



CEI Plan of Action 2024-2026

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INTRODUCTION

Elaborated by the CEI-Executive Secretariat, in cooperation with the Member States¹, the *CEI Plan of Action* is conceived as a flexible and dynamic tool for manifold cooperation in the framework of the CEI, complementing the *CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure* - the statutory document of the Organisation.

In advancing its mission as a regional intergovernmental forum working on European integration and sustainable development as well as addressing the challenges faced by the region, the CEI provides a platform for upholding political dialogue and project cooperation through maintaining cooperative relations and building confidence among the Member States. It also cooperates with the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), other international and regional organisations, international financial institutions especially the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), public or private institutions, non-governmental organisations, as well as with other partners.

CEI Strategic approach to regional cooperation

The CEI Plan of Action (PoA) is a strategic framework tailored to meet the needs of the Member States, while encouraging solidarity and cohesion among them, and advancing the mission of the Organisation to achieve two strategic objectives for the region, i.e.:

Strategic Objective 1: Supporting European integration, and Strategic Objective 2: Promoting sustainable development.

These processes are guided by various normative documents, policies and strategies mainly of the EU and the UN (in particular the *UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs). For the attainment of the desired results, however, they call for a joint action and coordinated approach from the whole international community, including from regional organisations and intergovernmental fora. In this regard, the CEI is particularly well placed to complement efforts.

Through the implementation of the PoA, the CEI aims to bring its Member States closer together in joint initiatives in a structured and result-oriented manner, combining policy dialogue, project cooperation, partnerships and a multistakeholder approach towards the realisation of the two strategic objectives. The PoA builds on the political indications and views provided by CEI governments on the occasion of the meetings held in the previous triannual period, on the results obtained with the projects and partnerships, as well as on regular introspective assessments of the CEI's performance by its structures. Indications and inputs by other relevant stakeholders concur to the PoA. Thanks to this approach, the CEI sets the course for actions to respond effectively to the changing conditions, while also capitalising on the obtained results. Such an approach is also amplifying the impact of the activities in furthering the mission and in tackling the manifold persistent, complex and new challenges of the region.

Through this approach, the CEI has faced one of the most serious recent challenges: Russia's unprovoked full-scale military invasion of Ukraine started in February 2022 (in continuation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine that has been ongoing since February 2014). Driven by their shared values for solidarity and cohesion, the CEI Member States urgently intervened in support of Ukraine. The CEI's reaction was expressed: firstly, by

¹ According to the CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure the CEI Member States are: Republic of Albania, Republic of Belarus (suspended) Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Bulgaria, Republic of Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Italian Republic, Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Poland, Romania, Republic of Serbia, Slovak Republic, Republic of Slovenia and Ukraine.

condemning - through political statements - the Russian aggression against Ukraine and suspending the Republic of Belarus from its rights of representation due to its support to the Russian Federation; and secondly, by promptly providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and its people through the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as well as directly to Ukrainian beneficiaries.

The CEI's immediate political and financial support to Ukraine provided in the early days of the war has paved the way for new initiatives to further support the country, and to address the consequences for the region. With Ukraine being under direct Russia's unprovoked full-scale military invasion and the rest of the Member States being geographically situated in the vicinity of the war of aggression, the CEI has pursued coordinated initiatives to face the unprecedented challenges for the region, thus showing remarkable unity and resilience to crises as well as capacity to swiftly put forward common solutions. Moreover, instruments fostering regional cooperation, such as the CEI, have once again demonstrated their usefulness in tackling issues transcending national borders.

While on one side the CEI region had to cope with a war of aggression on its territory, on the other, the armed invasion confirmed the importance of continuing with the political project of European integration. In this regard, Ministers, Parliamentarians and experts - in their deliberations on the occasion of the CEI meetings - have been united in the belief that European integration was more than ever the response needed to the current challenges, and the only possible way to keep peace, stability, security and prosperity in Europe.

In addition, the CEI has continued to pursue sustainable development in its activities and projects, also through the promotion of the UN 2030 Agenda, thus contributing to the tangible implementation of various SDGs.

Last but not least, the CEI has continued to focus on areas identified as priority fields of interest for cooperation among its Member States, such as connectivity, economic recovery, health, sustainable energy, youth, women empowerment and others.

Current international context

Acknowledging the rapidly changing international context and defining, thereby, a joint approach among the Member States in managing pressing issues is of great importance. Current realities linked to the challenges, confirm the importance of a secure and prosperous region.

Today's international context concerning the region, among numerous issues such as the unbalanced socio-economic recovery from the hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental emergencies and others, is marked by the aggression by the Russian Federation against the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders of one of the CEI Member States - Ukraine.

This war of aggression has brought about an immense loss of lives, and a huge humanitarian and economic toll on Ukraine, while also causing ripple effects across the entire CEI region. Numerous sectors such as energy, food industry, agriculture, healthcare, education and research have become particularly vulnerable and exposed to mounting disruptions in the supply chains. The everyday lives of citizens have been directly affected by economic difficulties, uncertainty of energy supplies, spikes in energy prices and rising inflation, coupled with increased security risks. This situation may have far-reaching geopolitical consequences.

Under such circumstances, the boost in the EU enlargement process in 2022, which led to the opening of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, followed by granting of the EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine as well as to Bosnia and Herzegovina, provided hope for the CEI non-EU countries. It was considered as a major step towards furthering European integration, thus safeguarding the security and mitigating the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine itself and its direct neighbour - Moldova. It was also considered as the right answer to the concerns about its potential ramifications in the Western Balkans. As a result, such developments, along with the suspension of Belarus due to its support to

the war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, have had an impact on the membership of the CEI: all non-EU Member States are now EU candidates. Yet, there are expectations for further breakthrough as regards EU enlargement.

As for sustainable development, 2023 marked the halfway point of the *UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. In this regard, a mid-term review of the implementation of the SDGs took place in New York on the occasion of the *High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development* in July 2023 and the *2023 SDG Summit* convened under the auspices of the General Assembly in September. The findings have shown that many efforts have been made in the implementation of the Agenda and its 17 SDGs, yet gaps and needs persisted. Better coordination of sustainable development actions encouraging the implementation of the SDGs was, therefore, needed. Challenges and threats such as rising inequalities and vulnerabilities, environmental pressures and climate change, and others, are still to be taken into account by all.

Considering the pressing and complex challenges for the region, but also the existence of an untapped potential of opportunities, there is the necessity for the countries to cooperate in the spirit of international and regional cooperation and effective multilateralism. To this end, addressing them collectively and more systematically at regional level, through intergovernmental frameworks such as the CEI, could be a possible way forward. Indeed, given the transitional character of the challenges and the size and nature of the CEI as a multilateral intergovernmental forum, the Organisation has a great opportunity to shape global and European efforts, thereby generating a desirable impact at a larger geographical scale and future progress through an enhanced common and effective regional agenda.

CEI working methodology: an asset to address the current challenges

The CEI has, over the years, developed a specific methodology based on two fundamental pillars: multilateral diplomacy and project cooperation, with a special focus on strategic partnerships with other international and regional organisations and a multistakeholder approach, the latter involving NGOs, academia, businesses, etc. This methodology has obtained concrete positive outcomes and given new momentum to regional cooperation. The main added value of the CEI's work lies in the interrelation between the policy dimension and its operational translation into the definition of relevant policies and projects, nourishing tangible results on the ground.

