



## Interim Implementation Report 2022 of the CEI Plan of Action 2021-2023

### Background

The Plan of Action (PoA) is a strategic framework tailored to meet the needs of the CEI Member States, while advancing the mission of the Organisation to achieve two strategic objectives, namely supporting European integration and promoting sustainable development of the CEI region.

Through the implementation of the PoA, the CEI aims to bring its Member States closer together in cooperative initiatives and encourage further regional cooperation in a structured and result-oriented manner.

In practical terms, its implementation intends to make the most of the main assets of the Organisation, based on its distinctive working methodology for the promotion of regional cooperation through a combination of political dialogue and fund, programme and project management, as well as through a multistakeholder and multilevel approach. Such approach includes cooperation with parliaments, businesses, local actors, civil society, scientific communities, academia and media, as well as strategic partnerships and enhanced cooperation with other international and regional organisations. The latter with a view of developing joint actions and/or amplifying the impact of the respective activities.

### Context

This year has been marked by an unimaginable event, i.e. an aggression towards the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of one of the CEI Member States – Ukraine – by the Russian Federation.

This aggression has brought about an immense loss of lives and a huge humanitarian and economic toll on Ukraine, causing ripple effects across the entire CEI region. Numerous sectors, such as energy, food industry, agriculture and healthcare are particularly vulnerable, and are exposed to mounting disruptions in the supply chains. The everyday lives of citizens are directly affected by economic hardships, uncertainty of energy supplies, spikes in energy prices and rising inflation, coupled with increased security risks, including that of nuclear escalation. In parallel, countries are dealing with the challenges of a hybrid war. This situation may have far-reaching geopolitical consequences.

To mitigate the impact of the war on Ukraine and across the region, instruments fostering regional cooperation, such as the CEI, have demonstrated their usefulness once again. With Ukraine being a CEI member under military aggression and the rest of the members being geographically situated in the vicinity of the war, the CEI promptly acted in pursuing coordinated initiatives to address these unprecedented challenges, thus showing remarkable unity and resilience to crises, as well as capacity to swiftly put forward solutions, building upon solidarity and cooperation.

The immediate political and financial support to Ukraine, provided in the early days of the war, confirm this approach. It has paved the way to new initiatives to further support Ukraine, but also to vigorously pursue the European integration process as a key priority and an integral part of the CEI's response to the current challenges, and as the only way for peace, stability, security and prosperity in Europe.

Against the backdrop, the two meetings of the Foreign Ministers, the informal one in New York, and the regular one in Sofia, also represented an opportunity for the Ministers to send a message of unity and deepening solidarity through their exchange of ideas on furthering European integration.

Now that the CEI Member States are either EU Members or aspire to join the EU, the Organisation has become even more consolidated. Sharing the experiences between the EU and non-EU CEI countries remains fundamental, representing an added value of the Organisation. Thus, possibilities for the CEI to become a strong interlocutor in favour of the EU enlargement should be explored.

In addition, the CEI has continued to pursue sustainable development through the promotion of the UN 2030 Agenda and through the tangible implementation of various SDGs with activities focused on youth, connectivity, health, economic recovery, clean water, sustainable energy, sustainable cities.

### Outcomes

In this context, the CEI, i.e. the Bulgarian CEI Presidency and the CEI-Executive Secretariat (CEI-ES), was fully committed to adequately meeting the objectives of EU integration and the 2030 Agenda as mutually reinforcing and complementary processes and in tackling the challenges, including those linked to the consequences of the war in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic in all its spheres and other topical issue for the region. Indeed, traditional and new-initiated actions have been launched within the CEI framework in 2022, pursuant to the Plan of Action 2021-2023:

