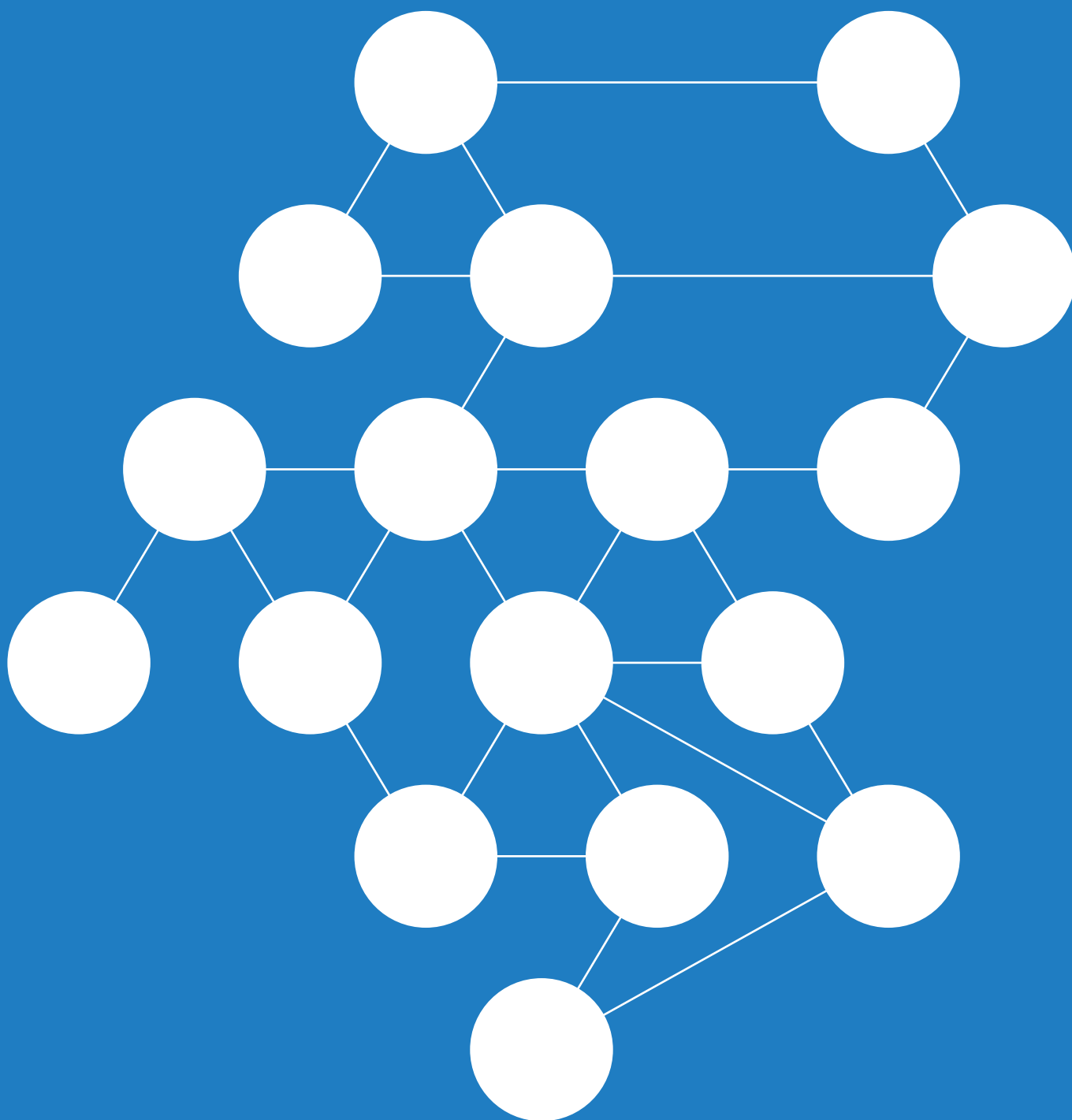


The Central European Initiative

Legacy from the past
Vision for the future



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The CEI was established in 1989
and currently brings together
17 Member States from Central,
Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.



Foreword

More than three decades ago, the Central European Initiative (CEI) was born of a political insight that would help shape a pivotal chapter in Europe's history. Gianni De Michelis, one of the architects of the Quadrangolare and later of the CEI itself, described it as a piece of scaffolding: light, flexible and temporary by design, yet sturdy enough to serve a clear strategic purpose – to foster integration “on the other side” of the Iron Curtain and thereby avert disintegration “on this side”.

More than 30 years on, that insight has lost none of its force, even though the international landscape has been transformed almost beyond recognition. The European Union has undergone successive rounds of enlargement. Yet, at the same time, war has returned to the heart of Europe, while profound shifts in the Euro-Atlantic order are placing multilateral cooperation under mounting strain. In this context, the role of the CEI – and, more broadly, the value of regional cooperation – has not diminished but must be renewed and adapted to a fundamentally different strategic environment.

While historical circumstances are not the same, the underlying imperatives underpinning the CEI's mission remain unmistakable and are linked with the future of Europe and its quest for security, stability and shared prosperity on a continental scale.

Regional cooperation is not a legacy mechanism whose purpose has expired. On the contrary, it has acquired renewed strategic importance, particularly in supporting the countries of Europe's immediate neighbourhood (first and foremost the Western Balkans) on a credible and secure path towards membership in the European Union.

Over more than 30 years of activity, the CEI has established itself both as a trusted partner of the European Union and as a consistent advocate of European integration for the countries of the region. By combining political dialogue, stronger institutions and practical, project-based cooperation, it has helped turn enlargement from a political aspiration into a tangible process of convergence with European standards, institutions and values.

This paper, prepared by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), sets out the principal channels through which the CEI translates regional cooperation into practical action. These range from the promotion of connectivity, as illustrated by the initiative to rehabilitate the Trieste–Ljubljana–Zagreb–Belgrade railway corridor, to legal diplomacy through the Falcone–Borsellino Programme, as well as science diplomacy and the engagement of younger generations.

The study also highlights the strategic role of the *CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development* (EBRD), through a dedicated Fund which provides support for technical cooperation, institutional capacity-building and the transfer of knowledge and expertise among member states. The Fund has become one of CEI's most effective instruments for turning shared priorities into concrete results.

The CEI's position at the interface between EU and non-EU countries has always been both its central challenge and one of its defining strengths. By bringing together countries within and beyond the Union, it has sustained cooperation across institutional and political divides and supported the successive stages of the enlargement process now once again at the centre of the European debate. Its role as a complement to the European Union (and to the European Commission in particular) also opens up new possibilities for more structured forms of delegated cooperation.

In the last years much has been achieved, and yet convergence remains incomplete. Significant disparities persist between CEI countries and the European Union, beginning with per capita income and extending across multiple dimensions of connectivity. These gaps concern not only road and rail infrastructure, but also energy interconnections, digital integration and the quality and capacity of legal and institutional systems.

Such disparities are not merely technical deficits. They bear directly on Europe's cohesion and on the credibility of its political project.

Europe rests on a distinctive compact between diversity and common purpose, between the identities of its nations and the interests they share.

It cannot endure as a prosperous economic area dense with rules but thin in political meaning, governed by technocratic procedures alone. It must remain a political community in which individual states can coexist, cooperate and manage their differences without once again being driven apart by resurgent nationalism.

The development of the European institutions has produced an intricate legal and institutional order. Its strength, however, will not be measured by complexity alone. It will depend above all on its ability to uphold the universal reach of Europe's values while respecting the particular histories, cultures and identities of its peoples.

Against this background, Ukraine represents a defining test for Europe. Securing a just peace and rebuilding the country are not peripheral concerns: they are vital to Europe's security, credibility and future. A successful reconstruction would also send a powerful message of hope across the continent, demonstrating Europe's capacity to defend not only its interests, but the principles on which its common order is founded.

From the outset, the CEI has recognised that regional cooperation cannot be the preserve of governments alone. Its inclusive approach has brought

together national institutions, regions, local authorities, universities, businesses and civil society. Over the years, this broad network has enabled political dialogue to be translated into programmes, projects, exchanges of expertise and practical initiatives delivering tangible benefits to people throughout the region.

This bottom-up dimension remains the CEI's hallmark and one of its greatest strengths. Regional cooperation cannot simply be declared from above. It must be built through the active involvement of communities, the patient development of mutual trust and the capacity to turn shared objectives into concrete and lasting outcomes.

Today, the CEI is opening a new chapter in its history. The mission is not to preserve, for its own sake, a structure designed for an earlier age but to ensure that this structure keeps evolving, in response to the demands of the present and the challenges of the future.