This working methodology is crucial in order to address the international context. The final aim is to promote multilateral activities that offer a joint approach towards European integration and sustainable development, placing focus on cohesion and solidarity, in particular between CEI EU and non-EU Member States, and towards meeting the challenges.

The main drivers of the CEI working methodology are its dimensions, namely Governmental, Parliamentary, Economic and Local (the latter still in its build-up phase), and its funds and instruments. The annually rotating Presidency provides the general framework for the activities, while the everyday activities linked to this operational method are handled by the CEI-Executive Secretariat (CEI-ES). The CEI-ES is also undertaking appropriate initiatives to promote the accomplishment of the CEI mission.

The *Governmental Dimension* is the core policy pillar of the CEI focused on multilateral diplomacy. It operates in the context of its structures, i.e. through a Committee of National Co-ordinators (CNC), which is the key body responsible for the management of CEI cooperation, and through CEI high-level meetings, such as the annual Meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Summits of the Heads of Government, as well as sectorial ministerial or expert meetings. *The Parliamentary Dimension* focuses on the activities related to the promotion of cooperation among parliaments through its own structures, while *the Economic Dimension's* main activity consists of a CEI Economic Forum as well as of other activities with related stakeholders.

The CEI channels its resources to project activities through the following *funds and instruments*:

- The *CEI Co-operation Fund* financed by annual contributions from all Member States: the Fund is designed to implement the CEI strategic goals and objectives through a number of streams. These range from short-term activities such as meetings, workshops, conferences, trainings (events in general) aimed at creating longer term relations, networks and partnerships with various stakeholders within the region, to larger and longer-term activities within a focused section identified by the CNC annually with a view to cope with particularly felt challenge/s or sector/s. The Co-operation Fund also co-finances CEI Flagship Events. They are Cooperation Activities which have an added value and strategic significance in pursuing the CEI mission, and ensure high visibility and media outreach to the CEI. The Fund is also designed for pursuing cooperation with other international and regional organisations on activities of mutual interest. It is also aimed at facilitating the Member State holding the annual CEI Presidency in the implementation of activities pursuing the priority goals set for the year.
- The *CEI Fund at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)* fully financed by the Italian Government: provides grant-type assistance in the form of *Technical Cooperation (TC)* projects in support of investment and non-investment operations of the EBRD including prefeasibility and feasibility studies, project implementation, management training, capacity building and pre-loan audits. The Fund's beneficiaries are private and public sector clients in the non-EU CEI Member States.
- The CEI Fund at the EBRD also contributes to the *Know-how Exchange Programme (KEP)*: a grant facility aimed at promoting European integration by supporting capacity building and best practice transfer from institutions in EU CEI countries to the benefit of recipients in non-EU CEI Member States.
- The CEI is also active in the field of EU project management: by participating in EU-funded projects, the CEI is able to achieve tangible results, enlarge its cooperation networks and ultimately contribute to the implementation of EU policies in the broad area covered by its membership. The CEI's ability to design and implement EU-funded projects, involving partner institutions from EU candidate countries, is a major CEI asset allowing it to provide a tangible contribution to European integration, and in particular to the EU enlargement process.

In combination with multilateral diplomacy, project cooperation allows for concrete results in areas where the CEI is uniquely suited to provide a comparative advantage and to create spillover effects especially in terms of generating further financial and human resources as well as knowledge. To give some concrete examples: the CEI Co-operation Fund contributes to the mobility of participants from the CEI countries in activities of regional character focused on topical issues, and helps the organisers attract additional financial resources for their projects. The TC projects financed out of the CEI Fund at the EBRD often yield high co-financing ratios, thus mobilising substantive international investments. It is estimated that - since the start of the Fund's operation - for each Euro committed for technical assistance by the Fund, the EBRD and its financial partners have invested over 230 EUR. In addition, the CEI funds and instruments also help establish a broad cooperative network with numerous stakeholders throughout the region in various sectors.

In order to foster both policy and project-oriented cooperation based on solid mutual knowledge and synergies towards achieving the same goals, the creation of *strategic partnerships* is of utmost importance for the CEI and is considered a part of normal working practice. In this context, the CEI constantly works on strengthening relations with the EU and its institutions, the UN and its specialised agencies, programmes and related bodies - deploying its Observer Status in the UN General Assembly - as well as with other international and regional organisations, including those focused on important areas for European integration such as connectivity, environment, anti-corruption, migration, health. With some of these organisations, cooperation is based on Memoranda of Understanding.

Moreover, capturing the vision of a connected, economically empowered and sustainable region, the CEI strives to include in the implementation of its activities not only the governmental level, but also other public and private actors (e.g. enterprises), local actors, academia and civil society, through a bottom-up approach, fostering thereby a genuine *multistakeholder approach*. Over the three decades of its existence, the CEI has established a wide outreach and a unique network of stakeholders and non-governmental actors.

Way forward: an agenda for the future

In addressing issues of transitional character, in particular those linked to the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, economic hardships, growing environmental challenges and threats, societal changes and others, intergovernmental cooperation remains of utmost importance for several reasons: inter-governmental bodies are well-positioned to support dialogue and exchange of views among numerous countries and stakeholders, and to promote multi-sector collaboration and knowledge sharing, helping countries develop best practices in a constructive environment.

Because of its geographical composition and working methodology, the CEI is the ideally suited for taking into account the needs and priorities of the countries and transforming them into tangible outcomes. It is only natural that complex issues, in particular as regards the security-European integration nexus, be dealt within the framework of an intergovernmental organisation such as the CEI, which gathers all countries concerned by these. Therefore, it is more important than ever to further uphold the constructive environment conducive to stable and prosperous region.

Looking ahead, the magnitude of the regional challenges implies that the CEI should significantly increase its capacity to deliver.

Against this backdrop, the current document provides a framework for actions needed to pursue the current challenges and trends, in accordance with fundamental principles of international law and the UN Charter, while creating cohesion between the CEI countries in the implementation of the two strategic objectives and their transformation into tangible results for the Member States.

To do so, the current PoA (2024-2026) is centred around two main interconnected and mutually reinforcing pillars: 1. *CEI Political Agenda*, defining, in particular, the joint line of action among the Member States, and 2. *CEI Thematic Agenda*, identifying the objectives in various fields.

CHAPTER I: CEI Political Agenda 2024-2026

Today's geopolitical scenario is profoundly different from that of 1989 when the CEI was established. In the early years of its creation, regional cooperation proved to be a valuable tool to face turbulent times in Europe and a successful model for fostering European integration process as the most important project for upholding the peace, security and economic development of the continent. It also laid the foundations for the EU enlargements, which included numerous countries from Central and Eastern Europe. Under such circumstances, the CEI was seen as a very useful actor where the countries in the initial stage of the membership were "learning" from countries already part of the EU, or embedded in the integration process. Yet, the EU enlargement process despite the promising results in those years, has reached a stalemate over the last decade.

In light of increasing, complex and new challenges affecting the international peace and security, as well as the need for a further breakthrough in the EU enlargement process, there is a greater demand from the Central, Eastern and South-Eastern European countries for a stronger promotion of European integration as the right model to effectively address the vulnerabilities of our times. In this regard, an Organisation like the CEI, bringing these countries into one solid and compact group, could represent an opportunity by providing quick and flexible solutions.

Especially now that all non-EU CEI Member States are EU candidates, thus sharing the same goals and democratic values with the EU countries, the Organisation has become even more consolidated. To this end, possibilities for the CEI to become a strong interlocutor in favour of the EU enlargement should be explored.

