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## Introduction

At this moment, core EU values—such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights—are under threat. Young people all over Europe, particularly in the accession countries, such as **Serbia, North Macedonia, Georgia and Ukraine**, are at the forefront of defending these European values. While most believe that the EU is a force for democratic advancement and upholding these values, some also grow more and more disillusioned with the length and uncertainty of the integration process.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, young Europeans share this belief: 50% of them want an accelerated enlargement process and comprehensive reform of the EU.<sup>2</sup> This desire is fueled by growing disillusionment among youth in some accession countries, who are frustrated with the slow pace of the integration process and the limited visibility of its benefits.

In light of these challenges, the EU must do everything in its power to honor the call for faster accession and genuine reform. The following demands outline the changes we believe are essential for the EU to progress and respond to this call for transformation. They also seek to create a safe environment where young people can thrive and continue to champion Europe's values. Moreover, these demands address the need for structural reforms, such as the establishment of a common Security and Defense Union, which are vital to ensuring protection from external threats to these values.

Young people place their hopes in the EU, and it must rise to the occasion by delivering on these hopes and expectations, ensuring a European future for all.

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<sup>1</sup>National Youth Council of North-Macedonia (2024), CompletEU: Analysis - North Macedonia, p.73.; National Youth Council of Serbia(2024), The Role of the EU in Enhancing Democracy and Youth Engagement in Serbia. p. 85(9)., in: CompletEU-research paper. Youth, Europe, Enlargement.

<sup>2</sup> JEF-Europe (2024), EU youth and democracy, peace and rule of law in the context of enlargement, p. 5., in: CompletEU-research paper. Youth, Europe, Enlargement.

## Our demands:

1. *To guarantee political stability, we demand a strong rule of law that upholds democratic values, transparency and accountability, thereby cultivating trust in the democratic institutions!*
2. *Open up and facilitate the access of the youth of the candidate countries to all the EU youth mobility programmes, thereby strengthening civil society as a whole while fostering a true European and democratic spirit!*
3. *Put effective measures in place to combat disinformation and foreign interference with coordinated strategies, transparent communication, media literacy education, support for independent journalism, and protection of free speech!*
4. *Sustain a credible enlargement process and include civil society and activists of the candidate countries in its negotiation process in order to increase knowledge and to hold governments and the EU alike accountable for the process!*
5. *Ensure the safety of (youth) activists in the exercise of their activism without fear of physical or psychological repercussions!*
6. *Foster a genuine representation of young European citizens through revised youth checks for the next EU Youth Strategy and innovative ways of participation!*
7. *Install a mechanism similar to the youth test that considers the impact EU legislation has on other marginalised groups!*
8. *Practice and guarantee a foreign policy that puts the core EU values, such as the rule of law, human rights, freedom and democracy at its heart!*
9. *Establish a common Saving and Investment Union that can also be channelled to better help candidate sections getting fit for EU accession!*
10. *Create a unified, federal Security and Defence Union that is equipped to defend and protect Europe's citizens, its integrity, values and peace.*
11. *Reestablish immediately and without restrictions, the freedom of travel within the Schengen area!*
12. *Fully renew European democracy by Europeanising the elections through converting the political party groups into truly European parties, a renewed European Electoral Act, and a democratically composed federal EP!*

- 1. To guarantee political stability, we demand a strong rule of law that upholds democratic values, transparency and accountability, thereby cultivating trust in the democratic institutions.**

The rule of law is one of the core principles on which the EU is founded and that guides its actions until now. However, we see more and more that these values are under threat within the EU, but also unfortunately in the candidate countries. There is a link between having strong rule of law mechanisms and the trust people place in democracy and the EU institutions as a whole. Things like transparency and accountability are crucial for building and maintaining this trust. However, more and more countries don't adhere to or try to circumvent these rule of law principles, undermining political stability. In order to maintain trust in its institutions and help guarantee political stability, the EU needs to defend the rule of law among its member states as well as candidate countries. This will help cultivate political stability in these countries and increase trust in the democratic institutions of the EU and the respective countries.