In 1989, that scaffolding was needed to help Europe move beyond the divisions of the Cold War. Today, it is no less indispensable as Europe enters another formative phase – one defined by resilience and connectivity, by the reconstruction of Ukraine, by the integration of the Western Balkans, and by the renewed conviction that regional cooperation is not an adjunct to the European project, but one of its essential foundations upon which a more united, more secure and more prosperous Europe must now be built.

Franco Dal Mas

Michele Valensise

Executive Summary

The Central European Initiative (CEI) is the oldest and largest framework of regional cooperation in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Founded in November 1989, days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, under the original name *Quadrangular*, it was conceived as a bridge between countries that the Cold War had kept apart. Today it brings together 17 member states,¹ within and outside the European Union, around its founding mission: promoting regional cooperation for European integration and sustainable development.

This document, drafted by the Istituto Affari Internazionali, builds on the Chair's Statement issued in March 2026 for the 30th anniversary of the Executive Secretariat in Trieste and offers an independent contribution to the CEI's strategic reflection and to its next Action Plan.

The first part of the document reconstructs how the Initiative works and what resources it can mobilise.

The CEI combines an intergovernmental political dialogue with a parliamentary dimension, an economic dimension and an emerging local dimension, a multistakeholder architecture that sustains dialogue at different institutional and societal levels at once. This political function rests on diversified funding: the CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the multilateral Cooperation Fund, a growing portfolio of EU-funded projects and the contribution of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region. The diversification of resources shields the Initiative from single-donor dependency and sustains its credibility as a partner of the EU's merit-based enlargement process and of the *UN 2030 Agenda*.

The second part argues that connectivity should become the guiding thread and the strategic framework of the CEI's future action.

The geopolitical environment that shaped the Initiative has changed profoundly: interdependence, long read as a guarantee of stability, can now be turned into leverage, and connectivity has therefore ceased to be a neutral by-product of globalisation to become a strategic choice grounded in trust and political alignment. The document translates this principle into three operational dimensions: infrastructural connectivity, from the Pan-European transport corridors crossing the CEI region and the Trans-European Transport Network to energy, water and digital networks; legal connectivity, strengthening the rule of law and democratic resilience in line with the requirements of EU accession; and people-to-people connectivity, investing in youth, local communities and structured exchanges among societies.

¹ The members are: Albania, Belarus (suspended), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

The third part outlines the operational consequences of this repositioning, pointing to avenues that would be worth exploring for the Initiative, such as deepening the cultural and scientific dimension and advancing the Youth Agenda.

These orientations build on an established record. Over more than three decades, the CEI has accompanied the enlargement of the European Union and the gradual reunification of the continent, and its history reads as a success story of European integration. If that success continues, the progressive integration of all CEI member states into the EU would represent a major accomplishment for the Initiative and mark the beginning of a new phase, in which the CEI continues to serve, within an enlarged Union, as a forum for political dialogue and for cultural and societal exchange across the region.

Introduction

At the conference marking the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Executive Secretariat of the Central European Initiative (CEI), its rotating Presidency, held by Romania, together with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued a landmark Chair's Statement highlighting this significant milestone. The statement, as the event itself, celebrates decades of shared commitments to stability, growth, regional cooperation and European integration, while also outlining a forward-looking strategic vision for the future of the Initiative.

Today, the CEI plays a complementary role to the EU in the European integration process by supporting its non-EU member states in their efforts to fulfil the necessary criteria for accession, in line with the merit-based nature of the enlargement process.

At the same time, the CEI is a strategic bridging platform and a driver of economic and social development in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

For its member states, the Initiative is a hub for connectivity and an institutional bond with other regional organisations and initiatives, such as the *Regional Cooperation Council* (RCC), the *South-East European Cooperation Process* (SEECP) or the *Three Seas Initiative* (3SI), as well as several sectorial regional initiatives. Furthermore, the CEI supports the UN Agenda, working as a transmission belt between regional and global ambitions.

The following document, drafted by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), builds upon that Statement and the ministerial inputs, and provides an independent contribution to the CEI's ongoing strategic reflection. The document is structured along three parts. The first part provides an overview of the CEI's history and current governance, reflecting its current architecture and funding. The second part presents strategic orientations for the future, drawing from the 2026 Chair's Statement and conveying policy proposals.

The third part offers operational suggestions to solidify the Initiative's accomplishments and move into the next phase. In its long history, the CEI has facilitated the EU enlargement and horizontal integration; the present document seeks to further consolidate this position, ensuring that the Initiative remains a relevant political and results-oriented platform, capable of supporting its member states and acting as a bridge between the European Union and its neighbourhood in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape.



West Berlin, at the Berlin Wall, in the days after 9 November 1989. Within the same weeks, the *Quadrangular*, the future CEI, was founded in Budapest. Photo: Fortepan / Szebeni András



Budapest, Vörösmarty tér, 2 March 1989. A protest rally demanding the release of the Czechoslovak writer Václav Havel. Photo: Fortepan / Vímola Károly

1.1 History and Mission

The Central European Initiative stands as one of the oldest and largest initiatives of regional cooperation in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The journey of the Initiative started in November 1989, just days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as a regional format named *Quadrangular*. Its founding members, Italy, Austria, Hungary and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, sought to overcome the former divide of the Cold War by establishing a bridge between countries of different political orientation. This pioneering effort was aimed at ensuring new avenues of cooperation with the ultimate goal of deeper integration and, eventually, the reunification of the European family.

Budapest, 1989

the *Quadrangular* is launched
as the Berlin Wall falls

As the map of Europe rapidly changed, the Initiative evolved accordingly. With the admission of Czechoslovakia in 1990, the Initiative was rebranded as *Pentagonal* and then, after the inclusion of Poland in 1991, *Hexagonal*. By 1992, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, the name was officially changed to *Central European Initiative*. The institutional backbone was consolidated in 1996 with the establishment of the Executive Secretariat in Trieste (Italy), with the legal status of an international organisation under a Headquarters Agreement. The Secretariat's presence in Italy confers a special responsibility upon the country to monitor and foster the Initiative's progress, further reinforcing its role as a founding member.

1996

CEI-Executive Secretariat
established in Trieste

Over more than three decades, the CEI's membership has expanded and currently encompasses 17 states, representing diverse geography spanning from the Baltic to the Adriatic and Black Seas. The CEI's core mission has remained promoting regional cooperation for European integration and sustainable development, keeping the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union as a strategic priority. More than 20 years after the launch of the EU accession perspective for the Western Balkans, the reunification of the region is even more pressing for the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent. This growing strategic weight is reflected in new informal diplomatic formats, notably the "Friends of the Western Balkans", which highlight the region's enduring importance and the conviction that shared prosperity is generated by integration. At the same time, the strategic importance of the CEI's Eastern flank has especially intensified in recent years, shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine and the firm aspirations of Kyiv and Chisinau to join the European Union.

In such an evolving geopolitical environment, the CEI increasingly represents a platform capable of accompanying both political convergence and concrete regional cooperation across different parts of the European continent through political dialogue, institutional cooperation and practical initiatives. The Initiative has gradually incorporated a strong project-based and results-oriented approach with the aim of delivering practical results that can produce a significant impact on communities and societies. By leveraging different financial tools, the CEI today facilitates the transfer of know-how from EU to non-EU members, particularly in the Western Balkans and the

Eastern Partnership countries (the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine). It also has held Observer Status in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) since 2011. As of 2026, the Initiative remains a vital regional multistakeholder platform, addressing contemporary challenges – ranging from connectivity and energy transformation to institutional capacity-building, democratic resilience and support for the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine – while maintaining its founding spirit of political dialogue, inspired by the dream of European unity.

2011

Observer Status in the
UN General Assembly

Over the years, the CEI has progressively evolved from conflict prevention into a concrete and operational framework for regional cooperation. What initially emerged as a pioneering effort to reconnect a fragmented Europe has proven its enduring relevance in a geopolitical environment marked by overlapping crises, fragmentation and strategic competition. The dream of a reunited Europe today remains embedded both in the political dialogue promoted by the Initiative and in its practical activities, ranging from infrastructure connectivity and institutional capacity-building to people-to-people cooperation. In this respect, the CEI continues to embody a unique platform where EU and non-EU member states cooperate on equal footing, contributing to the gradual integration of the European continent through both political coordination and concrete operational initiatives.

Over time, the constant interaction among the three constituencies of the CEI's membership, Central Europe, Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe, has produced a layer of mutual knowledge among governments, officials and stakeholders across the region, increasing closeness and trust.