Against this background, given the key role played by regional cooperation in the European integration process, and EU enlargement, it is deemed necessary to further put this process as a central element of the CEI activities. This would enable the CEI to act as an "EU enlargement advocate" for the non-EU CEI countries.

Hence, the CEI will remain fully committed to promoting, on the one side, the objectives and benefits of the process, and, on the other, to keeping the countries interested in pursuing reforms by adequately meeting the necessary requirements. Indeed, the EU enlargement process requires the adoption and implementation of numerous standards in various sectors, transparent institutions able to cope with issues such as organised crime and corruption, illegal migration, development of good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, full respect for democratic values and rule of law, further economic integration preparing economies to compete, among others, while complying with environmental standards. These issues will be adequately addressed through the *CEI Thematic Agenda 2024-2026*.

In this regard, the support and the transfer of knowledge on enlargement issues from CEI EU to non-EU Member States is considered of paramount importance and value, but also an enhanced cooperation between and among the CEI countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern countries (Moldova and Ukraine).

By placing European integration deep "at the heart" of its core business, the aim of such efforts will be to enable the CEI to deliver on its mandate more effectively and accountably, and, therefore, better positioning it to face European and global challenges and making it more resilient.

To this end, the CEI will also remain fully committed to the promotion of sustainable development as a complementary process, as well as to facing all challenges concerning the region, such as those linked to the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and other topical issues.

1.1 Addressing the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has provoked dramatic damages. It has brought about a humanitarian tragedy in the country and catastrophic consequences affecting the lives of citizens and economies world-wide.

In the early phase of the aggression, the CEI immediately reacted by condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine through political statements, by suspending the Republic of Belarus from its rights of representation due to its actions in support of the aggression and by providing for continuous assistance to Ukraine through the CEI Cooperation Fund and the CEI Fund at the EBRD.

In the upcoming period, the CEI will continue to support Ukraine with both political and financial means, and to make all possible efforts to reach a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine based on the *Ukrainian Peace Formula* in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter and norms of the international law. It will also continue to support the country in all spheres, including restoration of territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders. At the same time, tangible activities will be envisaged with the aim to assist the implementation of the development - within the CEI framework - of *Forward-looking initiatives for restoration and assistance to Ukraine*, tabled by the country in 2023, by:

- providing aid in the treatment and rehabilitation of Ukrainian citizens;
- assisting in restoring the energy infrastructure of Ukraine;
- promoting digitalisation;
- supporting logistics projects within the framework of increasing food security;
- supporting development of transport system to include Ukrainian logistics routes in the TEN-T network;
- supporting restoration of Ukrainian transport infrastructure;
- supporting restoration of critical infrastructure by priority (short-term - restructuring of the "loan portfolio", repurposing of existing projects for urgent needs, support in the implementation of key reforms; medium-term - retroactive financing of infrastructure projects, support for the operation of critical infrastructure, ensuring proper winter maintenance of roads; and long-term - preparation of new projects for the restoration and development of transport infrastructure according to MFI procedures, preparation of feasibility studies for large infrastructure projects, conducting researches on prioritization of infrastructure restoration).

Furthermore, initiatives put forward by the countries - in the framework of the CEI structures - will also be considered, in order to further support the country, but also to cope with consequences for the region in various sectors, in accordance with the *CEI Thematic Agenda*. Decisions about the use of the CEI funds and instruments to this end will be regularly reviewed.

1.2 Intensifying policy dialogue on issues of strategic importance

Policy dialogue is the main CEI instrument for addressing the challenges faced by the region. In this regard, the Governmental Dimension, as its core pillar, will continue to promptly respond and provide guidelines for further actions, in particular, through its high-level structures. Sectorial ministerial meetings will be particularly encouraged as they usefully complement the political dialogue by taking into account key strategic priorities in the region. Efforts will be made to enhance coordination between political dialogue and project-oriented activities.

The annual work programme developed by the Presidency, with the operational and active support of the CEI-ES, will take the guidelines included in the PoA into account in order to ensure continuity between past,

present and future activities, especially between the programmes of the current and the successive Presidencies. Herewith, a stronger role could also be played by the CEI Troika.

In order to further foster the European integration process as mentioned above, this issue will regularly be on the agenda of the Governmental and other structures, in particular the Parliamentary, along with issues linked to the challenges.

Activities related to the Parliamentary Dimension will continue to focus on the promotion of cooperation among parliaments. An intensified coordination between this dimension and the other dimensions, with the support of the CEI-ES, will be fostered. Complementary activities will be promoted, particularly in the framework of the structures of the Parliamentary Dimension. The knowledge sharing of best practices on specific matters will also be encouraged, including for example through the organisation of bilateral meetings and exchange of views.

The Economic Dimension is not only an important supporting side activity, but also an enabler of the political mission and economic development, which is the primary goal of all countries to prosper and increase the quality of life of its citizens. Its strengths are the wide range of subjects to cover, and to provide a platform for economic dialogue and cooperation in the region, while boosting regional economic diplomacy among the Member States, in particular, through the Economic Forum. A strengthened format of this latter should be taken into consideration.

The CEI will also pursue an increased interaction and better coordination among its three dimensions, so as to allow for enhanced reciprocal information flows and knowledge as well as to strengthen the impact of CEI activities among them. To this end, strategies and work programmes developed within the three dimensions will play a key role in improving the coordination of work topics.

In addition, the momentum of the *CEI Local Dimension* needs to be rejuvenated in light of the critical challenges emerging in the field of democratic participation and civic life, and therefore its institutionalisation should be envisaged. Additionally, recognising the need to provide future perspectives to the young people, the CEI will work on furthering the *CEI Youth Agenda*, through streamlining youth activities supported by the CEI in line with objective 2.2.

1.3 Increasing project cooperation on strategic issues

The complex challenges call for an increased project cooperation among the countries, through tangible actions on the ground. Such cooperation requires, on one hand, necessary funds, on the other, a major knowledge of the issues to be addressed.

Regarding funding, the CEI will continue to be a reliable donor, but also a recipient by attracting external resources, primarily from EU as well as from international financial institutions and other sources. This will facilitate the implementation of projects to the benefit of its Member States in common areas of their interest. The role of the CEI as promoter of EU projects, could deliver tangible benefits, in particular, to its non-EU Member States, all holding an EU candidate status in their further approach.

As to the knowledge, in stimulating project cooperation the CEI will focus on the practical value of actions, the untapped potential of partnerships and international expertise, as well as the lessons learnt and best practices to be replicated across the region and beyond. The recent increase in the CEI Co-operation Fund could serve this purpose.

The CEI with its funds and instruments is trying to do its best to promote project cooperation. Their peculiarity lies in the spillover effect they are able to produce and to the flexibility to promptly respond to unprecedented challenges through tailor-made actions.

Yet, in order to further exploit their potential in tangible fostering of regional cooperation on common objectives and to respond to the increasing challenges with an enhanced impact, there is a need for continuous monitoring of the functioning procedure of the CEI funds and instruments. The final aim would be their integration and coordination within the overall CEI actions and more prioritisation in the management of available funds, especially of the CEI Co-operation Fund, as the only multilateral instrument owned by the countries.

Furthermore, the CEI-ES shall further improve its ability to clearly communicate its added value as regards its capacity to design and implement EU-funded projects. This activity can make a real contribution to the implementation of EU policies and working methods.