**2. Open up and facilitate the access of the youth of the candidate countries to all the EU youth mobility programmes, thereby strengthening civil society as a whole while fostering a true European and democratic spirit!**

The majority of the candidate countries, especially those in Eastern Europe (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia) do not have full access to youth mobility programs such as Erasmus+ (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro) and CERV (North Macedonia). Expanding these programmes to young people from candidate countries is a logical and practical way to accelerate the social aspect of integration of this new generation of Europeans with their counterparts from the rest of the Union. Therefore, we urge the EU to facilitate access to all mobility schemes to all accession countries, in order to foster a youth that is excited at the prospect of deeper integration and that is hopeful for a shared Europe. To open up these countries to these schemes means to open up their youth to a European future.

**3. Put effective measures in place to combat disinformation and foreign interference with coordinated strategies, transparent communication, media literacy education, support for independent journalism, and protection of free speech!**

Spreading misinformation and half-truths has unfortunately become a common strategy to destabilize countries and to push them away from and towards a mistrust towards Europe and democratic institutions in general. Like the examples of the elections in Romania and the situation in Georgia have shown, foreign interference through misinformation is a serious issue. Additionally, attacks on journalists have also increased furthering the issue. The EU must make clear that these attacks against the free press and the attempts on influencing and interfering through foreign powers can't be accepted and must actively support the countries in their fight against disinformation.

**4. Include civil society and activists of the candidate countries in its negotiation process in order to increase knowledge and to hold governments and the EU alike accountable for the process!**

Civil society organisations and activists play a substantial role in the enlargement and accession process. They act as promoters and drivers of democratic reforms and represent the voices of the citizens of all generations as well as facilitate the space between individuals and institutions for interaction. However, enlargement disillusion, especially amongst young people is more and more present especially in the accession countries. In order to reinvigorate the enlargement process, we call therefore to strengthen and institutionalise the participation of civil society organisations in the dialogue between the EU and the accession countries. A successful example would be the EESC's (European Economic and Social Committee) Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative in 2024. While this constitutes a good example, involvement of this kind must be far more institutionalised on a continued basis.

## **5. Ensure the safety for (young) activists in the exercise of their activism without fear of physical or psychological repercussions!**

Civil Society actors play a crucial role in upholding democratic values. However, those who fight for a free and democratic society and the rule of law, often face repercussions and challenges for their individual safety. They are often harassed through limiting their right to assemble and arbitrary detentions through the state, through hostile reporting by the media and targeted surveillance of often young activists.<sup>3</sup> The rule of law and the democratic freedoms are the core values of the European Union that need to be respected by all that wish to join and it has a responsibility to oversee this respect in the accession countries. It should remind the respective governments of these values and not hesitate to take consequences in case of non respect of these values.

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<sup>3</sup>[https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/KOMS\\_Insight-into-the-position-of-young-activists.pdf](https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/KOMS_Insight-into-the-position-of-young-activists.pdf)

## **6. Foster a genuine representation of young European citizens through revised youth checks for the next EU Youth Strategy and innovative ways of participation!**

Youth must be given the importance they deserve in all aspects of the enlargement and policy making process. This means also giving them and all citizens more possibilities to participate in the decision-making process. While a lot of positive change has already been initiated, like the introduction of a European Commissioner for Youth in the new European Commission, the youth checks established by the EESC, we believe that there is still a lot of potential to increase participation channels for all citizens. In order to put back the citizens at the heart of the EU we support the creation of instruments of direct democratic participation such as citizen's conventions in member states and the accession countries about topics directly impacting them. We are convinced that this will foster a new transnational debate about important issues and will strengthen a common European spirit.

