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VOICES

#ESA26
5th edition



EUROPEAN STUDENT ASSEMBLY 2026 HANDBOOK

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Think before you print.

INITIATIVE

What is the European Student Assembly?

The **European Student Assembly (ESA)** is the main initiative of EUC Voices' Erasmus+ project. It is an annual event which each year gathers more than 230 students from the European Universities Alliances (EUAs) to debate, **first online and then onsite**, issues that are central to students in Europe, draft policy recommendations on the future of Europe and advocate for them among stakeholders and decision-makers.

he ESA is designed and implemented by the **Technical University of Cluj-Napoca** and **NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences** with the key contribution of a Alumni Advisor group composed of volunteers recruited among participants of previous editions and a local team of students. The EUC Voices project is coordinated by **Université Grenoble Alpes**.

The main focus of the EUC Voices project is active European citizenship which is implemented through 3 main activities: European Student Assembly, The European Universities Student Ambassadors Forum and EUC Voices Alumni Network.

ESA objectives

- **Voicing the opinion of EUA students** from different countries, backgrounds, fields and levels of study, all **recruited for their engagement and motivation**.
- **Fostering the student community-building across the EUAs**.
- **Advocating for deliberative processes** in an annual pan-European assembly as a way to **reduce the gap between citizens and decision-makers**.
- **Encouraging students to get involved in European politics** at local, national, and European level in order **to regenerate European democracy**.

Expected outcomes

The participants of the ESA 2026 will produce a **collection of policy recommendations on 8 debating topics**.

The Assembly itself will be followed by a series of **dissemination events gathering stakeholders and decision-makers** where students will advocate for and disseminate their policy recommendations among various actors at different government levels, companies, and NGOs, active in the European political life.

Debating topics *(detailed from page 10 and onwards)*

- Panel 1—**Strengthening democracy, engaging citizens**: How can the EU bridge the gap between its institutions and its citizens to build trust and foster civic participation?
- Panel 2—**Scaling the circular economy**: How can the EU overcome uneven progress and encourage change across sectors and societies?
- Panel 3—**Aligning budget with impact**: How can the Union's funding rebalance and adapt to the social changes?
- Panel 4—**Europe moving together**: How can the EU develop an inclusive public transport system?
- Panel 5—**Unlocking digital potential**: How can the EU empower inclusive digital literacy and cybersecurity and build resilience?
- Panel 6—**Educating without borders**: How can the EU support universities in fostering interdisciplinarity?
- Panel 7—**Enabling generational solidarity**: How can the EU address demographic change and promote meaningful participation for older generations in society?
- Panel 8—**Europe's strategic autonomy**: How can the EU reconcile strategic autonomy with its core values in the field of trade agreements?

CONTEXT

From the Conference on the Future of Europe...

Jointly organised by students and faculty members, the inaugural session of the European Student Assembly gathered **275 students** from **38 EUAs** in Strasbourg in March 2022.

This first edition took place in the context of the **Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE)** launched jointly by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission on Europe Day 2021, in Strasbourg. The CoFoE was meant for citizens and organisations all over Europe to express recommendations on the future of the Union. The ESA22 participants debated and produced 89 policy proposals that were submitted on the platform of the CoFoE and discussed with Members of the European Parliament, representatives from the European Commission and other stakeholders.

The second edition (#ESA23) took place in March 2023, with **230 students from 44 EUAs** drafting **75 policy recommendations** on 10 topics related to the strategic autonomy of the EU. Finally, the third edition (#ESA24) took place in April 2024, with **250 students from 49 EUAs** drafting **79 policy recommendations** on 11 topics related to the European election of 2024 and the future of Europe.

The fourth edition (#ESA25) took place from 26 to 28 May 2025, involving **230 students from 53 EUAs**. Participants produced **76 policy recommendations** across 8 key topics, addressing critical areas such as mental health, diversity, artificial intelligence, and housing.

...to #ESA26

The fifth edition (#ESA26) is launching and will bring a new generation of EUAs' students together. Participants will debate and draft policy recommendations on **8 topics** related to the future of Europe and essential for students.

This **several-months project** will culminate in a deliberative assembly gathering at the **European Parliament in Strasbourg** from **20 to 22 April 2026**. During the event, many activities will be organised for students and the **65 EUAs**.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

The preparation phase

From **January to April 2026**, the selected students will work remotely with other members of the same panel to deepen their understanding of their chosen topic and start drafting policy recommendations. They will meet **experts** and follow **online training sessions** on policy drafting and moderation.