1.4 Fostering strategic partnerships for common goals

The creation of partnerships is an essential tool to expand CEI activities and to give leverage to regional cooperation and integration. The CEI is committed to engaging with all relevant international and regional actors and developing effective interactions with those who share the same goals of fostering European integration and promoting sustainable development. Therefore, the CEI will continue to further cooperate with like-minded partners in line with priorities and challenges.

Establishing cooperation links at institutional level with the EU and its institutions has always been one of the main priorities of the CEI and is instrumental to the mission. The CEI can be particularly useful as a partner of the EU, because of its experience in supporting countries in the EU enlargement process, especially between those which have undergone the process, to those which are currently undergoing it. The way towards the EU requires a long series of applications of standards and compliance with accession criteria. To this end, the CEI is ready to play a role as facilitator of dialogue and cooperation with the EU.

In the pursuit of promoting sustainable development, the CEI is vigorously engaging in cooperation with the UN, based on its Observer Status in the UN General Assembly (obtained in 2011) and with its specialised agencies, programmes and other related bodies (in particular the World Health Organization – WHO, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as well as with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and others).

Cooperation with the WHO, especially with the Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe), was established during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues on other health issues, among others, in the framework of the “Roadmap for Health and Well-being in the Western Balkans 2021-2025” endorsed by the CEI Summit 2021. This cooperation, together with other entities of the UN system, will be further pursued.

At the same time, the strong institutional link with the EBRD, through the CEI Fund at the Bank, will remain one of the main pillars supporting the CEI mission.

Cooperation with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe is also addressed, and several joint activities and projects have been undertaken and will continue to be further pursued.

Enhancing synergies and strengthening cooperation with other regional organisations will also be in the focus. Partnerships and joint activities with such organisations will be further fostered, especially because the activities concern areas and objectives which need particular attention in the European integration process as well as for sustainable development.

1.5 Advancing multistakeholder approach in CEI activities

The CEI strives to include in the implementation of its activities not only the governmental level, but also other public and private actors, local actors, academia and civil society through a bottom-up approach, bringing about a genuine multistakeholder approach. This because to feed regional cooperation, it needs to bring together decision makers and non-state actors to share experience and effective methodology and to set trust and friendship among institutional and civil society actors. The CEI will continue adding value to such multilateral component by combining policy dialogue with collaboration among diverse partners and stakeholders aiming at maximizing results.

The multi-stakeholder approach is crucial for seizing opportunities through the exchange of best practices, sharing experiences, identifying new and innovative methodologies and developing regional and sub-regional networks. In close cooperation with all relevant players, this approach also identifies, develops and promotes structuring projects contributing to regional integration.

The activities supported by the CEI Co-operation Fund are particularly instrumental to this end. Moreover, the CEI's participation in EU-funded projects is also an already consolidated instrument for attaining this approach, having helped establish a broad cooperative network with more than 250 stakeholders throughout the CEI region and beyond. Therefore, the CEI will continue to deploy project activities as a powerful tool for advancing the multistakeholder approach.

1.6 Consolidating the CEI-Executive Secretariat to effectively address the needs of the membership

Ever since its establishment in 1996, the specific nature of the CEI-ES is to be a lean structure. It was designed to efficiently reply to the needs of its membership. The main role of the Secretariat is to provide administrative support and conceptual assistance to the CEI structures - the Presidency and other decision-making and operational structures and dimensions of the CEI, by providing continuous day-to-day support. Throughout the years the CEI-ES has also started taking appropriate initiatives to promote the accomplishment of the CEI mission.

In practical terms, the CEI-ES is the platform which operationalises decisions taken at political level through the organisation of dialogues and follow-up activities, and promoting initiatives intended to foster cooperation in the region. It also offers strategic guidance and fosters synergies between the multilateral component and project-oriented activities. With regard to the latter, the role of the Secretariat is also to design and implement CEI programmes and projects. The CEI-ES is ever more assuming the role of a project developer thanks to EU-funded projects. Furthermore, the Secretariat has steadily developed interactions and synergies with strategic partners and other stakeholders.

This approach has yielded positive results. Yet, since its role has increased throughout the years and is now also to offer solutions and put forward proactive initiatives for the benefit of enhanced regional cooperation, its consolidation is necessary.

From a functioning perspective, this means that with a need to better deliver on the ambitious political agenda to cope with challenges, increase the number of projects and develop efficient synergies with other potential partners and stakeholders, while at the same time enhance the visibility through an effective communication strategy, the operational level of the CEI-ES should be increased. CEI Member States shall identify the best possible solutions to reach this objective.

CHAPTER II: CEI Thematic Agenda 2024-2026

In the past years, the CEI has made steps forward to promote the two-far reaching objectives: supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development of the CEI region. However, there are unfinished agendas, requiring the implementation of numerous standards and goals. In addition, while complex issues such as Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the unbalanced recovery from the hardship of the COVID-19 pandemic are putting pressure on countries, and call for accelerated efforts towards the tangible achievement of objectives.

The transnational character of these challenges call for a coordinated approach. On one side, there are issues which remain to be addressed such as institutional transparency, illegal migration challenges, changing demographics, rising inequalities, climate change and growing environmental pressures, insufficient connectivity. On the other side, trends such as technological advancements (AI, automatization, digitalisation ...), international scientific cooperation and others, present numerous opportunities for progress. In this regard, regional cooperation seems to be the most effective instrument to deploy their potential.

Given its size and nature, the CEI has an opportunity to tangibly deliver on major European and global commitments underpinning the international development agenda. In this regard, the new PoA sets the course for the CEI's efforts to respond effectively to current challenges and changing conditions, while putting forward common objectives.

To realise these objectives, the joint approach should aim to focus on a better-connected and modern region with a higher level of economic, environmental and social cohesion. It should also emphasise the need for overall security, resilient and sound economies, environmental sustainability and inclusive societies, fully taking into account the relevance of respecting democratic values, valorisation of the youth, as well as creating opportunities and diminishing disparities hindering the ultimate goal of achieving a prosperous and secure region.

Along these lines, the CEI will further step up its activities on these matters through a holistic approach.

To operationalise this approach, the CEI has developed a general thematic agenda to articulate the strategic focus into specific objectives covering the areas of cooperation agreed upon within the *CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure*, representing the main subjects of interest for the CEI Member States.

With this agenda, the CEI intends to play an important role in furthering the European integration process and sustainable development as a source of global growth. It also aims to address the challenges, first and foremost those aimed to mitigate the consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on numerous sectors, the socio-economic hardships of COVID-19 pandemic and other topical issues for the region.

In a nutshell, the *CEI Thematic Agenda* takes into consideration all concepts contributing to a stable, sustainable and developed region that the CEI strives to achieve, also through a transversal and interconnected approach, while paying sufficient attention on the objectives of the *CEI Political Agenda*.

In its pursuit, the CEI will promote cooperation models conducive to further European integration through the promotion of the implementation of standards and values, and solutions that are green, economically sustainable, resilient, and inclusive. It will thus aim at enhancing cooperation in the framework of the CEI, leading to a transformed region integrated with the EU and with sustainable development as the engine of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social well-being, where inequalities are reduced and opportunities are created.

2.1 Advancing good governance and institutional development

Strong institutional capacity and good governance are a cornerstone of democratic stability and security as well as a conditional asset for European integration and sustainable development. Good governance requires a transparent and accountable state organisation, bringing together multi-level approaches and different actors for adopting shared long-term development policies and programmes and preserving stability upon the values of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Local authorities, in particular, can play a significant role in this process as many of the challenges emerge from the grassroots and as they are closest to the citizens.