This familiarity has matured into what may be called a reflex of cooperation: the habit of turning to CEI partners as issues emerge, operating alongside, and often ahead of, formal EU channels.

1.2

Governance, Political Dialogue and Multistakeholder Approach

Political dialogue represents one of the defining pillars of the CEI and remains essential to the Initiative's added value within the broader European regional architecture. In the current geopolitical environment, this constant diplomatic interaction contributes to preserving trust, maintaining channels of communication and promoting cooperative approaches among countries.

At the heart of the CEI political pillar, there is the (inter)governmental dimension, which secures political guidance and provides up-to-date strategic priorities. A parliamentary dimension operates independently, complementing the political dialogue among the countries. The central position within the governmental dimension is underlined by the critical function of the Presidency, held on a rotating basis by member states and crucial to shaping the annual Agenda. The highest echelon of the intergovernmental dimension is represented by the *CEI Summit* which may be convened upon decision of the CEI Presidency, in agreement with all member states, and the *Ministers of Foreign Affairs Meeting* (MFA Meeting), convened once a year (with an additional informal meeting on the occasion of the UNGA), and chaired by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the country holding the Presidency. The Ministers play a key role in setting priorities and strategic guidelines. The daily decision-making process is the responsibility of the *Committee of National Coordinators* (CNC), composed of senior diplomats from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the member states, which meets on a regular basis to discuss, review and coordinate cooperation, including in relation to other international organisations and regional groupings, and the implementation of CEI programmes and projects.

The parliamentary dimension is embodied by the *Parliamentary Assembly*, the *Parliamentary Committee* and the three *General Committees* (on Political and Home Affairs; Economic Affairs; Cultural Affairs), composed of the national parliaments of the CEI member states, represented through their parliamentary delegations. Parliamentarians contribute to the political dialogue and support CEI activities through regular meetings, held in the framework of the rotating CEI Presidency.

The Trieste-based *CEI Executive Secretariat* supports the work of the Initiative at both the institutional and the operational level by facilitating political and policy coordination among member states, while also developing and implementing programmes, projects and cooperation initiatives. Through these activities, it contributes to translating political dialogue into practical cooperation, fostering the exchange of expertise, new ideas and innovative solutions, and continues to play an active role in regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and programme and project management. The CEI Executive Secretariat mirrors the Initiative's mission of (re)uniting Europe, bringing together officials and professionals from different political and geographical realities of the region. In particular, the current composition of the *Deputy Secretaries General*, representing the Executive

level together with the Secretary General from Italy, includes member states such as Hungary, Serbia and Ukraine.

The involvement of the rotating Presidencies, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, National Coordinators, parliamentary representatives and various national authorities, as well as the intense activities of the Executive Secretariat, constitutes one of the CEI's main strengths and a key element of its political added value. In this respect, the CEI today contributes to facilitating exchanges of views, building convergence on regional priorities and maintaining open channels of cooperation even in complex geopolitical contexts. This role is reflected in the regular Ministerial Meetings and the respective declarations, the consultations carried out by the Secretary General with representatives of member states, the constant support by the parliamentary dimension and the regular coordination ensured through the Committee of National Coordinators. The same approach surfaces through the CEI's continuous political backing of Ukraine and the work carried out in multilateral fora such as the United Nations.

The CEI's working model has proven particularly valuable in times of crisis.

Both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to the consequences of the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine, regional cooperation had to rapidly adapt to evolving political and operational realities. This adaptability was made possible through close interaction with member states and the Initiative's capacity to respond pragmatically to emerging needs while preserving political dialogue and adding cooperative mechanisms to the cooperation. This engagement has taken increasingly concrete forms: the CEI took part in the Ukraine Recovery Conferences in Rome (2025) and Gdańsk (2026) and has supported partnerships between Ukrainian municipalities and their counterparts across the region.

The coexistence of multiple dimensions within the CEI system allows the Initiative to sustain dialogue at different institutional and societal levels simultaneously. Beyond formal meetings and declarations at the governmental and parliamentary level, the CEI provides a flexible and inclusive space where member states can exchange views, identify common priorities and build convergence on issues of strategic relevance for the region. Besides political guidance, as an international forum shaped by a multistakeholder approach, the CEI has developed its economic dimension through structured collaborations with several economic institutions, notably Chambers of Commerce and other economic actors. In this framework, the CEI holds an Economic Forum, whose main objective is fostering dialogue on economic cooperation, regional integration, connectivity and sustainable development, while promoting exchanges between the public and private sectors. Moreover, in recent years, the CEI has been working to enrich its governance with a fourth local dimension aimed at communities, NGOs and youth organisations. This network should support the CEI's activities with specific insights from independent civil society organisations.

1.3

Funding and Instruments

To translate political dialogue and regional cooperation into practical action, the CEI has progressively developed a diversified financial architecture supporting capacity-building, technical assistance, know-how transfer and project-based cooperation among member states. In this sense, the financial architecture of the Central European Initiative operates as a multi-layered system that translates political guidance into concrete regional cooperation and development initiatives across its member states. From its inception, the Initiative has been simultaneously a fund receiver and donor. Within this structure, the CEI relies on a set of financing instruments designed to support different types of projects and activities.

At the core of this architecture stands the CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), established by Italy in 1992 as a strategic tool to advance the CEI's mission. The CEI Fund plays a crucial role in enabling the EBRD to catalyse investments and support activities in its countries of operations. Over the years, the Fund has supported initiatives across the entire CEI region and today operates in the CEI-EU candidate countries supporting investment, reforms and development processes. The Fund primarily finances the Technical Cooperation Programme, a grant-based instrument that underpins EBRD operations in areas such as agribusiness, energy and climate, finance and business development, institutional strengthening, support to small and medium-sized enterprises, municipal infrastructure and services, and transport. Rather than focusing on physical infrastructure delivery, Technical Cooperation provides the expertise required for preparatory work, including feasibility studies, regulatory assessments and capacity-building activities. This approach ensures that major investments by the EBRD and other international partners are grounded in solid analytical foundations. Alongside Technical Cooperation, the Fund also finances the Know-how Exchange Programme (KEP), a grant facility promoting European integration through capacity-building and the transfer of best practices. The Programme connects institutions from EU CEI member states with counterparts in non-EU countries, supporting reforms in fields such as public governance, digital transformation, environmental protection, innovation and sectoral development. By fostering institutional strengthening and alignment with EU standards, the KEP contributes to deeper structural integration and facilitates the participation of beneficiary countries in the wider European space. Parallel to the Italian-funded instrument is the *CEI Cooperation Fund*, which represents the Initiative's multilateral pooling mechanism. The Cooperation Fund, established in 2001 by the MFA Meeting in Milan, collects proportional annual contributions from all 16 active member states, reflecting a shared ownership of the regional agenda. The Cooperation Fund provides smaller-scale funding for workshops, seminars and training modules. These activities serve as a comprehensive system, filling the region with specific professional skills and fostering direct interaction between civil society, academic institutions and local administrations. While the capital volume per project is lower than that of the Technical Cooperation Programme, its frequency and geographic

reach are significantly higher, creating a dense web of micro-collaborations that support the overall resilience of the region.

In addition to the two aforementioned instruments, the Executive Secretariat in Trieste has evolved into a specialised hub for the management of EU-funded projects. In this capacity, the Secretariat acts as an interface between the EU structural and research programmes, such as Interreg and Horizon, and the specific needs of the CEI region. By leading or participating in international consortia, the CEI absorbs external capital to address transnational challenges that exceed the capabilities of single states, such as maritime safety in the Adriatic Sea, regional connectivity and sustainable mobility, or the ecological transition to a circular bioeconomy. The close connection between the CEI and local communities is reflected in the strong relationship with the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region, which hosts the Initiative's Secretariat. Besides providing the administrative headquarters for the Executive Secretariat in Trieste, the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region serves as one of the primary co-financing partners. This relationship is operationalised via the Joint Working Programmes (JWP), a dedicated framework that lines up regional resources with the Initiative's goals in selected areas of common interest.