- **Support to Ukraine:** the war in Ukraine has provoked tragical damages. First and foremost, it has brought about a humanitarian tragedy in the country and catastrophic consequences affecting the lives of citizens and economies world-wide. Driven by the search for solidarity, stemming from its mission and strategic objectives, the CEI has reacted immediately both by condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine through political statements in support of the country, by suspending the Republic of Belarus from its rights of representation and by providing concrete contributions to the urgent needs of the people of Ukraine. These latter included: CEI support through the International Committee of the Red Cross; creation of a Ukrainian Educational Hub in Warsaw to assist students in maintaining continuity with their education in line with the Ukrainian system and offer various training opportunities to young people and adults in areas such as languages (Ukrainian, Polish, English), soft skills, information technology, and career guidance; provision of a mobile emergency service and medical equipment in Mikofajów; aid for basic necessities in Kharkiv, Sumy and Poltava.
- **Intensified political dialogue:** in line with the already established practice, activities of the Bulgarian CEI Presidency, with the support of the CEI-ES, included four CNC meetings and two meetings of the Foreign Ministers, an informal one held in New York in September, and the regular one in Sofia in November under the title "A united CEI region in support of Ukraine and addressing the wider ramifications of the war". Supporting Ukraine in the ongoing Russian aggression against it; mitigating the impact the war is having across the region, on its citizens and economies; furthering European integration and diversification of energy supplies, were among the topics analysed and discussed at both meetings. Moreover, capturing the vision for a stronger region, the MFA Meeting in New York decided to increase the CEI Cooperation Fund, thus better enabling the Organisation to cope with the growing challenges through joint activities. At the same time, the CEI-ES has undertaken actions for promoting the CEI. In this regard, visits were organised to the Republic of Bulgaria, the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as online meetings with a number of government officials from the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Albania. Moreover, a visit to the Republic of Moldova was organized for the preparation of the CEI Presidency 2023.
- **Expert meetings:** in addition to the political dialogue, the Bulgarian Presidency, with the strong support of the CEI-ES, promoted several expert meetings in the framework of its priorities on the following topics:
  - **Health** – organised in cooperation with the WHO Regional Office for Europe, a joint CEI-WHO high-level expert meeting was held in Trieste in September, to exchange views, best practices and share experience on the primary health care models. Focus was put, in particular, on mental health and youth, thus contributing to the activities of the Presidency in the context of its social recovery from the pandemic priority.

- **Youth** - at a dedicated event held in Sofia in October, delegations composed of high-ranking experts from the ministries or agencies responsible for youth and representatives of the national youth council or international non-governmental youth organisations of the CEI Member States (the latter between ages 15 and 29) had the chance to exchange views and good practices on how to better involve youth as key players in peacebuilding, as well as motivate them to take concrete actions at local level or across national borders.
  - **Connectivity** – an event was held in Brussels in December, in cooperation with the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat, to launch a discussion on enhancing connectivity from a broader perspective, particularly focusing on transport, including transit of goods, as an important factor for the overall economic development of the region, which can help unlock the potential of interlinked production networks and value chains.
- **Parliamentary cooperation:** the cooperation among parliaments included two main events. The first one was the Parliamentary Committee of the CEI Parliamentary Dimension in Sofia in May, which focused on the topic of cross-border research and innovation. National parliaments and governments were invited to create and implement policies aimed at developing talents and at accelerating the countries' technological advancement and sustainability, as well as invest in research and innovation. In particular, the committee suggested that a new event format should be established, i.e. a 'CEI Innovates Summit' bringing together leaders in the *CEI innovation ecosystem*. The second one was a General Committee on Cultural Affairs in Krakow in September, which served as an occasion to debate on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites' protection and administration. Support to the Ukrainian people affected by the Russian aggression, especially referring to the shared values of peace and freedom and protesting the severe damages to the Ukrainian cultural heritage sites was also expressed.
  - **Economic cooperation:** the Bulgarian Presidency organised a CEI Economic Forum at the margins of the MFA Meeting in Sofia in November, including a special panel for Foreign Ministers and special guests, entitled "Supporting Ukraine and addressing the wider economic consequences of the war in the CEI region". The overall topic of the forum was "The Challenges the CEI SMEs are Facing and the Economic Recovery of the Region". The CEI Economic Forum complemented the activities of the Presidency in the context of its Economic Recovery Priority and the CEI Economic Dimension. It provided an opportunity for Ministers to directly inform the business about the deliberations during the MFA meeting on topics such as providing further support to Ukraine, pursuing regional measures to enhance connectivity and stabilize supply chains, supporting young people and groups particularly. Likewise, the Forum's sessions focused on topics such as talent as a source of competitive SMEs and economic development; access to strategic capital in the domain of future building blocks; future role of SMEs.
  - **Local cooperation:** this year a focus was also put on the development of the Local Dimension. In this regard, in March the CEI-ES signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ALDA - the European Association of Local Democracy. The agreement aims at underlining the importance of local democracy for the functioning of the rule of law and the achievement of its goals. Moreover, the first CEI Local Authorities Congress was held in Sofia in June, in the framework of the Bulgarian Presidency on the topic "CEI Local and Regional Authorities in the post crisis Europe - prospects for sustainable and resilient future". Discussions focused, in particular, on the challenges in the field of ecological transition and transition to clean energy in the region, outlining key priorities, lessons learned and challenges faced especially in these difficult times. On this occasion, a fruitful collaboration with the Council of Europe was established with some follow-up activities, including an informal event for the Permanent Representatives to the Council of Europe of the CEI countries and members of the Congress on the occasion of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in October.