In this regard, the CEI acts as a platform for promoting institutional development and good governance. Within this framework, the Know-how Exchange Programme (KEP) primarily focuses on capacity building for institutions to advance towards EU standards and policies. The CEI Cooperation Fund also supports activities aimed at sharing experiences and good practices. Cooperation with other regional partners in this field is also pursued.

The CEI will promote activities to help improve good governance, as a basis for European integration and sustainable development. This includes supporting activities aimed at strengthening the quality of services and capacity of public institutions to undertake policy reforms. In addition, managing issues such as irregular migration and human trafficking, but also demographic distress and brain drain call for strong institutional capacity to cope with them. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- supporting governance reforms to eradicate corruption and organised crime, implement regulatory frameworks and judiciary reforms, promote the rule of law and increase transparency of public services as well as of public procurement practices and open data, including capacity building and exchange of experiences among the Member States;
- fostering the capacity of local authorities and civil society to improve participatory processes;
- promoting digitalisation across institutional operations, including improving administrative procedures, developing transparency policies and a regulatory framework for the digital economy and society, expanding internet connectivity for all, as well as fostering green transition and thereof related investments;
- promoting exchange of practice and knowledge among CEI Member States on combating trafficking in human beings, migrant exploitation and related crime;
- supporting analysis and actions on demographic changes, brain-drain and diaspora feed-back, and promoting dialogue of the CEI Member States on the internal movement of their people;
- strengthening cybersecurity through a more secure and resilient digital environment, a wider risk assessment and suitable system of processing and analysis of internal and external security data sources.

Against this backdrop, the final aim would be to contribute to a faster modernisation and institutional transformation, thus building transparent and coordinated Institutional frameworks, able to advance policy reforms as well as horizontal inclusion of diverse actors of society through a multi-level approach.

2.2 Empowering youth, women and other vulnerable groups

In order to secure their citizens a sustainable and a more prosperous future, one of the key priorities the CEI Member States need to address is the problems facing their youth, who hold the key to such a future, as well as women and other vulnerable groups. As for young people, they face challenges of different nature across the entire region, especially in the non-EU CEI Member States. In particular, there are persistently high levels of youth unemployment, educational systems that often fail to meet the needs of the labour market, youth

“brain drain”, as well as shared concerns about youth health and well-being, climate change, and the crisis of EU values and others. Raising awareness about these challenges and the need to work towards the solutions is crucial. At the same time, regional sustainable development requires gender equality through women empowerment and meaningful participation in all levels of society and the policy-making process. Restricted opportunities for women to access education, employment, political participation and leisure activities, reinforce gender-based social and economic inequalities. The same goes for other vulnerable groups, such as minorities, elderly, disabled, displaced, refugees, or people living in rural and remote communities. In the framework of gender equality policies, specific measures are required for preventing and acting against gender-based violence which is a deeply rooted human rights’ violation of our time.

In the context of youth empowerment, the CEI is undertaking awareness-raising activities specifically targeting the role of youth for sustainable development. It also supports activities, especially through the CEI Co-operation Fund, in favour of youth mainly focused on providing capacity building, fellowships, training opportunities and mobility, supporting young talents and bringing benefits to a vast sample of students, young professionals, researchers, musicians, writers, journalists and youth organisations across the CEI region. As for women empowerment, the CEI pays attention to this issue with a number of activities such as conferences and workshops focused on women entrepreneurship and favouring gender equality, in particular, through the CEI Co-operation Fund.

The CEI will, thus, continue to promote activities aimed at fostering people empowerment, especially of youth, women and other vulnerable groups with activities aimed to remove all kinds of discriminatory provisions, growing inequalities and to enhance their participation in the public life. In particular, supporting youth empowerment will remain one of the top priorities for the CEI with the further elaboration of the *CEI Youth Agenda*, in cooperation with the Member States. This will be carried out by strengthening the CEI cooperation in the youth sector at both regional and international level, as well as by streamlining youth activities supported by the CEI. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- strengthening the role of the youth by promoting their active participation in civil society and advocating for their engagement in the decision-making process, also by supporting the recognition (where missing) of the National Youth Councils within the respective Member States as the main national “youth umbrella bodies” representing their youth at both national and international level;
- increasing youth awareness on the UN Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals and on the EU values;
- promoting education as the primary tool for achieving self-empowerment, inclusiveness and equality, including non-formal education, for all vulnerable groups aimed at the development of skills, including entrepreneurial, personal development, training, mobility and exchanges, etc., with particular focus to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics);
- supporting the modernisation and digitalisation of educational systems in the Member States, development of digital competences and skills, and enhancing the synergy between academic institutions and the labour market;
- promoting upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning to contribute to resilience, flexibility and adaptivity of education and training systems in the Member States;
- fostering networking and best practice exchange among women from various backgrounds, motivating them to pursue their inspirations and overcome obstacles;
- providing opportunities for capacity-building programs, mentorship initiatives, training activities and skills development as a contribution to prevent illiteracy and economic independence, thus creating better conditions within the labour market for business and professional women;
- encouraging awareness raising activities on preventing and combating gender-based violence;
- promoting the exchange of best practices as regards the development of relevant support services to respond to the needs of the victims of gender-based violence;
- providing opportunities to Ukrainian refugees for their insertion into the host country’s society.

In summary, regional efforts should be reinforced in the field of people empowerment, especially of youth and women as a contribution to an inclusive and sustainable development. Youth in particular are key drivers for social change, economic growth and technological innovation, and are critical in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals. It is thus crucial to take compelling action to empower the youth and support them to reach their full potential. Likewise, as a further contribution and overall approach, the CEI systematically recommends a gender responsive conduct in the management and implementation of activities supported through CEI funds and instruments.

2.3 Fostering better health and well-being

Natural disasters, climate change events, conflicts around the world, including Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic and other diseases' outbreaks, have put health at risk. Health threats affect economies, healthcare systems and cause social and political instabilities, with significant transnational political and security implications. This calls for enhanced international and multilateral cooperation, placing health at the centre of governments' agendas and regional policies to ensure adequate exchange of knowledge, proper agreements in the field of public health and increased trust among relevant stakeholders and parties involved.

The CEI is constantly developing its capacity to rapidly respond to health challenges, such as those deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, in cooperation with the WHO. Activities in this regard range from political dialogue to high-level meetings and joint actions with regional organisations. The topic is also dealt with through several EU-funded projects and the CEI Co-operation Fund.

The CEI is fully committed to applying a multilateral and multistakeholder approach to foster better health and well-being in its Member States, supporting them in building stronger and resilient health-care systems, improving the quality of the related services, enhancing education, deployment and performance of health workforce, guaranteeing access to medicines, with particular attention to the vulnerable population. Activities aimed at providing science-based information and encouraging cultural habits through a multidimensional and cross-sectoral approach, will also be promoted. Building on the already consolidated partnerships and gained experience, the CEI will continue with its endeavour to strengthen health diplomacy and bridge science, innovation and policymaking. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- promoting public physical and mental health, prevention, and equity, to build trust across our countries and better respond to future crisis and challenges;
- ensuring exchange of knowledge and best practices, to empower policymakers and citizens in shaping policies to grant universal access to health care and services, also with the support of innovation and digital tools;
- fostering healthier lifestyles and healthier environments through the promotion of improved health policies and more effective solutions for disease prevention, encouraging health campaigns and training, including activities favouring healthy and active ageing and sports.