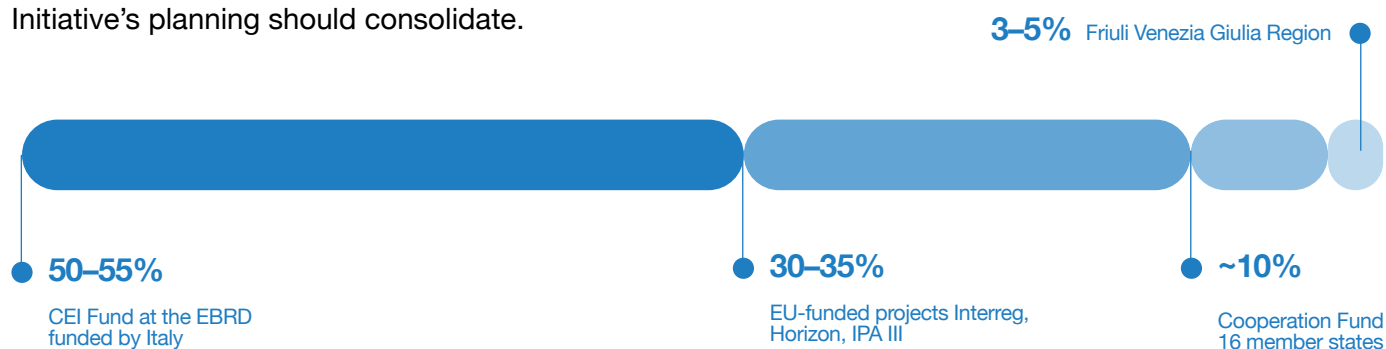
The recent financial architecture of the CEI (as of 2024) is defined by a complex multi-channel system, managing a total volume of approximately 4 to 5 million EUR, excluding the value of multi-year EU projects. The CEI Fund at the EBRD, funded entirely by the Italian government, constitutes the backbone of the Initiative's budget, representing approximately 50 to 55 per cent of the total. EU-funded projects, including programmes like Interreg, Horizon and IPA III, account for the second-largest share at 30 to 35 per cent, positioning the CEI as an effective EU-oriented agency. The multilateral Cooperation Fund, supported by proportional contributions from all 16 active member states, covers about 10 per cent of the budget, focusing on smaller-scale activities. Finally, the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region contributes 3 to 5 per cent through the JWP. This diversification of funding is probably one of the strongest assets at the CEI's disposal, as it ensures a high degree of autonomy and maintains the Initiative's standing as a credible international body. By operating through a multi-layered financial engine, the CEI avoids the risk associated with single-donor dependency.

While the CEI's operational reach has been achieved with rather limited resources by the standards of international organisations, its financial instruments have demonstrated a remarkable multiplier effect.

In particular, through its Technical Cooperation Programme, the CEI Fund at the EBRD has enabled the mobilisation of substantial financial flows: between 1993 and 2025, CEI-financed assignments were estimated to leverage over EUR 8.3 billion in investments from the EBRD and its financial partners, corresponding to a total investment ratio of approximately 1:250.²

2 Office for the CEI Fund at the EBRD, "Annual Report 2025", Trieste, 2026, p. 7

This reflects the strategic value of Italy's contribution in enhancing the impact of the CEI Fund operations across the CEI region. At the same time, the Cooperation Fund offers considerable potential as a flexible instrument for generating visibility, fostering regional partnerships and creating positive spillover effects. By supporting focused projects and activities of strategic and political relevance, it can further strengthen the CEI's role as a platform for regional cooperation, policy dialogue and practical initiatives. In addition, the expansion of the EU-funded project portfolio, the new openings in the youth, cultural and science diplomacy fields, and the activities surrounding the 30th anniversary of the Trieste Secretariat have signalled a renewed dynamism that deserves recognition, and that the next phase of the Initiative's planning should consolidate.



The CEI's financial architecture: main funding sources. Data refers to 2024 only.

The multidimensional structure enables the CEI not only to facilitate political coordination among member states, but also to translate political priorities into operational initiatives thanks to its funds and instruments. Its diversified funding allows the Executive Secretariat to act as an executive agency capable of managing complex and large-scale interventions; ministerial discussions and strategic orientations are progressively complemented by capacity-building activities, technical assistance, project implementation and people-to-people exchanges, ensuring continuity between political commitments and concrete regional action. This is what is often referred to as peer-to-peer activities, namely exchanges of knowledge and expertise among peers involving citizens, civil society organisations, academia, journalists and young professionals across the region. Citizenship participation contributes to strengthening regional ownership, institutional resilience and long-term convergence processes throughout Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Driven by its mission of promoting European integration, the CEI has, since its establishment, worked to maintain close relations with the EU as part of its broader objective of supporting European convergence across the continent. Owing to its unique composition, bringing together EU and non-EU member states, the Initiative has traditionally functioned as a complementary platform for dialogue, exchange of expertise and practical cooperation aimed at facilitating gradual alignment with European standards and policies.

Through technical assistance, capacity-building activities and participation in EU-funded programmes, the Initiative contributes to strengthening institutional capacities, supporting reforms and promoting regional cooperation in areas directly linked to the EU enlargement and neighbourhood agendas. The merit-based nature of the enlargement process rests on the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria and the progressive opening and closing of negotiating chapters on the basis of implemented reforms. The CEI's instruments – capacity-building, know-how transfer and technical assistance – operate at this level, supporting candidate countries in developing the institutional and regulatory readiness that accession requires. Yet, relations with the EU and its institutions have thus far not evolved into a more structural and long-term cooperation.

Against the current geopolitical context and the renewed attention devoted to enlargement and regional resilience, the EU and the CEI could be more ambitious in establishing a political dialogue and exploring synergies of the respective agendas going beyond occasional projects and spontaneous contacts. A more structural relationship with the EU, ingrained in the priorities of both the bloc and the CEI, should build upon the existing cooperation within EU funding programmes. For the EU, the CEI – through its own instruments – may offer added value as a flexible regional actor capable of connecting local and regional needs with broader European strategic objectives.

This function also operates in the opposite direction: through structured dialogue with candidate countries, the CEI is positioned to register their needs and priorities and to carry them into the European debate, an intermediary role that rests on the full alignment between the Initiative's founding vocation and the EU's enlargement agenda.

The Initiative's activities frequently complement the work of EU institutions by facilitating collaboration among countries at different stages of the integration process and by promoting dialogue in areas where informal regional coordination remains essential. In this respect, the Initiative contributes to reducing developmental and institutional gaps within the region while reinforcing the broader objective of a more united, stable and

interconnected Europe. The growing involvement of the Executive Secretariat in EU-funded projects such as Interreg, Horizon Europe and IPA further reinforces this mission and demonstrates how the Initiative is ready to serve as an operational partner capable of translating European priorities into concrete regional actions and pilot initiatives. This trajectory could culminate in the recognition of the CEI as an implementing entity for EU delegated cooperation, enabling the Initiative to run European programmes directly and turning its regional expertise into executive capacity. This prospect was also explicitly endorsed in Italy by the Senate's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, in its resolution on the strengthening of the CEI, which called for recognition of the Initiative as an implementing body of delegated cooperation by the European Commission.

Throughout the years, the CEI has progressively strengthened its contribution to broader international discussions on sustainable development, an integral part of its mission. After the Observer Status conferral at the UNGA in 2011, the CEI has further reinforced its international position and its role as a regional platform capable of connecting regional priorities with wider global agendas, particularly within the framework of the UN 2030 Agenda and its *Sustainable Development Goals*.

Currently, the CEI's mission is heavily concentrated on Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) and Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), which serve as the operating system for regional stability. By facilitating high-level political dialogue and parliamentary exchanges, the Initiative builds the institutional capacity required to sustain progress across all other thematic areas. Moreover, the economic and technical dimensions of the CEI provide direct support for Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure). Through the Technical Cooperation Programme and the KEP, the Initiative ensures that infrastructure development and market integration in non-EU members are coupled with sustainability standards. This involves a focus on the circular economy and the digital transformation of SMEs, effectively bridging the gap between EU objectives and UN guidelines. The recent CEI annual reports underscore this by highlighting increased funding for projects that link industrial growth with environmental protection, particularly in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine).

On the social and territorial level, the CEI targets Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) through its multilateral Cooperation Fund. This instrument focuses on “people-to-people” connectivity, which serves as a system for knowledge transfer and social cohesion. By funding transborder academic mobility and urban resilience, the CEI translates the global targets for inclusive and sustainable communities into practice on the ground and strengthens its local dimension. Furthermore, recent initiatives in science diplomacy and health cooperation demonstrate an evolving capability to address SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). This integrated approach plays on local realities and global strategies and ensures that the CEI plays a key role in regional integration within the 2030 objectives, converting high-level aspirations into practical and tangible outcomes.

The synergy between regional diplomatic efforts and targeted financial investment proves that regional cooperation could be the most efficient mechanism for navigating the complex geopolitical obstacles that sustainable development will face in the next decade.

The successful global-local approach that has marked many past CEI projects should be a cornerstone for the next years' planning.

The CEI is not alone in its efforts to promote its mission, with regard to both European integration and sustainable development. In this context, building partnerships with other international and regional actors constitutes an essential component of the CEI's work and operational model, and contributes significantly to the Initiative's ability to avoid duplication, mobilise expertise and create synergies within the broader European and international institutional architecture.

