia Torchio).

The Commission should also strengthen the independence of state institutions in candidate countries and enhance their capacity to monitor EU fund allocation. While CSOs play a watchdog role, they often compensate for weak state functions without adequate protection or institutional follow-up. Formal channels should ensure that CSO evidence feeds directly into monitoring, implementation and corrective mechanisms.

3. Strengthen cross-regional CSO coalitions

The Commission should reinforce structured cooperation between regional civil society platforms in the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and Türkiye, while sustaining engagement with EU-level mechanisms such as the EESC's Enlargement Candidate Members initiative.

Regular, cross-regional cooperation should be established to enable CSOs to share expertise, coordinate advocacy and feed joint inputs on enlargement, foreign policy and MFF negotiations. Existing EU-level platforms should serve as entry points for systematic dialogue rather than ad hoc exchanges.

The need for a new narrative

If the EU is to meet its own accession timelines, it must move from strategy to delivery – starting with a renewed narrative on enlargement. Public communication cannot focus solely on the costs of enlargement but also articulate the strategic risks and costs of non-enlargement. Clear, consistent, fact-based yet [emotionally resonant](#) messaging is essential to prevent instrumentalisation by far-right and external actors.

If the EU is to meet its own accession timelines, it must move from strategy to delivery – starting with a renewed narrative on enlargement.

Civil society – from EU member states and candidate countries – can act as a transmission belt, translating EU debates into domestic contexts.

Enlargement must be made tangible through ‘hearts and minds’ approaches that demystify candidate countries, counter reductive narratives and connect enlargement to everyday life and shared European identity.

Civil society – from EU member states and candidate countries – can act as a transmission belt, translating EU debates into domestic contexts. This role, however, requires structured engagement, sustainable funding and sustained political will from EU institutions and member states.

The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

Connecting Europe is a project of the European Policy Centre and funded by Stiftung Mercator. Established in 2017, its objective is to connect civil society organisations with EU decision-makers and to give those organisations more visibility in Brussels. A network project with 65+ partners from 16 countries, Connecting Europe actively works to improve the links between the national capitals and Brussels to discuss EU policy in a European fashion.

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR

With the strategic
support of



King Baudouin
Foundation

Working together for a better society