Health and well-being should be considered in political agendas as they are closely linked to our economic, social, environmental dimension of sustainable development. Despite the progress made, further attention is still needed to ensure sound access to healthcare, prevention and protection. On this ground the CEI will enhance its effort with the final goal of building a healthier, equitable and more secure environment for its citizens.

2.4 Promoting connectivity and sustainable mobility

The transport sector in the CEI region is still facing several challenges: an unbalanced level of infrastructural development, a significant environmental impact of transport operations and services, mainly due to the predominance of road transport, fragmentation of the legislative and institutional framework, difficulties in communication and coordination between institutions and operators in the transport sector. Moreover,

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has caused connectivity disruptions in the region and posed additional challenges for the next years both in terms of infrastructural reconstruction as well as on freight and passenger mobility. At the same time, relevant policies and strategies for promoting sustainable mobility in the region have been developed and adopted (e.g. *EU Sustainable and Smart Mobility strategy*, *Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility in the Western Balkans*), posing the basis for a harmonised shift towards the mitigation of the negative impacts of the transport sector in citizen's lives.

The CEI pays particular attention to supporting the development and modernisation of transport infrastructures through the CEI Fund at the EBRD. It also supports the identification of physical and non-physical barriers along transport corridors, the promotion of more sustainable passenger transport solutions, to mitigate the environmental and social impact of road transport especially through the EU-funded projects, as well as favouring dialogue and institutional cooperation between transport stakeholders in the CEI region.

In the framework of the PoA 2024-2026, the CEI will continue promoting connectivity and sustainable mobility in the region, focusing on strengthening the transport networks and supporting the adoption of sustainable mobility solutions both for passengers and freight, with the ultimate scope of reducing the environmental impact of the transport sector in the region and to promote modal shift towards more sustainable transport solutions. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- supporting institutional dialogue and cooperation between transport stakeholders in the region;
- providing technical assistance for investment projects in transport infrastructures (CEI Fund at EBRD);
- designing and strengthening policies and strategies aimed at promoting the use of sustainable transport solutions, including digitalisation of transport services and operations;
- enhancing sustainable mobility services for passengers in rural, peripheral and cross-border areas (e.g. cross-border public transport connections), including designing new passenger transport services at regional and cross-border level, also promoting active mobility;
- supporting the adoption of solutions for greening transport operations (e.g. green ports, green jobs, last-mile delivery of goods in urban areas, etc.);
- implementing soft measures aimed at supporting the improvement of transport network efficiency in the CEI area (e.g. bottlenecks/lack of services along transport corridors).

Despite numerous improvements in recent years, the transport sector is still responsible for a significant level of emissions into the environment. Besides, the predominance of road traffic, in addition to pollution, causes congestion, accidents and fatalities, negatively impacting people's lives. The CEI will continue to promote solutions aimed at reducing the environmental impact of the transport sector by fostering innovation and institutional dialogue to ensure an effective integration in the region.

2.5 Scaling up renewable energy, energy efficiency and energy security

The recent challenges, including Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, has shed light on the potential for a rapid energy transition. In this regard, energy supply and demand will have to focus more on energy-efficient methods and make a greater use of renewable energy sources. However, despite breakthrough progress in renewables, public and private investments in their development are still modest. Countries continue to heavily depend on fossil fuel sources and rely on a limited number of energy exporters. Thus, there is a need for significant investment in this sector in order to help countries diversify their energy supply and protect themselves against fluctuating natural gas and oil prices. Due to geographical conditions, the efficient implementation of investments related to the diversification of supplies requires cooperation between the countries of the region. The CEI can be a forum to coordinate cooperation which is necessary to implement investments and to agree on a common position in other formats, e.g. the EU. Furthermore, local and regional supply chains need to be significantly increased in the region. In addition, there is a need for sustainable development related policies to strengthen measures for the industry and the housing sector (energy performance of buildings and buildings with almost zero energy consumption).

In this framework, the CEI wishes to act as a platform for dissemination and information in this field. The CEI supports the putting into place of regulatory mechanisms for renewable energy policies especially through its Technical Cooperation Programme. Moreover, strengthening cooperation among Member States aimed, in particular, at supporting measures to facilitate investments and enhance dissemination as well as information through policy events on the topic such as ministerial and expert meetings, and project activities (including through the CEI Co-operation Fund) is part of the working practice.

Promoting clean energy research and technology, including renewable energy sources (wind, hydropower, biomass and solar) and low-carbon energy sources (including nuclear power), energy efficiency, as well as smart energy systems, will continue to be the focus of the CEI Thematic Agenda 2024-2026. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- enhancing international cooperation for further promoting renewables and energy efficiency, including legislative harmonisation;
- providing technical assistance for investment projects in energy infrastructure and operations (CEI Fund at EBRD);
- scaling up renewables investment in order to strengthen energy security and affordability, thus diminishing the energy and financial shocks, including those related to the aggression against Ukraine;
- strengthening the renewable energy capacities as well as local and regional supply chains and decreasing dependence on imports through modernisation projects that facilitate the integration of renewable energy sources into existing systems, thus expanding energy connectivity;
- supporting corporate and municipal sectors to identify opportunities to save energy and resources and turn them into economically-viable projects.

In a nutshell, energy security shall be at the forefront of the CEI operations, focusing on renewables, nuclear power and energy efficiency, which offer an opportunity for a secure and sovereign energy supply in the region, also moving away from fossil fuel dependency.

2.6 Enabling circular bioeconomy

Circular Bioeconomy (CBE) is at the core of EU's efforts to meet global climate targets and constrain Greenhouse Gases (GHG) emissions while making the Union's local economies more vigorous, innovative, and sustainable. Over the past decade, substantial and possibly unprecedented intellectual, political and financial efforts have been channelled in an increasingly coordinated set of actions that have culminated in the EU Bioeconomy Strategy and the EU Green Deal (with the array of cascading policy instruments, mechanisms and funding deployed at EU, national and sub-national levels), with the ambition to create the most favourable environment for a smooth and efficient shift from a resource-intensive linear fossil-based production-consumption pattern to a circular and sustainable one primarily based on renewable resources. Besides public-funded and corporate research to innovate technologies, processes and the techno-economic facets of this complex equation, significant efforts have also been invested in designing strategies and policies capable of mainstreaming these innovations at national and local levels. The CEI constituency is often regarded with extraordinary interest thanks to the abundance of biomass that could be sustainably utilised as feedstock for producing renewable and biobased materials and energy (as well as for its market uptake potential). In contrast, CEI Member States prioritise these topics differently than EU12 countries, especially regarding policy development and support for domestic research and innovation. There are objective reasons for this, yet in the long term this might represent a critical risk in terms of economic growth with not negligible social impacts.

Acknowledging this gap in perceptions and measures, the CEI has deployed its funds and capacities and engaged in several EU-funded initiatives and projects to raise awareness of the beneficial impacts of CBE among stakeholders from its countries. It has also consistently promoted CEI Member States' R&I capacities with partners leading the CBE advancement in Europe. The main goal has been to bring forward the understanding that one solution cannot fit all, especially when it comes to complex fossil-to-renewable and

linear-to-circular transitions that envision a fundamental restructuring of the economic tissue entailing not only societal benefits but burdens as well.