Over the years, the CEI has developed cooperation with a wide range of partners active in fields linked to connectivity and economic cooperation, institutional capacity-building, public health and local resilience. Important recent examples include cooperation with the EBRD through the CEI Fund, collaboration with the Transport Community in the field of transport connectivity and border facilitation, as well as partnerships with organisations such as WHO/Europe and the *South-Eastern Europe Health Network* (SEEHN) in the area of public health, the *Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative* (RAI) in the field of anti-corruption, and the *Association of Local Democracy Agencies* (ALDA) in the area of local governance.

The CEI has also strengthened interactions with several United Nations entities and programmes, including UNDP, UNECE, UNICEF and UNESCO, particularly in areas related to institutional resilience, education, culture and science diplomacy. Strengthened partnerships with the Council of Europe and the OSCE have also developed over the years in various areas of cooperation, while more recently collaboration with the Council of Europe in the youth sector has started to gain momentum. At the same time, through its Executive Secretariat, the CEI regularly and actively participates in coordination processes among broader regional organisations and initiatives, notably the *Adriatic-Ionian Initiative* (AII), the *Black Sea Economic Cooperation* (BSEC) and the RCC.

These partnerships enhance the CEI's ability to act as a bridge between political dialogue and operational implementation, while reinforcing its role as a flexible platform capable of connecting regional priorities with broader European and global agendas.

2.1

CEI in a Changing World

When the leaders of the Initiative met in Budapest in November 1989 to launch the *Quadrangular* connecting Italy, Austria, Hungary and Yugoslavia, the political order of post-war Europe was collapsing with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The CEI emerged within the broader process of European reunification, aiming to reduce the divide between East and West through political dialogue, regulatory convergence and regional cooperation.

Over the following decades, as the CEI expanded eastward while maintaining Italy as a central anchor, Europe underwent profound transformation. The enlargement of the European Union progressively reduced economic and political disparities across the former Iron Curtain, reinforcing the belief that interdependence, multilateralism and the rule of law could provide the foundations for a stable and integrated European order. The growing circulation of goods, capital, people and ideas was expected to foster prosperity, reduce conflict through interdependence, and strengthen supranational cooperation. In this context, the EU consolidated its role as a *sui generis* political and economic project combining integration, solidarity and shared governance. Connectivity became both the symbol and the driver of globalisation.

At the same time, the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia – one of the CEI's founding members – revealed the fragility of this transition and anticipated the persistence of instability on the European continent. Today, the geopolitical environment that shaped the CEI has fundamentally changed. The progressive erosion of the post-Cold War order has accelerated into a broader systemic crisis marked by renewed power competition, security fragmentation and the return of identity-based politics. Europe faces major vulnerabilities, including the incomplete integration of the Western Balkans and the security consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In this context, interdependence is increasingly perceived not only as a source of cooperation, but also as a potential instrument of coercion.

Connectivity – once associated with openness and globalisation – is now also viewed through the lens of resilience, strategic autonomy and security.

Globalisation itself has not disappeared but is evolving toward more selective and politically conditioned forms of integration, including friend-shoring and near-shoring. Within this landscape, the European Union stands out as one of the main expressions of the liberal order in a world drifting toward illiberal models of political and economic organisation, a shift increasingly described, within the G7 itself, as a historical rupture rather than a transition. The EU response has been to consolidate ties with like-minded partners across the globe: the recently signed Partnership Agreement with Mercosur and the established trade relationship with Canada under CETA trace a network built on shared rules across the globe. The CEI reproduces the same logic within

Europe itself, with one decisive difference: its members belong, or aspire to belong, to the same political community. Cooperation among them therefore serves not only the defence of a liberal model but the completion of the European family, giving the Initiative's mission an identity dimension that global partnerships cannot replicate. Candidate countries carry an additional geopolitical weight in this respect: beyond their place in that family, they are the natural connectors toward the Black Sea and the South Caucasus, the space on which the EU is concentrating growing strategic attention and resources. Nearly all of them sit within the CEI, and two, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, lie on the axis along which this engagement runs.

This evolving environment requires organisations such as the CEI to reassess their role and operating model. Rather than abandoning cooperation or preserving existing approaches unchanged, a more selective and value-based framework of integration may offer a viable path forward, linking regional cooperation more closely to political alignment, strategic resilience and shared principles. The rediscovery of Europe's constitutive values, the rule of law first among them, together with the continent's characteristic balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities, gives this selectivity its substantive criteria. In this framework, connectivity can no longer be understood as a universal principle of globalisation, but rather as a strategic choice grounded in trust, political alignment and shared interests. The sharing of critical infrastructure – including energy systems, transport corridors and digital networks – as well as regulatory standards, technological capabilities and scientific knowledge, increasingly reflects the existence of reliable political partnerships rather than simple economic interdependence. The region's recent experience has already given this principle concrete form: energy interdependence with Russia, long regarded as a stabilising factor, proved to be an instrument of coercion, and its unwinding since 2022 shows what selecting connectivity means in practice. Selectivity thus operates in both directions, deepening integration where political trust exists while reducing exposure where interdependence can be weaponised, in line with the logic underpinning the EU's economic security agenda.

As the pooling of coal and steel once provided the material foundation for reconciliation and integration in post-war Western Europe, today the development of shared strategic assets can strengthen cohesion within a broader European community. In this perspective, connectivity should remain at the core of the CEI's future Action Plan, not as a neutral or automatic policy objective, but as a political instrument shaped by common principles and mutual commitments. A selective connectivity, based on political decisions, is the key to the future reunification of Europe, a process in which the CEI can be instrumental. The CEI has already demonstrated this approach through its consistent support for Ukraine, affirming that cooperation and connectivity are sustainable only where there is political convergence and a shared understanding of risks and responsibilities. Ultimately, this strategic logic finds its natural conclusion in the progressive integration of all CEI members into the European Union. Over time, the CEI's relevance will rest as much on the mutual trust and shared political horizon of its members as on its institutional structures.

2.2

Addressing Contemporary Challenges through Connectivity

In the last years, many international organisations have begun revising their strategic frameworks and adopting action plans to address a geopolitical landscape defined by systemic instability and the urgent need for greater European autonomy. More specifically, the Russian aggression against Ukraine has transformed regional security into a primary concern for all CEI member states, highlighting the need for resilient infrastructure, secure supply chains and stronger regional coordination capable of supporting both civilian continuity and collective security.

The main challenge for the integration of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe is the fragility of the regional nexus. In this context, strengthening connectivity should become a long-term strategic priority for the CEI, not only as a tool for development, but also as an instrument of resilience, convergence and political cohesion.

This vision of connectivity, while holding its cornerstone in infrastructure and tangible assets, should increasingly incorporate regulatory convergence, technological cooperation and societal resilience within a broader strategic framework. By positioning connectivity at the heart of its strategic model, the CEI can contribute to shaping the transition toward a more integrated Europe, equally built on wealth, legal frameworks and human ties. This approach is anchored in the Initiative's role as a trusted partner for both EU member states and candidate countries, leveraging its unique multistakeholder methodology to act as a technical and political incubator for the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine).

The first dimension of this model, infrastructural connectivity, focuses on the tangible systems that power regional growth. Through its strategic partnership with the EBRD and the management of the CEI Fund, the Initiative facilitates high-impact technical cooperation in agribusiness, energy and transport. Going forward, such cooperation could increasingly prioritise strategic corridors, energy diversification, digital infrastructure and dual-use connectivity projects capable of reinforcing both economic integration and regional resilience.

A second strategic dimension concerns legal connectivity. Through judicial cooperation, anti-corruption capacity-building and the exchange of best practices among legal and administrative institutions, the CEI contributes to strengthening the rule of law across the region. Legal connectivity is strategic for the CEI mission as it works on one of the most sensitive topics related to the Copenhagen criteria and thus the future of European unification via the *acquis communautaire*. This dimension extends to the resilience of democratic institutions and information ecosystems against hybrid threats,

including disinformation.

Lastly, the CEI's model is deeply rooted in a people-centred approach that engages civil society, youth groups and academia. Engaging civil society across the CEI region is pivotal to understand what organisations could learn from others and what intangible assets (cultural or organisational) could be exploited by the Initiative to share best practices. It is also within this dimension that the CEI's alignment with the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals takes concrete form, translating global objectives into regional action. This people-to-people connectivity is exemplified by the *CEI Youth Agenda*, which fosters a sense of shared identity and democratic values across borders.

