



Engaging with Connecting Europe

2017-2024 and beyond

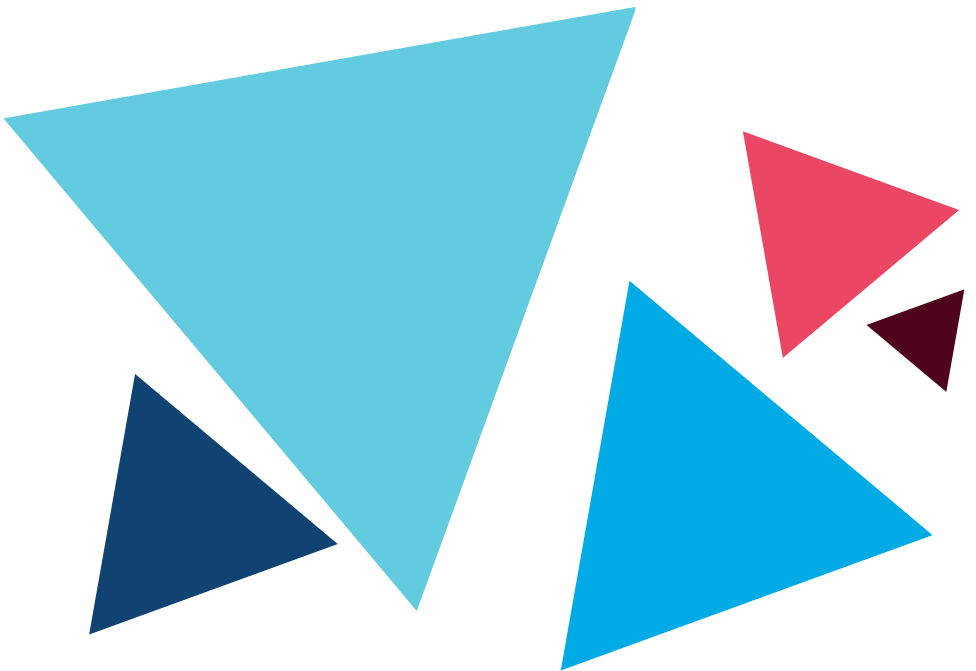


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We would like to thank [Unity Effect](#), a social enterprise founded with the purpose of “leading change from the inside out. for their work on this report”.

1. Introduction: Welcome to Connecting Europe

For years, the European Union (EU) has been confronted with a multitude of challenges, facing multiple crises (*permacrisis*) and in need of preparing several major transitions of our societies – from green and digital transitions, over economic transformations to demographic change. At the same time, global crises, including the war in Ukraine and the Middle East, require the EU to redefine its role on the world stage.

An active, involved civil society is crucial in helping the Union successfully navigate these challenges. Particularly at a time of rising nationalism, European civil society can make a vital contribution to enhancing European dialogue and understanding. Independent research and policy advice are the cornerstones of evidence-based policymaking and thus have a major role in generating informed responses to today's manifold challenges. However, in the past years, we have also seen shrinking spaces for civil society and non-profit organisations, both globally and on the European level.

Connecting Europe was initiated in 2017 by the **European Policy Centre (EPC)** in Brussels and funded by **Stiftung Mercator**, a German independent foundation. Connecting Europe's goal is to connect civil society organisations with EU decision-makers, as well as transnationalising EU policy debates.

It does this through a range of activities and outputs: **workshops, policy dialogues and roundtables; study trips** to Brussels and **joint publications** with partner organisations. It also offers **tailor-made advice** to its network partners, enabling them to respond to EU policy developments and to effectively navigate Brussels and reach the right EU decision-makers.

This booklet provides an overview of Connecting Europe and its work to facilitate further engagement with the project. We hope that this report serves as an invitation for:

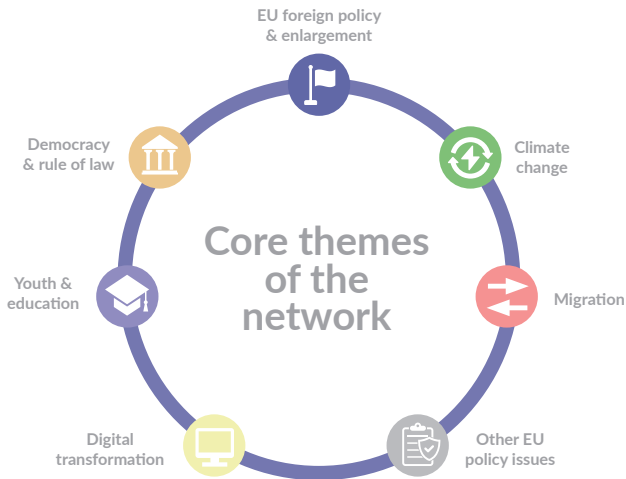
- Existing partners to celebrate their contributions and explore ways to deepen their engagement with the project;
- Any interested organisation seeking to understand more about Connecting Europe and how engaging with it and/or with individual partners in the network can support their work;
- The general public to gain insights into the work of Connecting Europe, and how it might connect to their own work and ambitions.

