



**Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs
of the Member States of the Central European Initiative**
Tirana, 20 November 2024

Joint Statement

We, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Central European Initiative (CEI) gathered in Tirana on 20 November 2024 to exchange views on strengthening CEI's role in the regional cooperation, furthering European integration process, supporting Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, as well as addressing current challenges and exploring new opportunities to face them,

Expressing our commitment to the CEI's two-folded mission to support European integration and promote sustainable development, and to the strategic goals embedded in CEI Guidelines and Rules of Procedure,

Highlighting the importance of the respect for international law, UN Charter, human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic values and the rule of law, shared by all CEI Member States,

Reaffirming our commitment to good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation with the objective of a peaceful, strong, stable, prosperous and united Europe,

Condemning in the strongest terms the ongoing war of aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine – a valued Member State of the CEI,

Reiterating our support to Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, within its internationally recognised borders, including territorial waters,

Underlining the CEI's valuable role in fostering solidarity and constructive regional cooperation among its Member States,

Stressing that the CEI's role has become even more important in view of the pressing international challenges,

Recalling the CEI Plan of Action 2024-2026 adopted on 21 December 2023,

Would like to state the following:

1. Reinforcing CEI Cooperation and Regional Dialogue

We emphasise the pivotal role of the Central European Initiative as a forum for open dialogue, partnership and action.

We stand ready to intensify policy dialogue on issues of strategic importance to the region.

We recognise that the CEI Plan of Action 2024-2026 is a valuable roadmap for joint actions to meet the established objectives and address common challenges.

We acknowledge the importance of the CEI projects for the region, financed through the CEI Cooperation Fund, of which we approve the budget for 2025, the CEI Fund at the EBRD financed by Italy, the latter also including the CEI Know-how Exchange Programme, and the CEI projects funded by the European Union (EU) and the Autonomous Region of Friuli Venezia Giulia.

We appreciate the efforts of the CEI-Executive Secretariat to foster regional cooperation through joint activities in the areas of science, media freedom and pluralism, gender equality and women empowerment, youth and education, culture, economy, environmental protection, circular economy, social innovation, sustainable mobility and transport.

We highlight the importance of advancing CEI partnerships with other international and regional organisations in line with the CEI strategic goals and principal objectives, and **we appreciate**, in this context, the activities by the Albanian CEI Presidency and the CEI-Executive Secretariat organised in the framework of the Albanian CEI Presidency.

We congratulate the CEI-Executive Secretariat for organising the Coordination Meeting of Regional Organisations in Trieste on 17 September 2024, with the participation of the Secretariats of the Adriatic Ionian Initiative (AII), Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation (BSEC) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), and with guests from the European Commission, Regional School of Public Administration (RESPA) and Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative (RAI), and **we take note** of its cooperative links with the WHO/Europe, the UNICEF Office of Innovation, the Permanent Secretariat of the Transport Community and the Secretariat of the Council of Europe.

We consider the multistakeholder partnerships initiated by the CEI with NGOs, academia, local authorities, businesses and other actors as key for addressing complex challenges.

We welcome the increased cooperation with the CEI Parliamentary Dimension, and underline the important role Parliaments play in advancing good governance and institutional development in the region.

We highly value the work done by the CEI Governmental and Parliamentary Dimensions at the *Convention for the Strengthening of the Central European Initiative*, and **we welcome** its outcome in the form of *Recommendations for the Strengthening of the Central European Initiative*, as a basis which to build upon, as applicable, in areas where Member States agree that CEI has a concrete value added.

We recommend to strengthen cooperation between all CEI Dimensions (Governmental, Parliamentary and Economic), and to proceed with the development of a CEI Local Dimension and a CEI Youth Agenda.

2. Supporting European Integration

We commend the important milestones by the candidate countries in 2024 on the EU integration process, confirming that the process is based on the principle of own merits, and on the adherence to the established criteria and fundamental European values, as well as on the capacity of these countries to implement the EU-related reforms.

We emphasise that EU enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, democracy and shared values, and a cornerstone of stability, security, and prosperity for the whole CEI region.

We reiterate the significance of a constructive regional cooperation, good-neighbourly relations, the respect of rights of persons belonging to minorities, mutual respect, and the rule of law as key elements for a successful integration into the EU family.

We recall the key importance the EU attaches to the alignment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the enlargement process.

We appreciate the expressed full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the non-EU CEI countries **and call** for an accelerated EU integration process for the non-EU CEI countries, giving them the opportunity to advance in the accession process, provided they accelerate the implementation of EU-related reforms and fulfill the necessary requirements as this is the only way to advance in the accession process.

We underline, in this regard, the importance of maintaining momentum in the EU accession negotiations, recalling, that the enlargement process is based on the principle of own merits and on the adherence to the established criteria and fundamental values of the EU by the CEI countries EU candidates.

We highlight the necessity of EU CEI Member States to continue providing political as well as wide practical support to their non-EU CEI partners in their EU accession processes and reform agendas, ensuring that the prospect of EU membership remains a joint objective and a credible and tangible goal for those who seek it, fulfilling the required steps on the road towards joining the EU.