They will analyse the political and legal context, identify the main challenges raised by the topic and decide the priorities they wish to deal with. They will be **responsible for proposing concrete solutions** to these challenges, to be implemented by stakeholders at various decision levels.

The pan-European Assembly in Strasbourg

Students from many countries will come together for a democratic exercise when the **European Student Assembly will meet in person in Strasbourg on the premises of the European Parliament.**

During 3 days they will discuss and finalise their policy recommendations with members of their panel. They will also hear from other panels' discussions and debate. Finally, they will **vote** on all policy recommendations prepared in a plenary session and participate in dissemination activities afterwards.

ESA does not charge any participation fees. *Meals will be provided for free as well as accommodation for three nights in a youth hostel. The reimbursement of travel costs is at the discretion of the European Universities Alliances.*



The dissemination phase

After the previous editions, participants took a series of initiatives to disseminate the results of their panel discussions and make the voices of students heard at the local, national and European or international level. Willing students had the opportunity to **meet with NGOs, Members of the European Parliament and representatives from the European Commission**. They participated in major stakeholders events such as the Vivatech Conference in Paris. ESA26 will follow this path, in coordination with the partners of the EUC Voices project.

The role of participants and coordinators

Panel participants taking part in the Assembly play an **active role** in their panel **from the preparation phase to the Assembly itself**. After being selected, they are expected to take part in training sessions and weekly online meetings with experts and other members of their panel.

Each panel is supported **by 2 panel coordinators**, also students, who monitor the progress of their panel, help to plan meetings with experts, and support the drafting of proposals. During the on-site gathering, **they will moderate the debate between panel members and present the result of the panel's work**.

Every panel participant and coordinator will be called to **vote on all panels' recommendations** during the final session of the Assembly. All the policy recommendations will be gathered in a guide, which will summarise the results of the Assembly. Panel members and coordinators will be called **to contribute to the European Student Assembly dissemination** to share their experience and spread the recommendations to stakeholders and decision-makers.

A series of three online training sessions, delivered by the ESA team, will support the acquisition of knowledge on how to formulate, deliberate, and revise recommendations. **Both participants and coordinators are expected to attend these sessions**.

In addition, the ESA team will assist coordinators in organising at least **two specialised training activities for each panel topic group**. These activities are designed to address each group's **specific interests and meet the evolving requirements of their panel work**.

Each active participant and panel coordinator will receive a **certificate** of participation after completion of the project.

HOW TO APPLY?

Applications are open from the **1st October 2025** to the **2nd November 2025** at 23:59 (CET) on the EUC website: www.eucvoices.eu

Eligibility

- Applications are open to **students** from all nationalities, fields and levels of study from the **second year of Bachelor to PhD**, and they are **not older than 30 years of age**.
- In order to participate, you must be registered in a higher education institution belonging to one of the **65 European Universities Alliances**, please check the list here:

List of Alliances

- Students who **never participated** in ESA are welcome to apply as participants and/or panel coordinators.
- It is essential that all participants are prepared **to actively engage with the group from the start**. This ensures that the group progresses at an optimal speed, allowing sufficient time for dialogue and debate without exceeding the allocated time.
- Students who **participated** in the previous edition of ESA as **coordinators** cannot apply anymore.
- It is recommended that **coordinators allocate more time than participants** in their schedules, as this will allow them to **fulfill essential responsibilities** such as organising meetings, summarising work, and maintaining communication with their team members and organizers.
- It is expected that coordinators will **utilise their leadership experience to ensure the group's cohesion**, establish an optimal pace, and ensure that the **workload is manageable**.
- Faculty members are not eligible except for **PhD candidates**.

Selection process and criteria

The selection will be **conducted jointly by the European Universities Alliances (EUAs) and ESA team**. The selection process has been **designed to ensure fairness, inclusiveness and transparency**.

For **participants**, the evaluation will focus on their **interest in European politics**, culture, and society; their **soft skills for engaging** in an intercultural setting; their **motivation to explore, develop, and defend** their opinions on the proposed topics; and their **commitment to making a positive impact** within their community. A maximum of **20 points** may be awarded, based on the first four criteria of the selection guidelines.

The selection of panel **coordinators** will be conducted by the **ESA Organizing Team**, with emphasis placed on candidates' motivation and prior experience as group leaders in similar initiatives. The maximum attainable score in this category is **25 points**.