In an increasingly polarised geopolitical environment, strengthening societal ties and supporting generational exchanges should be considered a strategic investment in long-term regional stability. By promoting youth programmes, science diplomacy and cultural exchange, the Initiative can ensure that the benefits of European integration are felt at the local level.

Taken together, these different dimensions of connectivity (infrastructural, legal and people-to-people) position the CEI not only as a facilitator of cooperation, but as a platform for strategic convergence across Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Looking toward 2026 and beyond, the effectiveness of this integrated approach will depend on the Initiative's ability to align connectivity initiatives with broader European priorities related to resilience, enlargement, security and democratic cohesion.

In the current geopolitical environment, infrastructural connectivity is the most effective method to ensure autonomy, solidify cooperation and alliances and protect European citizens from external threats or unpredictable shocks. Roads, bridges, ports, energy grids, water and gas pipelines are an essential instrument to build wealth, grant security and promote shared interests, especially in a region like Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, still marked by great disparities.

This multidimensional understanding of connectivity reflects the Initiative's historical mission of fostering cohesion and gradual integration across a diverse European space marked by different political, economic and institutional realities. As a result, the entire field of critical infrastructure is today at the heart of the CEI's missions to improve the sustainability and resilience of the member states.

Although the CEI is not a direct financial investor, the Initiative possesses significant potential to contribute to the preparatory, technical and coordination phases of major regional projects through its partnerships, technical assistance mechanisms and multistakeholder approach. In the coming years, this role could become increasingly strategic as European institutions prioritise resilient and interoperable regional infrastructure.

In recent years the Initiative has invested time and resources especially in transportation, evolving toward a more impactful role through the adoption of quantifiable targets and synchronisation. The CEI's sustained support for Corridor VIII is an example of this endeavour; by linking the Adriatic and Black Seas, this corridor serves as a cornerstone of regional connectivity and aligns directly with the EU's Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) objectives, a relevance further heightened by the EU's new strategic approach to the Black Sea region. Through the Technical Cooperation Programme at the EBRD, the CEI has enabled the essential preparatory studies and engineering expertise required for member states to modernise these routes. A recent example is the feasibility study on the reactivation of direct passenger rail services along the historic Trieste–Ljubljana–Zagreb–Belgrade route, financed within the Joint Operational Plan between the CEI Executive Secretariat and the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region and carried out by Politecnico di Milano: the study assessed a section of the newly established Western Balkans–Eastern Mediterranean TEN-T corridor, identified a potential demand of around 260,000 passengers per year and outlined a phased reactivation of services up to Belgrade.³ Several of the Pan-European corridors crossing the CEI region, conceived in the 1990s as largely conceptual planning frameworks, have since been absorbed and given concrete form by the TEN-T network. In the coming years, this commitment could not only be sustained focusing on the completion of

3 CEI Executive Secretariat, "Rehabilitation of Rail Passenger Services along the Historic Route Trieste – Ljubljana – Zagreb – Belgrade", January 2025, <https://www.cei.int/news/10031/rehabilitation-of-rail-passenger-services-along-the-historic-route-trieste-ljubljana-zagreb-belgrade>

Corridor VIII, alongside other pivotal regional routes such as Corridors IV, V, VII and X, but could progressively expand toward projects with a stronger strategic and security dimension. To sustain this medium-term goal, one of the most promising fields of action is dual-use mobility. As the EU prioritises infrastructure that handles both civilian logistics and the military requirements necessary for collective defence, the CEI may align its planning more closely with the EU and act as a regional facilitator for the upcoming European investments. These investments could be conveyed either through the EU Permanent Structured Cooperation on Defence (PESCO) – with projects funded to lower informal and bureaucratic barriers among member states in order to speed up military deployment – or through the broader *Connecting Europe Facility*, the main funding scheme for TEN-T corridors that will have a dual use focus in the next years.

In this respect, there is also room for cooperation with other regional organisations, such as the RCC, whose strategy for a greener and more sustainable transport and delivery system is aligned with the CEI's key priorities; the Transport Community, which has developed a significant expertise in standards and regulations; and the 3SI, marked by a strong vocation for interregional networks. This latter forum is particularly significant for the successful implementation of transport and energy projects that the CEI could integrate and expand towards Eastern countries, like Ukraine, which are seeking better connectivity with Europe. Such collaboration could focus on bridging infrastructure gaps by extending North–South transport corridors and cross-border energy interconnectors to the East, which are vital for integrating Ukraine into the European single market. Strengthening coordination with these actors could allow the CEI to position itself as a regional platform for infrastructure interoperability and strategic connectivity across the wider European space.

The CEI has supported energy efficiency programmes, which successfully prepared regional markets for large-scale investments. At the same time, it has sustained water management projects (e.g., Belgrade Water Treatment Plant) and is devoting special attention to the feasibility of new water pipelines. Energy and water could both be strategic for the future development of digital infrastructure, for instance AI hubs and data centres, that are increasingly relevant in defining a competitive economy. By integrating these diverse dimensions of infrastructural connectivity – transport, energy, water and digital networks – the CEI could consolidate its role as a preeminent regional partner for the European Union within Central Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The Initiative's specialised focus on supporting ambitious infrastructure projects during their critical preliminary and technical preparation phases allows it to serve as a vital bridge between high-level political vision and physical execution. This strategic positioning can also enable the CEI to act as a reliable partner for the United Nations in advancing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By explicitly bridging SDG 9, which focuses on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, with Goal 3 for Good Health and Goal 13 for Climate Action, the CEI could ensure that regional connectivity is always characterised by a strong green sensitivity for a healthier ecosystem.

In the years ahead, the CEI could build on its multistakeholder model to facilitate the development of logistics hubs connecting Italy, the Western Balkans, Central Europe and the Eastern CEI member states, notably the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. The quality of the regional organisations committed to improving connectivity in the area is a valuable asset for the CEI's future, as the Initiative is traditionally a main facilitator for initiatives and projects from an early stage of development. Besides the EU, many governments are improving intermodal connections along the border regions of Poland and Romania with Ukraine. At the same time, new ambitious initiatives, such as the envisaged IMEC corridor, may bring additional investments in the region. The CEI could therefore position itself as a coordination platform capable of connecting emerging European and interregional infrastructure initiatives with the specific needs of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Ukraine's reconstruction, the largest rebuilding effort in Europe in decades, is the terrain on which this approach will be tested first: regional cooperation operates here as a force multiplier for recovery and resilience.

The future logistics hubs and pipelines would be powered by renewable energy micro-grids and equipped with EU-standard water treatment systems. By linking these hubs to the Corridor VIII extension and the Baltic-Adriatic axis, the CEI creates a physical environment where transport logistics are powered by sustainable energy and supported by resilient water infrastructure, ensuring that supply chains remain operational even under geopolitical stress. The CEI should seek structural integration with regional actors, creating a level of permanent project-based coordination transcending political dialogue and followed by professionals familiar with ambitious transnational infrastructural projects. Furthermore, building cross-border infrastructure demands harmonised regulatory frameworks and the consistent application of the rule of law; by providing the legal expertise required for these projects, the CEI fosters an environment of institutional trust and shared standards. This is crucial when integrating candidate countries and non-EU members into the European framework.

Ultimately, the CEI's comparative advantage lies not in financing infrastructure itself, but in creating the political, technical and institutional conditions that make strategic investments possible.

As infrastructure becomes increasingly intertwined with security, competitiveness, energy resilience and European integration, the Initiative has the opportunity to evolve from a facilitator of regional dialogue into a recognised platform for project preparation, coordination and implementation support. By bringing together governments, international financial institutions, regional organisations and the private sector, the CEI can help transform connectivity into a genuine strategic asset for Europe. In this perspective, infrastructure is not merely about transport corridors, energy grids or digital networks; it is about strengthening Europe's cohesion, resilience and capacity to act in an increasingly fragmented geopolitical environment.

2.4

Strengthening Legal Connectivity

The CEI has been instrumental in the “soft” integration of the region by strengthening the rule of law. This is a practical and impactful aspect for the EU accession and therefore a key priority for the CEI’s near future. In this sense, initiatives such as the Falcone Borsellino Programme represent a successful model for capacity-building in the legal sphere.

Named after the two Italian judges killed by the mafia, the Programme aims at strengthening the rule of law by exporting Italy’s proven anti-mafia and anti-corruption expertise.

By training judges, prosecutors and law enforcement officials to combat transnational organised crime and corruption, the CEI helps candidate states align their jurisprudence with EU standards. This technical alignment is a functional necessity for fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and could be a blueprint for future initiatives in this field aimed at supporting institutional resilience, transparency and best legislative practices to strengthen a rule-of-law-based order across the region.