We welcome the efforts made so far by the EU to streamline and strengthen the merit-based enlargement process through a number of targeted instruments such as Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plan for the Republic of Moldova, intensified political dialogue and enhanced policy engagement, and that the new EU leadership will prioritize the enlargement in its agenda.

We also welcome that the President of the European Commission ranks the EU enlargement process among the top priorities of the new European Commission once it is formed, with dedicated EU Commissioner for enlargement portfolio, and we wish her a lot of success in this regard, while also wishing a successful mandate to the new designated EU Commissioner for Enlargement in promoting the values on which the EU is founded, pursuing the efforts to meet the obligations required for EU membership and contributing to tangible progress for all candidate countries.

We highlight that the CEI represents a valuable regional platform for dialogue and cooperation, as well as a facilitator of know-how transfer between the CEI EU and non-EU countries - on EU accession -related reforms, and that, given this feature, could represent a reliable partner for the EU in the implementation of its enlargement policy.

3. Promoting Sustainable Development

We stress the need to accelerate the achievement of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and the implementation of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in all Member States.

We welcome the adoption of the “Pact for the Future” at the Summit of the Future held in New York on 22-23 September 2024 and reaffirm our commitment to its vision for ensuring transformation of global governance to protect the needs and interest of future generations.

We also welcome the adoption of the Declaration on Future Generations and the Global Digital Compact as part of the Pact for the Future, as we must include the views and interests of “Youth and Future Generations” in our policies by actively listening to young people.

We support the Global Digital Compact with the aim of ensuring an open, free and secure digital future for all that upholds human rights, overcomes digital divides, reaffirms the multi-stakeholder governance of the Internet, as well as leverages artificial intelligence to advance the SDGs.

We commit to collective efforts to implement all the necessary actions for the achievement of sustainable development stipulated by the United Nations 2030 Agenda while engaging meaningfully all relevant stakeholders.

We highlight the CEI's role as a suitable platform for cooperation and joint action to this end.

We agree to continue to present joint CEI statements at relevant UN events, taking into account the CEI observer status in the UN General Assembly.

4. Addressing Current Regional and Global Challenges

We express our deep concern over the ongoing global conflicts, which have disrupted international supply chains, aggravated food insecurity, damaged the environment, heightened energy vulnerabilities and caused humanitarian crises.

We recognise the importance of solidarity and coordinated responses, both at the regional and global levels, to face an unprecedented set of challenges, ranging from geopolitical tensions to economic instability, migration pressures, global health, and triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollutions.

We reaffirm our commitment to upholding the principles of international law and territorial integrity, while promoting dialogue, conflict resolution and peace.

We stress the need for enhanced cooperation in addressing security concerns, including organised crime, terrorism, cyber threats and disinformation, which pose risks to the stability and prosperity of our societies.

We underscore the importance of strengthening regional resilience by enhancing connectivity, promoting economic diversification, digitalisation, building efficient and accountable institutions and fostering partnerships that contribute to greater self-sufficiency in critical sectors.

5. Further Supporting Ukraine

We reiterate the strong condemnation of the Russian Federation's war of aggression against Ukraine and its illegal attempt of annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, as well as parts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions of Ukraine.

We call for an immediate and unconditional cessation of Russia's illegal war of aggression against Ukraine and the withdrawal of all its armed forces and equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognised borders.

We emphasise that the Russian war of aggression causes immense suffering and numerous casualties among the civilian population and **we call** for the respect of the international humanitarian law.

We remain determined to protect the rules-based international order, respect for the UN Charter, the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity within the internationally recognised borders of all UN Member States, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We commit to making all possible efforts to reach a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine based on the principles of the UN Charter and the norms of international law, in line with the key principles and objectives of Ukraine's Peace Formula, as well as to continuing the international outreach efforts to identify steps forward.

We underline that we are committed to supporting Ukraine for as long and as intensely as it is needed.

We call on the international community to stay united in condemning the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine and in providing multifaceted support to Ukraine, especially in the recovery and reconstruction process.

We encourage the elaboration of concrete initiatives and projects in the framework of the CEI to assist Ukraine and its people in addressing the grave consequences, caused by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, including through increased political support and in line with the CEI Plan of Action 2024-2026.

We welcome Albania's efforts - as the current CEI Presidency - in steering our regional cooperation in this dynamic and challenging environment, while effectively promoting discussions and initiatives that strengthen ties among Member States in the areas of European integration, sustainable development, health, connectivity, tourism, culture and education, parliamentary cooperation.

We express to Serbia - as CEI Presidency for the year 2025 - our best wishes and full support.

We thank Secretary General of the CEI-ES Roberto Antonione for all his work and express our best wishes of success to the new Secretary General of the CEI-ES Franco Dal Mas.

We thank the Albanian CEI Presidency for the excellent organisation of our today's meeting in Tirana.