To create the booklet, we have partnered with Unity Effect, a social enterprise founded with the purpose of “leading change from the inside out.”

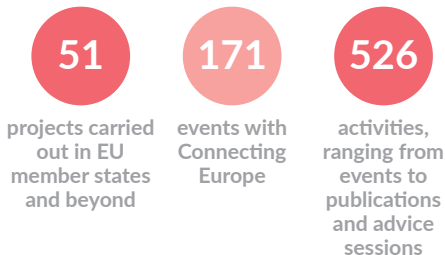
Connecting Europe at a glance

Since its inception in 2017, Connecting Europe has grown into a network of **more than 65 organisations**. This includes a broad range of research institutes, NGOs, think tanks, network projects and fellowship programmes working across Europe. Connecting Europe has engaged with approximately 50 projects, some of which are carried out by one organisation in the network, and some by two or three organisations in collaboration with one another. Overall, we have worked with partners from 16 countries.

Connecting Europe covers topics relevant to both the EU policy community and the partner organisations. The topics are **democracy and the rule of law; EU foreign policy and enlargement; climate change; digital transformation; migration; and youth and education**.



From 2017-2024, organisations within the network and the European Policy Centre carried out the following activities:



66 organisations are currently partners of Connecting Europe. Among the partners are:





A Kumu map of Connecting Europe events can be found here: [Kumu map](#)

2. How we work – and how you can engage with us

Connecting Europe is an open network of civil society organisations, with the objective to build a platform for engagement with Brussels for its partners. You become a partner organisation by cooperating with us and Stiftung Mercator – there are no official procedures to follow or documents you need to sign in order to benefit from the network.

Most importantly, partners decide their engagement pathway, ranging from receiving advice to attending events or creating their own collaborative projects. There are three different phases to pass through on the road to full engagement with Connecting Europe, some of which might overlap:

- **Phase 1 – Connect:** have an initial point of contact (either with the Connecting Europe team or Stiftung Mercator making the connection).
- **Phase 2 – Engage:** take part in community events and activities; have conversations with the Connecting Europe team to explore our work and receive advice and support.
- **Phase 3 – Create:** (co)develop own events, build partnerships, and start projects. We welcome creative ideas for collaboration.



There are no obligations that come with joining and being part of the Connecting Europe network. The Connecting Europe team is happy to provide support and advice, and to connect partners to other actors and help shape their events. No additional costs occur for partner organisations in the framework of cooperation with Connecting Europe.

2.1 Community building

Since its inception in 2017, the work of building a community among civil society organisations working towards the same goal has been central to Connecting Europe. As such, the project team has actively created and hosted various opportunities:

Network and Community events: These workshops focus on bringing together civil society actors operating within the same field, such as the rule of law or EU foreign policy. The day-long workshop setup provides the opportunity for networking as well as exchanging knowledge within the area of expertise. These network events are an opportunity to explore synergies beyond one's usual collaborations. They are designed to enable joint strategising on challenges, priorities and increasing impact.

Follow-up workshops and events: Community events are often the starting point for further engagement, either with Connecting Europe or with other partner organisations.

Study trips: Over the years, we have hosted many organisations for study trips at the EPC, coupling learning and networking in Brussels with input from Connecting Europe and EPC analysts.

Connecting Europe and its partners have engaged in:



This included community-building activities in the following policy areas:



2.2 Supporting research on EU policies

Bridging policy and research is an important aspect of Connecting Europe's work. Connecting Europe supports EU analysis by **contributing to the research process** as well as **discussing research results** in Brussels. It also **conducts its own policy research**, targeting EU institutions and member states.

Contributing to research processes: An important format for actively contributing to research is through **roundtables**. These are closed-door events focused on facilitating an exchange between key stakeholders on a specific topic guided by a research question or policy problem. Roundtables facilitate in-depth discussions on key issues related to EU policies. For partners and their projects, they offer multi-stakeholder feedback and direct exchange with policymakers - in effect, they are a platform in which to test ideas and recommendations. For policymakers, they offer state-of-the-art research on the issues and policies that they work on.