## **7. Install a mechanism similar to the youth check that considers the impact EU legislation has on other marginalised groups!**

Policies and legislation don't exist in a vacuum, they always have an impact. However, policy-makers are oftentimes not aware of the impact their legislation has, especially on marginalized groups, such as migrants, women, people with disabilities etc. However, these groups are oftentimes heavily and negatively impacted by said legislation and suffer consequences. We therefore urge EU decision makers to consider the impact of their legislation on these marginalised groups, with the aim to make EU policies more inclusive for every citizen, regardless of their circumstance. Similarly to the youth check, introduced to mainstream policies towards youth, we want to see similar checks for other marginalized and underrepresented social groups. We are convinced that with this, trust in the EU as an inclusive, governing body will increase among all its citizens.

**8. Practice and guarantee a foreign policy that puts the core EU values such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy at its heart!**

Values must not only be upheld within Europe but should also be projected outward, guiding the EU's role on the global stage. We urge the EU to adopt a coherent foreign policy that places its core values—equality, the rule of law, human rights, and democracy—at its center. The EU must strive to become a truly unified global actor, championing these principles in a world increasingly dominated by authoritarianism and a "might makes right" mentality. To achieve this, we call on the EU to develop a common foreign policy approach by integrating its security and defense policies, enabling it to stand firm, guided by its values, in the face of global autocrats.

**9. Establish a common Saving and Investment Union to secure stable financing, that can also be channeled to better help candidate sections getting fit for EU accession!**

As crises have multiplied in recent years, many people have developed the sense that the EU is not adequately protecting them, leading to a growing distrust of the Union's monetary framework. This issue of trust has been ongoing for some time. However, in the face of these challenges, the Union appears to be gaining momentum in addressing security, economic, and social issues collectively. Therefore, we call for the establishment of a genuine Capital Markets Union, Banking Union, and Fiscal Union, which would guarantee the stability and transparency of the entire European Monetary Union and, in turn, help rebuild citizens' trust in it. Additionally this could be channeled to financially support candidate countries more substantially to achieve the requirements necessary to EU accession faster.

**10. Create a unified, federal Security and Defence Union, that is equipped to defend and protect Europe's citizens, its integrity and values!**

Recent months have made it clear that the United States can no longer be relied upon as the sole guarantor of Europe's security. This can only be done by enhancing our defense and security capabilities by building a unified Security and Defence Union, capable of protecting itself and its allies from threats to sovereignty and shared values. While we recognize the recent steps taken by member states and the European Commission, these actions represent only the beginning of what must be a deeper commitment to a truly federal Security and Defence Union. To achieve this, we call for the creation of a unified European defense industry, reducing reliance on American-made military equipment by certain member states. Furthermore, we advocate for the establishment of a common European federal army, accountable to the European Institutions and under the democratic oversight of the European Parliament.

## **11. Reestablish immediately and without restrictions, the freedom of travel within the Schengen area!**

Since 2016, we have witnessed the gradual erosion of two of the European Union's most significant achievements: the free movement of citizens and the Schengen Agreements, as several member states have reintroduced temporary internal border controls. These measures are often justified by declarations of emergency, citing concerns over migration and threats to internal security or public order. However, such actions highlight that member states continue to prioritize national responses over collective European solutions. Issues like terrorism and migration must be addressed through unified, European measures, not through unilateral actions that undermine the fundamental right of EU citizens to move freely within the Schengen area. We therefore call on member states to abolish all internal border controls and restore full freedom of movement within the Schengen zone. Additionally, we urge member states to work together to find European solutions to these pressing challenges without compromising the freedoms of EU citizens.

**12. Fully renew European democracy by europeanise the elections through converting the political party groups into truly European parties, a renewed European Electoral Act, and a democratically composed federal EP!**

The 2024 European Parliament Elections have sparked a renewed conversation about European democracy, evident in the encouraging rise in voter turnout. While this is a positive step, there is still significant progress to be made in ensuring the elections are truly representative of all European citizens and in advancing towards a democratic, federal Union. We therefore call for a fundamental renewal of European democracy through the Europeanisation of the electoral process. This should include the transformation of political party families from individual national parties into genuine European parties, the implementation of a revised European Electoral Act, and the establishment of a democratically structured federal European Parliament with two chambers: one representing elected MEPs and the other representing member states.