In the coming three years, the CEI will continue supporting its Member States in developing strategies, mechanisms and tools to promote the use of renewable and sustainable feedstocks for materials and energy, thus fortifying the primary sector, supporting local development, contributing to rejuvenating the industry and addressing broad societal issues, such as unemployment, rural poverty and depopulation. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- promoting regional cooperation at the policy level to advance domestic industrial, entrepreneurial and research capacities while enhancing the status of the CEI constituency in the European CBE landscape;
- facilitating the exchange of knowledge with leading EU countries and organisations and promoting regional capacity enhancement initiatives and collaborations;
- sustaining the development of consistent strategic documents and policy measures to root innovative, sustainable value chains and circular production-consumption patterns in CEI Member States;
- encouraging a cross-disciplinary vision on CBE transition to overcome the silo mentality and the predominance of techno-economic approaches by involving social sciences and humanities in shaping the impending economic paradigm.
- supporting an inclusive approach to CBE as a potential driver for sustainable economic growth that benefits broad population strata through social innovation and grass-rooted entrepreneurship.

Supporting the Member States in the shift to CBE will remain at the core of CEI action in the next three years, with the ultimate goal of further strengthening Member States' capacities to proactively and strategically drive the transition to the benefit of their societies.

2.7 Enhancing environmental protection, risk-reduction and resilience

Over the recent years, the CEI region has experienced a significant increase in the number of man-made environmental disasters. The trend shows how this number continues to rise as a consequence of climate change and the overexploitation of natural resources: floods, droughts, heat waves, accidental pollution (air and water), earthquakes, land degradation and biodiversity loss are becoming more frequent, leading to environmental degradation and changed living conditions. Meanwhile, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine involves a range of unexpected and far-reaching environmental disasters and impacts that extend far beyond any trend and border (e.g. the detonation of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant), raising questions about the way we understand building resilient societies.

Considering the impact of these challenges on people's well-being, on ecosystems and on economies, the CEI supports activities reinforcing the culture of resilience and climate change adaptation comprehensively. This includes higher education, favouring local actions that encourage behavioural change, exchanging experience among the Member States in combating climate change and strengthening environmental protection. Introducing joint coordination platforms for reducing vulnerability against environmental disasters is also pursued. This topic is also addressed through the CEI Co-operation Fund.

Reducing the negative impacts of climate change, minimising the effects of pollution and limiting environmental exploitation remain hot-topics in the CEI Thematic Agenda 2024-2026. Therefore, the CEI will promote actions and initiatives in the field of (i) prevention (ii) preparedness, and (iii) response to environmental disasters. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- strengthening policies aimed at environmental protection and risk-reduction, (e.g. joining the global fight to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; setting up institutional and operational frameworks for disaster risk-related monitoring, planning and management);

- building capacities and cooperation networks that will foster environmental protection and resilience on the regional and transnational level as well as encouraging collective efforts in safeguarding the natural heritage and fostering biodiversity;
- promoting activities aimed at the efficient use and preservation of natural resources, thus reducing overexploitation and influencing behavioural patterns, through education, local dissemination campaigns and people-to-people dialogue, promoting conscious use of resources and waste management;
- improving practices and investments in measures and technologies that are suited to a changing and more variable climate in many sectors of the economy including energy, transport, water and urban infrastructure;
- supporting initiatives to monitor, assess and study the environmental impacts of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine affecting the sea basin, water flows and ecosystems shared by Ukraine and neighbouring CEI Member States, including initiatives to respond to environmental impacts of military conflicts in general.

Climate change is a process that cannot be reversed all at once, but mitigation and adaptation actions are crucial: thus, the CEI is committed to promoting the responsible use of environmental resources, cultural change and resilience, contributing to enhancing the prosperity in its Member States for future generations.

2.8 Encouraging sustainable communities, cities and territories

The search for better economic opportunities has caused, over the years, a population shift from rural to urban areas. This influx of people has placed increasing pressure on cities and increased the demands for essential services, thus stretching the cities' resources. Moreover, this trend has escalated problems such as inequality, unemployment, crime, climate change, and has jeopardised the health of citizens, as the experience with COVID-19 has demonstrated. Thus, in addition to tackling these issues in the cities, the important role of the rural areas when it comes to food production and sustainable management of natural resources should be borne in mind. Therefore, one of the current challenges is also to transform specific areas where people live in rural environments, as well as in isolated and underdeveloped conditions into smart and liveable places, and to contribute to creating stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural communities.

The CEI supports numerous actions for tackling this issue. These include activities aimed at improving access to suitable infrastructure and services, including their digitalisation, food regulatory frameworks, water management (including the provision of high-quality and availability of drinking water) and the development of adequate waste and wastewater treatment facilities, developing tourism offers, etc. In this framework, the CEI Fund at the EBRD is also providing support to a specific instrument of the Bank, the "EBRD Green Cities" with the aim of building a better and more sustainable future for cities and their residents by taking a broad approach to identifying and prioritising environmental challenges and connecting them with infrastructure investments and policy measures. Furthermore, the CEI promotes social innovation through EU-funded projects.

The sustainable transformation of cities, territories and communities, will, therefore, remain on the CEI Thematic Agenda 2024-2026. This will be a particular challenge for Ukraine. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- improving municipal infrastructure and delivery of modern digital services, especially in rural areas;
- enhancing sustainable agriculture to improve farm efficiency and competitiveness, increase farm incomes, food security and harmonisation of agriculture national law with the EU acquis as well as market connectivity and agricultural value chain linkages;
- developing new and enhancing existing tourism offers/local products;
- developing support mechanisms for the set-up, operation and growth of social enterprises and cooperatives as key actors in social inclusion and work integration and promoting social innovation;
- promoting international cooperation between smart communities in order to share knowledge and best practices, also in the framework of the CEI Local Dimension.

In conclusion, the CEI will continue to support activities aimed at helping cities, territories and communities meet economic, environmental and social challenges and improve the quality of life in line with technological advancements.

2.9 Improving business environment and entrepreneurship

A vibrant small and medium-sized enterprise sector is a vital ingredient for a healthy market economy. However, while it is important to support enterprise-specific interventions for businesses to grow, it is equally important to look at the environment in which they operate. Without addressing the issues related to the overall business environment, interventions at the enterprise level alone do not produce optimal results. This means creating enabling environments and regulatory frameworks, within the overall political, economic and social context. Such frameworks help entrepreneurs expand their activities, and thus create incentives for them to formalise their businesses, encourage innovation, generate employment and invest in human and natural resources over the long term, thereby boosting economic growth. In this regard, the CEI's priorities in enterprise development aim to foster policies and activities for entrepreneurship promotion and to create a favourable business environment, in particular, for SMEs which are considered crucial for stimulating economic growth, fostering competitiveness and employment.

Against this background, the CEI supports actions aiming at enterprise development, especially SMEs. The CEI also supports initiatives in this field aimed at transferring experience and best practices, intensifying relations and cooperation among its Member States. The CEI Economic Forum, and overall the CEI Economic Dimension, are particularly tailored to this end.

Based on the above-mentioned, major opportunities for further CEI support exist regarding the intensification of regional cooperation for promoting favourable business environments. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- transferring best practices and experiences in the field of entrepreneurship, research and innovation among CEI Member States and strengthening the collaboration between organisations of support to small and medium-sized enterprises;
- providing technical assistance for scaling up entrepreneurship skills (CEI Fund at EBRD) in particular through access to finance for enterprises and actions focused at enabling enterprises to make structural changes and develop new business skills, thus helping them compete in market economies;
- enhancing the promotion of international investments and trade, by increasing the attractiveness for foreign investments and the support to trade in the region - also through the organisation of meetings and economic fora for information exchange.