Disseminating research results: Based in the heart of Brussels, public **Policy Dialogues** at the EPC offer the opportunity to share and discuss research results with policymakers and other stakeholders. Over the years, we have discussed our project results with Commissioners, Members of the European Parliament and national representatives, as well as with other civil society actors and stakeholders. This has provided us with an opportunity to directly convey key messages to the Brussels audience and beyond.

Own policy research: **Connecting Europe's** own **publications** have helped it to consolidate knowledge and research findings, as well as offer a more transnational perspective on EU policymaking. Its publications showcase contributions by EPC analysts and researchers in our network, thus providing national and local perspectives on the EU's challenges.

Connecting Europe and its partners have engaged in:



2.3 Providing advice

Since the very beginning of the project, the Connecting Europe team has played an active role in engaging with partners in exchange and consulting sessions.

A key principle of the project is to centre any advisory activity around the needs of our partner organisations. We can help them to navigate Brussels, inform about and discuss policy developments, and link up with in-house EPC analysts. In the process, we help create stronger connections and deeper relationships between partners, the EPC and stakeholders in Brussels, which enables more impactful outputs for both Connecting Europe partners and the EPC. Advice can be provided via different formats:

1-on-1 meetings are initial conversations with representatives from organisations that are interested in participating in or deepening their engagement with the network. In such conversations, we also support our partners in helping generate impact in Brussels, for example by finding answers to questions such as: Who are the key EU stakeholders engaged in your work? How should people approach EU policymakers? What is the right time and approach for the events or policy papers?

Focus group meetings (max. 5 people) between the partner and specific EPC experts within their field. This is to gain insights into how their idea would be perceived in the Brussels context and to gain advice on how their policy idea could have more impact. They are most useful before the finalisation of the research.

Workshops bring together partners (outside of Brussels) and stakeholders (within Brussels) with the aim of increasing the Brussels-based network of the partner, aligning certain policy positions, and exchanging ideas. Creating platforms and workshops is particularly useful for the generation of new ideas and at the development stage of research.

Connecting Europe and its partners have engaged in:



2.4 Outreach and bridge building

Given the limited time and resources of many CSOs, Connecting Europe can connect partners with relevant stakeholders working on European policy. We can help you reach the right audience in Brussels, supporting the impact of your project. As one of the most influential think tanks in European affairs, the EPC can provide a valuable platform to increase your visibility and thus reach in Brussels.

We serve as a **connector and bridge builder**, allowing people to experience the policy processes in Brussels, form connections with other actors and provide a platform for themes and ideas that can be communicated to the wider public.

Apart from collaborating in events, Connecting Europe supports the **dissemination of activities** and research by sharing relevant resources and research findings via its **newsletter, social media, and a large network** of personal contacts. Working with Connecting Europe, partners can also publish research in the form of internal and external **publications**. This gives the valuable work of our partners increased reach, particularly among policymakers.

Finally, our ongoing offer of consulting and advice means we can help our partners identify relevant actors and spaces in the EU capital with whom they can connect. Whenever needed, we can build bridges and open doors in Brussels, making direct connections with our network in the city.

Outreach channels via Connecting Europe:

- Publications published with the EPC
- Our regular newsletter and social media presence
- Events and networking activities in Brussels



Subscribe to our [newsletter](#) here and follow us on LinkedIn and X.

3. Onto new horizons: Achievements and outlook

Responding to the challenges of the permacrisis requires a trust-based, connected and inclusive approach among all actors: public institutions, CSOs, research institutes, foundations, and the private sector.

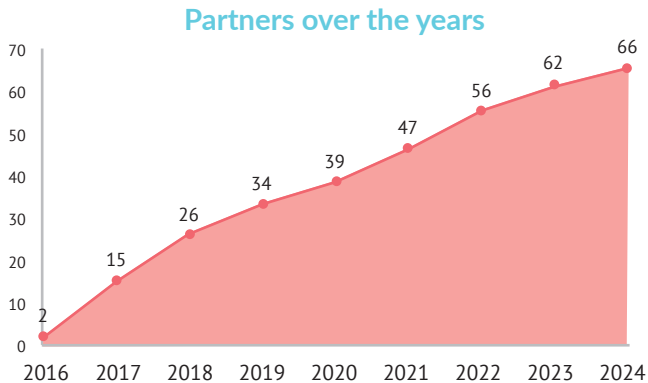
Creating a platform for this approach is what Connecting Europe stands for and will further build on in the coming years. In this chapter, we will first dive deeper into the trends and achievements of the period between 2017 and June 2024, before outlining the new strategy for the next three years, until 2027.