Description of the co-selection process

Students interested in participating **must submit** their applications online by **November 2, 2025, at 23:59 CET**.

Once the application period has closed, **a list of eligible candidates** will be shared with **the alliances**. Each alliance will then **review applicants** from its partner universities and prepare **a list of selected students**. On average, around **5 students per alliance** will be chosen, though this number may vary depending on the volume and quality of applications. **Alliances are strongly encouraged to follow the proposed selection guidelines and criteria**.

The ESA Organizing Team will **review the alliances' lists** and may make minor adjustments to ensure a **diverse range of student profiles**. The final selection results will **first be communicated to the alliances**, before being officially shared with the students.

The ESA Organizing Team and the Alumni Advisor Group have established the following guidelines:

INDICATIVE ASSESSMENT GRID

01

Strong interest in European politics, culture and society___5 points

The assessment focuses on the interest and motivation of the student to conduct an in-depth reflection on European topical issues rather than their knowledge or expertise in the field. The interest of the students is reflected in their argumentation and to a lesser extent in their past accomplishments. The participation in Erasmus+ mobilities and previous European projects are an advantage but not an obligation. Applications should not be discarded on the grounds of one student's personal opinions.

02

Soft skills _____5 points

The assessment criteria focus on the development of key soft skills, including communication, critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration, and emotional intelligence. They also recognise the importance of experiences that cultivate these competencies, such as public speaking, debate, and advocacy.

03

Drive to explore and develop ideas on the chosen topics___5 points

The assessment evaluates students' ability to justify their choice of panels convincingly, with each of the three selections requiring a clear and well-supported explanation. In addition, students should articulate their personal connection to and prior background knowledge of the selected topics, demonstrating how these factors inform and strengthen their justifications.

04

Citizen experience _____5 points

The criteria is designed to evaluate the student's motivation to engage proactively in their community. Prior experiences across multiple levels—local, national, or European—and within diverse contexts, such as educational institutions, unions, or non-governmental organizations, are equally recognised and valued for their contribution to the student's demonstrated commitment.

05

Coordinator experience _____5 points

The assessment evaluates the coordinator's motivation to promote team cohesion, effectively manage conflicts, and demonstrate a clear understanding of their role within the team. It further considers the ability to sustain an organized work rhythm, collaboratively guide the team in identifying key recommendations, and plan for the systematic dissemination of these recommendations following the event.

TIMELINE

01 October 2025

Opening of the application platform

**02 November 2025
(11:59 pm CET)**

Closing of the application platform

1 December 2025

Coordinators selection results

10 December 2025

Participants selection results

15 January 2026
(tbc)

Coordinators onboarding session

21 January 2026
(tbc)

Participants onboarding session

January - April 2026

Online preparation phase

20 - 22 April 2026

European Student Assembly at the
European Parliament in Strasbourg

DEBATING TOPICS

The **Alumni Advisor Group** has been in charge of defining the topics of the panels. It was formed by ESA alumni who have shown interest in contributing to another edition of ESA, this time by actively volunteering in its organisation as part of an interdisciplinary collaborative work.

Message from the Alumni Advisor Group!

We are students that came together **during the Summer** from all over Europe to design and explore panel topics for **the fifth edition of ESA!** We listened to each other, shared stories, and pulled together ideas that matter.

We brought our experiences, concerns, and hopes to the table and turned them into 8 topics that reflect **the challenges and opportunities of our generation**, from circular economy and digital literacy to ageing, interdisciplinarity, transport, and European values. These are, for us, **8 of the most important topics** to be tackled by the European Union in the coming years. **We loved working on these problem statements**, and we are sure **you will love drafting proposals** for them.

Even if you do not feel like an expert in a panel topic that you find really interesting, do not hesitate to apply!

You will have **training and guidance from experts and professionals** throughout your writing process, and you'll work with **amazing people from all around Europe**, so you definitely **will not be alone in this!**

We can not wait to see how **you will bring these panel topics to life** and **transform them into concrete policy recommendations!** You will see, this collaboration on different themes of ESA26 is a **cognitively and culturally enriching journey**. ESA is not only about writing policies, but also about **working in an interdisciplinary way**, where **imagination is more important than limitations**.

This is what makes ESA so unique: students shaping Europe, together!

We wish you an amazing journey, filled with self-improvement, joy, friendships, and a lot of fun.