In this respect, the CEI can bridge regional initiatives, such as the RCC-led *Western Balkans Working Group on Justice* or the RAI, with a wider network of diverse legal traditions, encompassing Central and Eastern legislative frameworks. The Initiative could be useful to its members by sharing practical knowledge in areas like public procurement, where lack of accountability and poor procedures continue to generate vulnerabilities. Over time, the creation of permanent expert networks or joint technical pools could further reinforce regional administrative capacity and legal interoperability.

In the same domain of societal resilience for democracy, another critical frontier for regional co-planning is the digital sphere, specifically in the fight against disinformation. As the European Union moves toward adopting the *Democracy Shield* and the Council of Europe the *New democratic Pact for Europe*, the CEI possesses the localised competencies and civil society contacts necessary to co-design a regional implementation strategy. By exploiting its existing networks with media professionals, youth organisations and NGOs, the CEI can serve as a regional observatory for democratic resilience. This mission is in line with the CEI’s past guidelines and might be particularly impactful in a region heavily targeted by disinformation campaigns featuring AI algorithms and deep fakes. In the coming years, strengthening societal resilience and trusted information ecosystems, including AI, may become an increasingly important dimension of regional security and democratic stability.

Both legal connectivity and the support for societal resilience can rely on the CEI multistakeholder model and therefore be pursued in coordination with other regional organisations, such as the SEECP, which are addressing

threats to democratic security in the regional dimension. This “bottom-up” and, at the same time, transversal and interinstitutional approach ensures that the EU’s strategy for the region is grounded in territorial reality, effectively strengthening democracy and the rule of law across all member states through a coordinated, multi-institutional response to contemporary hybrid threats.

Looking ahead, the CEI has the opportunity to position itself as a supporting structure for legal connectivity. By fostering networks of legal experts, judicial institutions and public authorities, it can transform legal cooperation from a technical exercise into a strategic instrument for European integration, democratic resilience and regional security.

In this perspective, legal connectivity becomes not only a prerequisite for EU accession, but also a cornerstone of a more resilient, cohesive and rules-based Europe.

2.5

Sustaining People-to-People Connectivity

Connecting peoples is the great vision for the EU that regional organisations like the CEI are pursuing. In this regard, the CEI is developing a dual anchor, bridging the global mandates of the United Nations with the specific integration goals of the European Union. While its observer status at the UNGA allows it to translate the 2030 Agenda into regional action, the CEI's operational strength increasingly derives from its alignment with the EU's Enlargement Policy and the *Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*. In the coming years, this dual-track positioning could strengthen the CEI's role as a platform capable of connecting global development priorities with concrete regional integration processes.

This dimension also carries a task of reconciliation. In a region where historical fractures and unresolved legacies still shape mutual perceptions, multiplying the occasions of encounter and joint work among societies helps transform inherited divisions into shared projects. Born to overcome the deepest divide in the continent's recent history, the CEI today extends the same vocation to the fractures internal to its own region, uniting peoples rather than merely connecting governments.

This dual-track approach transforms the CEI into a transmission belt that takes UN Sustainable Development Goals and filters them through EU technical standards and co-funding instruments. A primary example is the focus on empowering people-to-people exchanges, a goal reiterated by the CEI Action Plan and aimed at strengthening the Initiative's Local Dimension.

As the CEI's role is particularly active in business harmonisation through its economic dimensions, a possible contact with local issues is the further promotion of Social Entrepreneurship Incubators. These incubators could support traditional SME advisory services to support start-ups, effectively linking the UN's focus on decent work with the EU's Youth Guarantee and other funds devoted to entrepreneurship.

People-to-people connectivity takes concrete form in structured exchanges across societies: youth mobility and volunteering schemes, cooperation among local administrations on shared challenges such as urban services and territorial resilience, and peer exchanges among technical and operational bodies, from fire brigades and civil protection services to public utilities, whose accumulated know-how circulates poorly through intergovernmental channels alone. A growing digital dimension can sustain these exchanges horizontally: shared platforms, joint training and virtual networks allow municipalities, professional communities and youth organisations across the CEI region to cooperate directly and continuously, at limited cost and regardless of distance. Investing in this digital layer would extend the reach of the CEI's people-to-people instruments and thicken the web of micro-collaborations already fostered through the Cooperation Fund.

The CEI should reward initiatives intertwining UN SDGs, particularly for the

protection of environment and carbon footprint reduction, with technology and innovation. In connection with the effort made in the judiciary field, this kind of initiative should import global best practices into local sensitivities, which was one of the directives of the Chair's Statement.

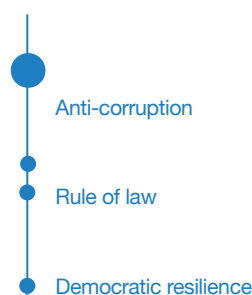
By fostering a circular social economy at the territorial level, the CEI creates a professional horizon especially for the younger generation, directly addressing the “brain drain” phenomenon that threatens regional stability. The importance of addressing the youth of the CEI member states is closely linked with the Initiative's ability to reach out for local partnerships, including associations and NGOs that, in many cases, have a deep youth-oriented mission. Strengthening these territorial networks could progressively become one of the main instruments through which the CEI consolidates social resilience, regional identity and public support for European integration.

Ultimately, people-to-people connectivity is where the CEI's mission becomes tangible for citizens: by investing in youth, education and exchanges among societies, the Initiative turns European integration from an institutional process into a shared experience, building the societal foundations on which regional stability ultimately rests.

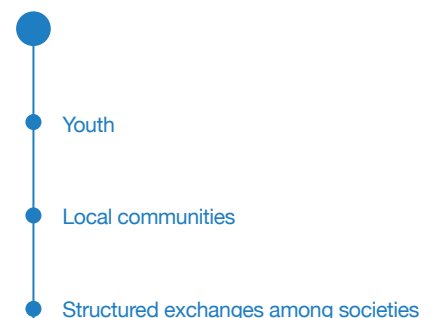
Infrastructural connectivity



Legal connectivity



People-to-people connectivity



Connectivity, the guiding thread of the CEI's future action

3.1

Repositioning the CEI for the Future

Recent European experience has demonstrated that institutional and economic integration alone are not sufficient to generate lasting political cohesion or public trust. While the European integration process has significantly reduced divisions across the continent, important gaps persist between supranational governance and local societal realities. In this context, regional organisations capable of connecting political cooperation with territorial and societal dimensions are likely to acquire increasing strategic relevance.

Within this evolving environment, the CEI retains a distinctive role as a flexible regional platform linking European integration objectives with the specific historical, political and cultural realities of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. The Initiative's long-term relevance will depend not only on its contribution to enlargement and regional cooperation, but also on its capacity to strengthen people-to-people ties, support local partnerships and reinforce public ownership of the broader European project.

As progressive EU integration advances among CEI member states, the Initiative may increasingly evolve from a primarily intergovernmental forum toward a platform complementary to the EU, focused on societal resilience, parliamentary cooperation, cultural dialogue, youth engagement and cross-border networks.

In this perspective, strengthening institutional capacity, communication, cultural outreach and youth engagement becomes essential to consolidating the CEI's long-term regional relevance and public legitimacy.

The following considerations aim to strengthen the Initiative's institutional effectiveness, public visibility and long-term regional impact, while consolidating its role as a bridge between European strategic objectives and the everyday realities of the communities it serves.

3.2

Cultural and Scientific Dimension

Within the framework of aligning EU and UN strategies, the CEI already operates on a clear trajectory where cultural cooperation acts as the fundamental catalyst for technological progression, socio-economic development and, ultimately, regional integration. Promoting mutual understanding, good neighbourly relations and social cohesion through intercultural dialogue and respect for cultural diversity stands as a core CEI priority.

As a key driver of human and social development, culture contributes significantly to inclusive and sustainable growth. In this context, cultural diplomacy serves as a vital instrument, advancing EU fundamental values and mediating historical divide and national differences.

Crucially, as many of these activities actively engage young people, cultural cooperation serves as a cross-cutting contributor to the region's Youth Agenda. At the institutional level, this mandate is addressed within both the CEI governmental and parliamentary dimensions. Within the latter, a dedicated committee focuses on cultural affairs, having recently expanded its scope to address the critical protection of cultural heritage in times of war, with particular reference to Ukraine. Strategically, the Initiative supports the preservation and management of cultural heritage across all its member states, promotes equal access to culture and encourages mobility of artists and cultural operators. To build on this work already initiated, a strategic partnership with the Venice *UNESCO Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe* could offer valuable opportunities to link, once again, local sensitivities with the wider international Agenda.