3.1 Achievements

Network growth

After beginning as a partnership between the EPC and Stiftung Mercator in 2017, Connecting Europe had expanded to 15 organisations by the end of the first project year. By June 2024 it had grown into a network of 66 organisations who were actively engaged in the project over the years.

Network growth from project start to 2024



In addition to the total numbers, a key strength of Connecting Europe is the **diversity of our partner organisations**. Six foundations and philanthropic actors, 10 network organisations, 11 NGOs, 16 research institutes, and 23 think tanks all shape the network. The different actors do have slightly different focus areas: research institutes have a strong focus on migration, for example, and think tanks on EU foreign policy and climate change; digital transformation is mostly present for NGOs, whereas democracy and the rule of law are a relevant topic for all types of organisations. The following charts provide an overview of network partners per organisational type:

Official partner organisations and project partners by type (2024)

Partner organisations

Foundation	6
Network organisation	10
NGO	11
Research institute	16
Think Tank	23
Total	66

Project partners

Advocacy project	6
Fellowship project	9
Network project	22
Research project	14
Total	51

Dedicated to themes that matter

A core agenda of Connecting Europe is to be responsive to relevant European and global trends. This means that network partners are given a forum in which they can discuss, make sense of, and present solutions for pressing concerns, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or Russia’s war of aggression in Ukraine.

As a result, certain themes have featured more highly than others throughout the years since inception, for example, democracy and the rule of law or youth and education. Climate change was prominent at the beginning of Connecting Europe and regained attention after the European Commission proposed the Green Deal. In addition, EU foreign policy has become much more relevant in recent years, given the geopolitical challenges and war in the neighbourhood.

Given the (geo)political environment, topics such as EU foreign policy or democracy and the rule of law will remain prominent in the coming years, while issues related to EU enlargement, the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood will become more important.

Connecting Europe activities per thematic area (2017-2024)

	<u>2017</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>	<u>2021</u>	<u>2022</u>	<u>2023</u>	<u>2024</u>	Total
Total Activities	50	66	51	84	66	79	64	66	526
Democracy & Rule of Law	20	34	20	40	31	27	18	22	212
Youth & Education	12	13	11	20	15	11	5	10	97
Migration	10	12	14	9	8	1	3	4	61
EU Foreign Policy	4	11	3	7	16	12	10	15	78
Climate Change	11	10	5	4	9	17	16	8	80
Digital Transformation	9	7	7	10	5	10	2	3	53
General EU Policy	3	9	3	7	8	10	5	8	53

Amplifying the voices of civil society

Connecting Europe works with a central intention in mind: to amplify the voices of CSOs, giving local, national and transnational civil society more visibility in Brussels. Our **roundtables, workshops and policy dialogues** are designed to facilitate the input of underrepresented groups in policy discussions in Brussels. Our **community events** provide a direct point of contact in Brussels and with policymakers, and **study trips** provide particular value in fostering knowledge about EU processes and can be the starting point for more effective work in Brussels.

Publishing and disseminating research in the form of internal and external **publications** gives the valuable work of our partners increased reach, particularly among policymakers. Additional outreach channels, such as LinkedIn or our newsletter, complement this.

Finally, our ongoing offer of **consulting and advice** via informal meetings and exchanges between the Connecting Europe team and partner organisations means we can help our partners identify relevant actors and spaces in Brussels with whom they can connect.

We serve as a **connector and bridge builder**, allowing people to experience the policy processes in Brussels, form connections with other actors and provide a platform for themes and ideas that can be communicated to the wider public.

The formats for engagement evolved throughout the project to provide the best possible forum for exchange. With this goal in mind, Connecting Europe and its civil society partners have jointly carried out the following activities between 2017 and June 2024:

Connecting Europe activities per category (2017-2024)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Total
Total Activities	50	66	51	84	66	79	64	66	526
Community Events		3	4	4		2		4	17
Public Events	3	11	7	15	8	6	4	7	61
Roundtables & Workshops	5	11	6	13	8	17	12	8	80
Study Trips					2	4	6	2	14
Publications				11	12	9	6	3	41
Advice & Exchange	42	41	34	41	36	41	37	42	314

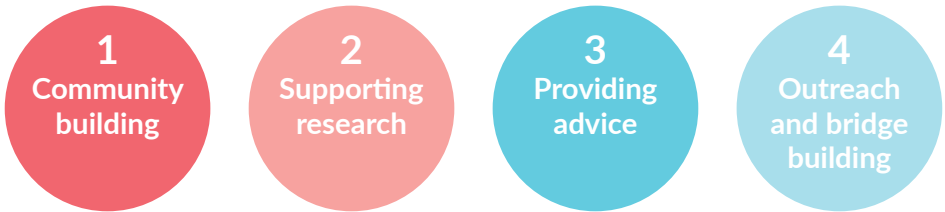
3.2 Looking forward: Strategy for the future

After a successful seven-year collaboration, EPC and Stiftung Mercator entered a new phase of cooperation in July 2024 in the form of a renewed Connecting Europe project. This phase will build on Connecting Europe's past achievements and successes, continuing the core elements of the project and complementing them with new strategic priorities.