Panel 1 – Strengthening democracy, engaging citizens: How can the EU bridge the gap between its institutions and its citizens to build trust and foster civic participation?

Many Europeans continue to **feel disconnected from EU decision-making**, even though over 80% believe they should have greater influence on the process. In 2024, **only 48% of citizens felt their voice mattered**, with the figure dropping as low as **23% in some Member States** such as Greece.

Despite extensive pre election campaigns, **40% of citizens remained uninterested in the 2024 European elections**. Participation tends to rise with age, income, education level, and pro-European attitudes.

Among **younger citizens**, surveys indicate a general **upward trend** in political engagement. Yet, their participation often takes **less conventional forms**, such as **activism or intensive use of social media**, rather than **direct involvement** in institutional channels. This reflects both **dissatisfaction and a lack of trust** in established processes.

Meanwhile, existing **participatory instruments** remain largely **invisible, difficult to access**, and perceived as having **limited impact**. For example, only about **1/5 of EU citizens** are aware of the **European Citizens' Initiative**, and follow-up on successful campaigns has been modest.

Since its introduction in 2012, only **one of six initiatives** that gathered the required number of signatures has been **translated into legislation**. The EU's mission is to **uphold democratic processes and represent citizens' interests**.

Yet, the persistent **gap between institutions and citizens** raises important questions about the **future of democratic participation**, the rebuilding of trust, and the ways institutions can respond to **evolving forms of civic involvement**.



Panel 2 – Scaling the circular economy: How can the EU overcome uneven progress and encourage change across sectors and societies?

The **Circular Economy Action Plan**, adopted by the **European Commission** in **March 2020** as part of the **European Green Deal**, is central to the **EU's goal** of achieving **climate neutrality** by **2050**.

It has influenced **legislation** on sustainable **product design**, **consumer rights**, and **waste management**. Yet, important **challenges** remain. **Circular economy implementation** varies widely across **Member States**. For instance, **Eurostat** reports that in **2022** the EU's **circular material use rate** stood at **11.5%**, with **significant disparities** between **countries**.

Regulatory barriers and **uneven enforcement** highlight structural **weaknesses**. Small and medium enterprises (**SMEs**), which make up **99% of EU businesses**, often face **high costs** when switching to **sustainable materials** or investing in **staff retraining**.

Complex global supply chains and **sectoral differences** exacerbate these **difficulties**. The **apparel industry**, for example, generates around **12.6 million tonnes of textile waste** annually in the **EU**, with less than **1% recycled** into new **garments**.

Transportation, **reverse logistics**, and varying levels of **public awareness** further complicate the **transition**. At the same time, new **frameworks** such as the **Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive** (**CSRD**) and the **EU Taxonomy Regulation** aim to strengthen **measurability** and **transparency**, helping to reduce **greenwashing**.

Still, the persistence of **financial**, **technological**, and **behavioural barriers** raises questions about how the **EU** can foster greater **convergence**, encourage **systemic change**, and ensure that **circular practices** are **accessible** and **effective** across **diverse contexts**.



Panel 3 – Aligning budget with impact: How can the European Union's funding rebalance and adapt to the social changes?

The **European Union** faces mounting **demographic** and **fiscal pressures**. By **2070**, nearly **one third of citizens** will be aged **65+**, while the **working-age population** will **shrink significantly**.

This **trend**, coupled with **low birth rates**, **economic uncertainty**, and the **long-term effects of COVID-19**, will have implications for **welfare systems**, **labour markets**, and **public finances**. Already, significant **disparities** exist across **Member States** and between **social groups**.

At the same time, **challenges** extend beyond **ageing**. **Youth unemployment** remains high in several regions, **healthcare systems** face **resource gaps**, and **digital** and **green transitions** require new forms of **investment** and **adaptation**. These **shifts** highlight the importance of considering how **resources** are **allocated** and how different **groups** can be **supported** in a **fair** and **sustainable** way.

The **EU budget** reflects these **tensions**. While **instruments** such as the **European Social Fund+** or the **Recovery and Resilience Facility** provide **targeted support**, they remain **limited in scope** and vary in **effectiveness**.

The persistence of **fiscal constraints**, **uneven national reforms**, and the **non-binding nature** of **frameworks** such as the **European Pillar of Social Rights** underline the **complexity** of **aligning common ambitions** with **concrete funding**.