SMEs play a vital role in innovation thanks to their flexibility in responding to the opportunities created by the changing and globalising marketplace. Therefore, supporting actions aimed at unlocking their potential is crucial.

2.10 Boosting research and innovation through science diplomacy

Well-functioning Research and Innovation (R&I) systems are essential components of modern democracies, having significant impacts on economic growth, social inclusion and security. Over the years, the CEI has been forging a shared vision in the field of R&I among its Member States, through the promotion of multi-stakeholder partnerships, regional projects and policy dialogue around common challenges and priorities. Despite undeniable differences in terms of potential and performance, all CEI countries need to prioritise investments in R&I to accelerate the green and digital transition and to advance on the accession path of EU candidates, while contributing to sustainable development in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

Against this background, the CEI aims to promote scientific progress and technological advancement towards knowledge economies and inclusive societies. To meet this goal, regional cooperation plays a crucial role, even more so if combined with an efficient use of science diplomacy. The CEI will keep acting as a facilitator of science diplomacy, based on the assumption that this policy tool is fundamental to help find science-based solutions to complex, transboundary challenges, as well as to connect research infrastructures and optimise their synergies, particularly in the context of Big Science.

Cross-border and transnational cooperation in the field of R&I, underpinned by science diplomacy, will be supported through multi-level and multi-stakeholder approaches, and in line with the quintuple helix innovation framework. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- establishing science-policy-diplomacy interfaces where cross- and inter-sectoral connections are nurtured for (i) fostering joint solutions to common societal challenges, (ii) tackling disinformation and false narratives, and (iii) encouraging evidence-informed policymaking;
- investing in R&I workforce by developing talent and skills through capacity building, trainings and knowledge exchange, including in the domain of science diplomacy, and by sustaining brain circulation and researchers' mobility (both geographical and sectoral);
- supporting policy development and new legislation to strengthen open innovation ecosystems built on solid science-industry links, able to valorise the results of research and facilitate their transfer into innovative products and processes, as well as the creation of innovative start-ups and micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises;
- facilitating interactions, exchange of best practices and know-how transfer between strong and modest innovators within the CEI membership, including through the establishment of cross-border and transnational scientific panels and research groups;
- investigating science diplomacy and its practical applications to untap the full potential of scientific resources and technological assets available in the region, while contributing to bridge political and development divides.

Promoting open, transparent, accessible and collaborative science for human-centred and responsible technological development, through regional cooperation and science diplomacy, will boost the competitiveness and resilience of CEI economies and enhance the cohesion and inclusion of their societies.

2.11 Safeguarding media freedom and pluralism

Freedom of expression is a fundamental right that can only be practiced in a free and pluralistic media environment. Maintaining media pluralism as well as safeguarding media transparency and independence are essential conditions for preserving the right to information and freedom of expression that underpins the democratic society. The recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine show how disinformation and fake news could significantly threaten media freedom and lead to manipulated and false information. At the same time, during crises new opportunities can arise as audiences progressively turn to independent media for reliable, balanced, and relevant information.

The CEI supports some major initiatives, in particular, out of its CEI Co-operation Fund, for the promotion of media freedom and for strengthening the role of independent and high-quality reporting.

In this context, the CEI remains committed to supporting the media of the region and stimulating a continuous awareness raising on freedom of expression and media freedom. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- promoting training activities, mobility opportunities, cross-border cooperation, award schemes to encourage ethical and professional standards in journalism as well as strengthen the capacity building of investigative journalism;
- encouraging networking and dialogue among journalists, media owners, civil society representatives, policy makers, government spokesperson and competent institutions in view of monitoring media developments in the region, considering national, EU and international legal frameworks;

- favouring debates on the challenges and opportunities for the media in the digital age, for example the rapid advance and adoption of artificial intelligence technologies, but also taking into account the need to adapt to new media business models.

In line with its mission, the CEI will devote much effort to supporting its Member States aspiring to EU membership, since media freedom is a core EU value and fundamental element of commitment to democracy, good governance and political accountability. Cooperation with competent international organisations and institutions is of highest relevance for advancing independent journalism, ensuring media pluralism, and promoting freedom of expression in the region.

2.12 Supporting cultural cooperation

Fostering mutual understanding and good neighbourly relations through intercultural dialogue and the respect for cultural diversity represents a major CEI priority. As a key element of human and social development, culture highly contributes to an inclusive and sustainable development, especially in terms of respect for human rights and democratic values, prevention of linguistic and ethnic divisions, economic and social growth, development of an active civil society. Moreover, the recent pandemic has confirmed the crucial role of culture and creativity in time of crisis and the positive impact on community resilience and well-being. Furthermore, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated the need for an increased preservation and protection of cultural heritage from the effects of armed conflicts and crisis situations.

The CEI pays great attention to this sector with numerous supported activities, especially out of its CEI Cooperation Fund. The CEI contribution covers activities such as conferences, workshops, festivals, exhibitions, capacity building and experience sharing activities, award and fellowship opportunities all aimed at fostering cultural cooperation in the CEI region.

Therefore, the CEI confirms its commitment to endorsing intercultural dialogue, preserving cultural heritage, promoting equal access to culture, advancing inclusion and accessibility, boosting quality management of cultural heritage, improving the access to professional art and culture. Cooperation with major international organisations and institutions active in the field of cultural cooperation will be further pursued especially in view of developing coordinated actions and synergies to the benefit of the CEI countries. In particular, the CEI will focus on:

- promoting activities such as conferences, workshops, festivals and exhibitions to enhance intercultural dialogue and communication, facilitate the relationships among different groups and cultures, foster cultural diversity, encourage cultural engagement, increase audience development;
- advancing capacities in managing and safeguarding cultural heritage, especially the sites of historical and cultural importance, with special attention to restoration and rehabilitation of cultural heritage affected by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine;
- promoting the exchange of best practices to boost entrepreneurship within the cultural and creative sectors;
- encouraging the mobility of artists and cultural operators to facilitate their professional advancement;
- supporting the circulation of cultural goods outside national contexts, especially in the fields of literature, artworks and audio-visual, also through awards and fellowship schemes.

Cultural diplomacy as a form of soft power promoting EU's fundamental values, but also addressing some of the major global challenges, is particularly relevant for the implementation of the overall CEI mission. At regional level, cultural cooperation could highly contribute to strengthen ties among neighbouring countries, develop peaceful relations and foster the integration process.

IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The CEI Plan of Action is a general and flexible call, and recommendation for the Member States and other actors in the region to work together on initiatives of regional interest.

The backbone of these regional actions is the political willingness of the countries to act in solidarity and cohesion towards two strategic objectives, i.e. supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development, and in tackling the challenges.

Its implementation relies on its consolidated working methodology through contributions from the countries and a wide range of stakeholders as well as through projects and activities supported by the CEI funds and instruments.

In this regard, the implementation process will not attempt to monitor progress, but rather to take note of the undertaken activities. They will be regularly reported to the CEI structures, primarily to the CNC, and through the Annual Reports of the CEI Secretary General.

Such reports will then serve as an indication on how widely the PoA has been perceived and used, and what new regional partnerships and initiatives it has stimulated. It will also serve to reflect on the feedback from the stakeholders, which in turn would serve for the future Plan of Action.