Continuing the success story

Connecting Europe will continue to provide a platform for **civil society engagement with EU decision-makers**. By doing so, it will remain steadfast in its efforts to **transnationalise policy debates**, in the process connecting European stakeholders with national and local-level civil society and research.

As this proceeds, the same four pillars of engagement will remain the foundation of the work:



New strategic elements

As the network continues to grow, Connecting Europe will work to enhance its impact. This will include increasing the strength and diversity of its network, improving its strategic outputs, and expanding its work with civil society in EU candidate countries. These new elements reflect the need for increased engagement in a new (geo)political context.

1. Becoming more inclusive

In the coming years, we will seek to reach out to new partners, particularly in EU member states that we've not covered so far. Furthermore, we will focus on engaging with partners from the Global South and the EU's neighbourhood in an effort to make Connecting Europe more inclusive for new voices, while extending our offer of partnership to new places and generating new ideas for policy debates.

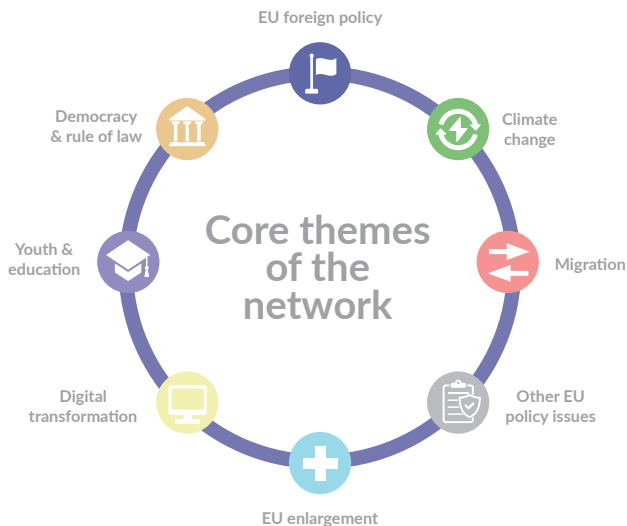
2. Enhancing strategic output

While remaining dedicated to themes that matter, Connecting Europe has, over recent years, adapted its thematic focus to meet new political circumstances and policy needs. We will continue this approach, particularly concentrating on four themes: **EU foreign policy**, **climate change**, **digital policies**, and **democracy and the rule of law**. At the same time, it will add a new focus area: **EU enlargement**.

3. 'Thinking enlarged'

Aligning with the current political landscape and ongoing developments in the discussion around EU enlargement, the EPC is pursuing its **'thinking enlarged'** focus. To make future enlargement rounds a success, actors from candidate countries need to be included in debates on the future of Europe. To aid this effort, Connecting Europe's "thinking enlarged" focus seeks to strengthen civil society in these regions.

Connecting Europe will therefore focus on building new connections to CSOs in the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood and involve these organisations more fully in our activities. We will host community building gatherings for civil society from the Western Balkans and from Eastern European candidates, as well as mainstream their inclusion into all Connecting Europe activities, selected EPC programme activities and EU policy debates more generally.



4. Let's work together!

To build on the successful work of the past, we need one important ingredient: **you**. We want to hear from you about your needs, concerns and prospects, to define together what a successful engagement journey can look like for each prospective partner.

To do so, please reach out to us via our LinkedIn or X accounts or our newsletter. We look forward to a positive and bright future with all of you.



Get in touch!



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The **European Policy Centre** is an independent, not-for-profit think tank dedicated to fostering European integration through analysis and debate, supporting and challenging European decision-makers at all levels to make informed decisions based on sound evidence and analysis, and providing a platform for engaging partners, stakeholders and citizens in EU policymaking and in the debate about the future of Europe.

Connecting Europe is a project of the European Policy Centre and funded by Stiftung Mercator. Established in 2017, its objective is to connect civil society organisations with EU decision-makers and to give those organisations more visibility in Brussels. A network project with 65+ partners from 16 countries, Connecting Europe actively works to improve the links between the national capitals and Brussels to discuss EU policy in a European fashion.