In this context, the **design** of **EU funding mechanisms** is not only a **technical matter** but also a reflection of **political choices** and **shared values**. **Balancing solidarity and efficiency**, ensuring **flexibility** to respond to **diverse needs**, and respecting **fiscal realities** will remain central to the **future of the EU budget** and to the way it supports **cohesion** across **Europe**.



Panel 4 – Europe moving together: How can the EU develop an inclusive public transport system ?

Despite **ambitious EU goals** for **sustainable mobility**, **Europe** still struggles to build a **transport system** that is **inclusive, interconnected, and environmentally friendly**.

While **large cities** are often well served, many **smaller towns, rural areas, and border regions** remain poorly **connected**, leaving millions of **citizens** – particularly **older people, low-income groups, students, and people with disabilities** – at risk of **exclusion**. **Private cars** are expected to continue **dominating mobility**, accounting for nearly **70% of passenger journeys** by **2030**.

Affordable and **reliable alternatives** remain limited, especially for **longer distances** and **cross-border travel**. **Structural challenges** persist: **public transport operators** face **rising costs** and **underfunded infrastructure**, while **accessibility** remains **uneven**, both **physically** and **digitally**.

Ticketing systems often stop at **national borders**, with little **interoperability, inconsistent pricing**, and limited **information** for **non-digital users**. These **barriers** highlight the **fragmented nature** of **Europe's transport networks**.

As the **EU** seeks to meet its **climate commitments**, strengthen **social inclusion**, and support **economic opportunity**, the gap between **ambition** and **reality** in **sustainable mobility** underscores the **urgency** of building a **transport system** that is both **fair** and **future-oriented**.



Panel 5 – Unlocking digital potential: How can the EU empower inclusive digital literacy and cybersecurity and build resilience?

Digital literacy and **cybersecurity** are **interconnected**, yet **distinct challenges** shaping **Europe's future**. As **digital technologies** transform **learning, work, and civic life**, more than **40% of EU citizens** still lack **basic digital skills**, with **disparities** across **age groups, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds**.

The **EU** faces the task of ensuring that every **individual** (regardless of **age, language, disability, or social status**) can **critically assess information, protect personal data, and safely use technologies** including **Artificial Intelligence** and **Virtual Reality**. While **digital literacy** enables **participation and opportunity**, **cybersecurity** provides the **foundation of trust and safety online**. Several **pressures** converge.

Education systems often struggle to equip **citizens** to **recognize misinformation, resist manipulation, and practice personal cybersecurity** in the face of **evolving threats** such as **deepfakes** and **AI-generated content**.

Frameworks for **data protection** and **responsible use** stay behind **technological development**. **Disparities in digitalization** between **Member States** complicate **policy implementation** and perpetuate **unequal access to opportunities**. At the same time, **coordination** remains difficult among **educators, public administrations, businesses, and civil society**, each of which plays a **critical role**.

These **dynamics** raise **key questions**: how can the **EU close digital skill gaps**, ensure **security** in a rapidly **evolving technological environment**, and build **inclusive digital capacities** that foster **empowerment, resilience, and trust** across **Europe**?



Panel 6 – Educating without borders: How can the EU support universities in fostering interdisciplinarity?

Employers increasingly emphasize the importance of **transversal skills** such as **critical thinking**, **collaboration**, and **adaptability**. In **2025**, surveys indicated that **7 in 10 companies** consider **critical thinking essential** for **graduates**.

Interdisciplinary education, which combines insights from **multiple fields**, has been shown to strengthen **complex problem-solving** and **intellectual curiosity**. Yet, despite these **benefits**, most **European universities** remain structured along **rigid disciplinary lines**.

This **fragmentation** limits **students' ability to connect knowledge across domains** and to approach **societal challenges holistically**. At the same time, **rapid technological** and **social changes** highlight the **urgency of reform**. The rise of **generative artificial intelligence (AI)** and the pervasive role of **social media** raise new questions about **accuracy**, **bias**, and **transparency of information**.

More broadly, the **World Economic Forum** estimates that nearly **39% of job skills** will **transform** by **2030**, with around **11% of the workforce** potentially **displaced**.

These **shifts** underscore the need for **graduates** who can **navigate uncertainty**, **evaluate complex issues**, and engage in **lifelong learning**. **European universities** therefore face a growing **tension**: while **disciplinary depth** remains **crucial**, **students** also need opportunities to engage in **joint programs**, **cross-faculty initiatives**, and **interdisciplinary curricula**.