A special position in the CEI Agenda is also played by Science Diplomacy, a sector bridging theoretical knowledge with potential technological fallout. The strategic investments in innovation could yield tangible outcomes for regional security and human welfare across the research spectrum and could be particularly significant in healthcare: by integrating health research into this innovative ecosystem, the CEI could improve member states' resilience against future threats, capitalising on the lessons learned from the pandemic. This comprehensive approach to culture is fully reinforced by the EU's New European *Innovation Agenda*, which the CEI helps implement by providing the technical assistance necessary for candidate states to join European Research Area (ERA) hubs. The recent role of the Initiative as co-chair of the EU Science Diplomacy Alliance should be leveraged to integrate more closely science diplomacy and EU ambitions, forging an operational partnership for the region with the CEI at its core.

The Central European Initiative has historically recognised that the reunification of the European family cannot be achieved only through high-level diplomatic protocols but requires a civil society appeal that fosters a bottom-up sense of belonging. Establishing a successful portfolio of awards and scholarships, such as the *CEI Award for Young Writers* in partnership with the Vilenica International Literary Festival and the CEI-Trieste Film Festival Award, the Initiative has created incentives for cultural and intellectual exchange. This strategy should now be emphasised and expanded to serve as the narrative backbone of the new communication strategy, linking the Initiative's project-oriented mission with its overarching political aspiration of continental integration.

A significant step in this direction could be the establishment of a prestigious new CEI award named after a political figure who played a seminal role in the achievement of European unity. This award could draw inspiration from the existing *CEI SEEMO Award for Outstanding Merits in Journalism*, which represents a practical example of how the Initiative encourages media freedom.

The future CEI award would be conferred upon individuals or entities from CEI member states who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to the field of European integration through regional cooperation – ranging from the rule of law and human rights to the development of a functioning market economy – thereby accelerating the accession of candidate countries to the European Union.

The award could be conferred upon proposal by member states (through bodies such as the CNC) and connected with the parliamentary dimension of the Initiative which could be involved in the awarding process. Such a high-profile recognition would not only honour the Initiative's heritage but also provide a powerful storytelling tool for the Executive Secretariat to demonstrate the practical impact of CEI-supported values on the ground.

3.4

Youth Agenda

The CEI Youth Agenda represents one of the most pressing challenges for the long-term sustainability of the Initiative, and its strategic importance spans across communication and parliamentary dialogue. Currently, the CEI's commitment for youth is supported by high-level multilateral partnerships.

A major milestone in this regard is the recently acquired observer status within the Council of Europe's youth committees, specifically the *European Steering Committee for Youth* (CDEJ) and the *Joint Council on Youth* (CMJ). This positioning allows the CEI to become increasingly familiar with the landscape of youth policies, interact with institutional best practices and mainstream Council of Europe standards across its region. Similarly, cooperation with expert bodies like UNICEF has proven highly valuable for the Initiative, as demonstrated by the CEI's active role in promoting and financing UNICEF's UPSHIFT social entrepreneurship programme among member governments. Even if the CEI mandate is intergovernmental – and therefore the main goal of the Initiative in this field is to align youth policies across its members – over the years the Secretariat has established direct contacts with Youth Councils and engaged youth directly through awards like "IMAGINE" (Active Young Citizens for Sustainable Development in CEI and All Areas) or the "Youth in Business" programme, powered through the CEI EBRD Fund. A deeper understanding of youth policies could advance in parallel with a new activism of the CEI's Parliamentary Dimension.

By valorising young parliamentarians across member states, possibly in connection with the *Interparliamentary Union* (IPU), the CEI can foster a new generation of political leaders who are invested in the mission of the Initiative. The establishment of a network of young parliamentarians would follow the best practices coming from other international organisations, like OSCE, and signal a tangible investment in the future.

The conditions for such a step are favourable. The Romanian Presidency for 2026 has placed the engagement of young people among its priorities, treating investment in the next generation as an investment in the future of the Initiative itself. The Parliamentary Dimension, for its part, has shown renewed vitality: the Parliamentary Assembly held in Belgrade in November 2025 closed with a final document calling for stronger interparliamentary cooperation on common standards for emerging technologies, while the Convention for the Strengthening of the CEI, which gathered representatives of governments and parliaments in three joint sessions in 2024, demonstrated that the Initiative can mobilise both dimensions around its own institutional future. A network of young parliamentarians could build on this momentum through a structured partnership with the European Youth

Parliament (EYP), an organisation the CEI already counts among its partners. CEI young parliamentarians could host an annual EYP session dedicated to youth and policies, with the resulting resolutions formally presented to the General Committees, while EYP delegates could in turn be associated with the work of the Parliamentary Assembly.

Drawing on the co-management model of the Council of Europe's youth sector, which the CEI observes from within through the CDEJ and the CMJ, youth representatives could ultimately be associated with the design of the CEI's strategic youth initiatives, starting with the youth chapter of the next *Plan of Action*.

Conclusion

The geopolitical environment that originally shaped the CEI has profoundly changed. Yet the Initiative's core mission (fostering dialogue, trust and regional cohesion across Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe) remains highly relevant within an increasingly fragmented European landscape.

The future of the CEI will depend not only on its capacity to support infrastructural, legal and people-to-people connectivity, but also on its ability to strengthen the relationship between European integration and local communities. Recent European experience has demonstrated that institutional integration alone cannot generate lasting political cohesion without a parallel process of social and cultural convergence.

The progressive integration of all CEI member states into the European Union should not be regarded as the end of the Initiative's mission, but rather as the beginning of a new phase.

Membership in the Union does not in itself hold a region together: as the experience of Benelux and Nordic cooperation shows, regional formats retain their function inside the EU.

The overarching objective of the CEI, keeping Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe connected as a coherent regional space, will therefore remain valid however far enlargement proceeds. The CEI may increasingly evolve from a platform primarily devoted to intergovernmental cooperation into a complementary regional framework focused on societal resilience, parliamentary dialogue, youth engagement and cross-border civic cooperation.

At a time when the idea of Europe is increasingly tested by geopolitical fragmentation and competing political narratives, the CEI's regional specificity and multistakeholder approach represent a strategic asset. The long-term credibility of both the Initiative and the wider European project will ultimately depend not only on institutional arrangements, but also on the capacity to preserve a genuine sense of shared destiny among European societies.

The Chair's Statement, issued in March 2026, sketched a clear roadmap that should remain the foundation for the Initiative's future vision. The CEI should consolidate its past achievements by investing in regional connectivity and societal resilience, strengthening the partnership with relevant stakeholders, such as the EU and the UN, and other regional organisations and initiatives. To enhance its regional efficacy, the CEI is concentrating its efforts on two high-priority geographical corridors: the Eastern Partnership, specifically focusing on the new candidate countries Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkans.

In the coming years, the CEI has the potential to enhance both its visibility and its attractiveness, laying the ground for a possible enlargement of its membership. Today, the CEI supports different kinds of initiatives, in keeping with its mission of pursuing closer integration among its member states. In this sense, the Initiative today acts as a unique forum for political dialogue that can offer a neutral space for frank exchanges between EU and non-EU member states. The rotating Presidency, the parliamentary dimension and the multistakeholder approach ensure that this dialogue is always connected with national political priorities and linked, through the member states, to any other relevant international organisation in the region.

As EU enlargement gains momentum and European unity comes under increasing pressure, the CEI remains an unparalleled incubator of ideas and initiatives involving international institutions, national politics, business and civil society.

The analysis conducted in this paper points to several avenues that the Initiative could take forward. In the infrastructural domain, there is room to consolidate the Initiative's role in the preparation of strategic projects along the corridors crossing the region, building on experiences such as the Trieste–Belgrade study, and to extend this expertise toward dual-use mobility and energy and digital resilience. In the legal domain, the networks of judicial and administrative cooperation tested through the Falcone Borsellino Programme would benefit from a more structured footing, coupled with initiatives on democratic resilience in the information space. In the societal domain, there is clear room for growth in the Youth Agenda, in science diplomacy and in cultural cooperation, including a renewed portfolio of awards anchored in regional cooperation. Finally, there is a strong case for consolidating the Initiative's financial and institutional base, capitalising on the multiplier effect of the CEI Fund and on the flexibility of the Cooperation Fund, and pursuing the recognition of the CEI as an implementing entity for EU delegated cooperation, along the lines advocated by the Italian Senate's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee. Building on solid historical roots and successful past projects, the CEI is positioned to remain an important actor in the reunification of Europe.

1989 ↗ 2026

from the fall of the Berlin Wall
to a Europe awaiting reunification

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