The persistence of **siloed structures** raises broader questions about how **higher education in Europe** can **evolve** to **balance specialization** with the **cultivation of transversal skills**, ensuring that **graduates** are **prepared** for **fast-changing professional** and **societal landscapes**.



Panel 7 – Enabling generational solidarity: How can the EU address demographic change and promote meaningful participation for older generations in society?

Europe is undergoing a profound **demographic transformation**. By **2050**, nearly **32% of the EU population** is expected to be aged **65 and over**, according to **Eurostat**.

While this **shift** reflects **longer life expectancy**, it also raises new **societal challenges**. Current **EU approaches** often remain **reactive**, with a strong emphasis on **pension sustainability**.

The **2021 Ageing Report**, for example, focuses largely on **fiscal implications**, while broader aspects of **ageing** receive less attention. Yet **labour market participation** among **older workers** remains limited: only **59% of those aged 55–64** are **employed**, leaving many without **stable economic security** or **opportunities for contribution**.

Beyond **employment**, **older people** frequently face **social exclusion**. **Urban design, digital services**, and rapidly evolving **technologies** can unintentionally **marginalize seniors**, making it harder for them to **participate fully** in **community life**.

Loneliness is an increasingly pressing issue: **Eurofound data** show that **older adults** are among the groups most likely to report **social isolation** in **Europe**. At the same time, **intergenerational divides** are widening in **fast-changing societies**, shaped by **technological shifts** and **cultural differences** across **Member States**.

This creates new **pressures** on **solidarity** and **shared understanding** between **age groups**. These **trends** raise broader **questions** about how **Europe** can **reimagine ageing**—not only as a matter of **economic sustainability**, but as a challenge of **social cohesion, dignity**, and **purpose** across **generations**.



Panel 8 – Europe’s strategic autonomy: How can the EU reconcile strategic autonomy with its core values in the field of trade agreements?

Growing geopolitical tensions increasingly put **international trade** and **supply chains** at **risk**, exposing the **European Union’s dependence** on **external partners** for **essential goods** and **technologies**.

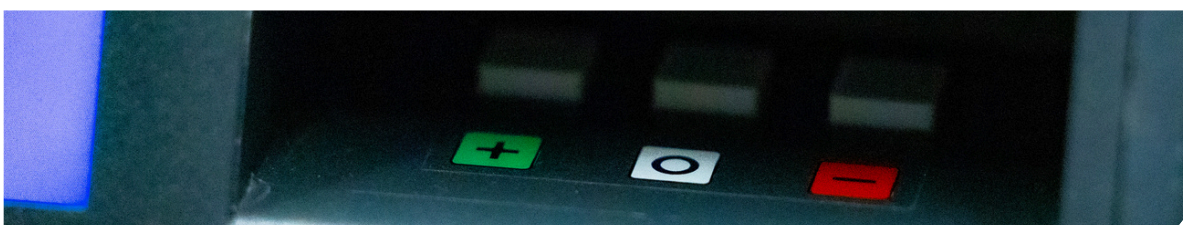
Key areas include **raw materials**, **energy**, **food security**, and **digital infrastructures** such as **semiconductors**, **cloud technologies**, and **AI chips**. Recent **disputes**, such as the **2025 U.S.–EU tariff agreement**, illustrate how **vulnerable Europe’s economic and technological position** can be.

In response, **EU institutions** have made **strategic autonomy** a **priority**, launching **legislative** and **financial initiatives** to **secure access** to **critical resources**. The **Critical Raw Materials Act**, for example, seeks to strengthen **Europe’s capacity** to **supply industries** ranging from **energy** to **defence** and **advanced technologies**.

These **efforts** aim to **reduce dependency** and reinforce **resilience** in a rapidly **shifting global landscape**. Yet the pursuit of **strategic autonomy** through **trade agreements** also creates **dilemmas**.

Securing supplies may require closer engagement with **undemocratic regimes**, **preferential access clauses**, or **restrictive measures** that risk clashing with the **EU’s own principles**.

This raises a core **tension**: how can **Europe protect its economic sovereignty** and **reduce dependencies** while upholding the **values enshrined** in **Article 2** of the **Treaty on European Union** — **human dignity**, **freedom**, **democracy**, **equality**, **the rule of law**, and **respect** for **human rights**?



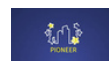
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Application form