- **Cooperation with the UN:** the CEI-ES took part in the UN General Assembly High-level week in New York in September, where the CEI holds an observer status. The delegation participated in the Education Summit 2022, focusing on the world-wide crisis in education and its impacts, and in the 77<sup>th</sup> Session of the UNGA, where global responsibility to current challenges was invoked. The informal MFA Meeting organised by the Bulgarian Presidency, in cooperation with the CEI-ES was held at the margins of UN General Assembly. Moreover, in November, the UN General Assembly, adopted the Resolution on *Cooperation between the United Nations and the Central European Initiative* by a recorded vote of 102 countries in favour, to 5 against with 28 abstained. This was the first time a Resolution was put to vote (previous resolutions were consensus-based), since, among other issues, the document reflects the consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine.
- **Cooperation with the EU:** strengthening cooperation with the EU has been further pursued. One of the CNC meetings (May) was partly dedicated to discussions on how to reach an enhanced cooperation with the EU. Deliberations included several proposals to be further explored in the CEI framework, embedded in the minutes of the meeting. For the future, possibilities for the CEI to become a strong interlocutor to the EU should be explored. At practical level, contacts with the Commission continued in the framework of the CEI EU-funded projects. Moreover, the CEI followed closely the implementation of the EU Macro-Regional Strategies and actively participated in a number of events in the context of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region.
- **Cooperation with other international and regional organisations:** special attention has also been paid to cooperation with other international and regional organisations. First and foremost, the CEI and the WHO/Europe have continued to work together in synergy and joining efforts. In this regard, the second CEI-WHO Europe inter-country/area meeting on Scaling-up Strategies for Primary Health Care was held in Trieste in September, in the framework of the endorsement of the “Roadmap for Health and Well-being in the Western Balkans (2021–2025)”. Establishing common actions and joint events with other organisations was also at the centre of attention. In this context, as mentioned above, the Bulgarian Presidency in cooperation with the CEI-ES collaborated with the Congress of the Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and organised the informal event in the context of the Local Dimension in Strasbourg. Moreover, a joint event on connectivity with the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat, the Bulgarian CEI Presidency and the CEI-ES has been organised in Brussels in December. A bilateral meeting with the Transport Community Permanent Secretariat on establishing synergies through joint actions was held earlier in the year (February). Similarly, a meeting with the Secretariat of the South-eastern Europe Health Network (SEEHN) was also held in February. The CEI-ES also participated in a coordination meeting of the Secretariat of the regional organisations in Istanbul in December, organised by the Black Sea Economic Cooperation. The cooperation with the Adriatic and Ionian Initiative (AII), continued in the framework of the Call “IMAGINE” Active Young Citizens for Sustainable Development in CEI and AII Areas. Finally, a Memorandum of Understanding with the Regional Anticorruption Initiative (RAI) was signed in Trieste in December.
- Last but not least, the CEI, and in particular the CEI-ES, has worked on enhancing **project cooperation and tailor-made programmes** for the needs of its countries. In this context, the following instruments have been put at the disposal of the Member States:
  - **Cooperation Activities** (co-financed out of the CEI Cooperation Fund, contributed by all CEI Member States) – the activities mainly promote networking and people-to-people contacts, such as conferences, seminars, workshops, festivals, cultural and youth exchanges, educational and science meetings, media events, etc. on topics where smaller amounts make an effective impact. 45 Cooperation Activities tackling the objectives of the PoA 2021-2023 were approved within the relevant Call for Proposals for activities to be implemented in 2022. A number of them have been implemented, some are still to take place. Furthermore, the Call for the activities to be implemented in 2023 was launched in November.

- **“IMAGINE” Active Young Citizens for Sustainable Development in CEI and All Areas** – the initiative intends to stimulate the contribution of young people towards the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. The first-place winner of this year’s competition was the Bulgarian “Goethe” German High School with the project idea “Active Young Citizens for Gender Equality in Bulgaria”, followed by “Become the best version of yourself, be non-formal!” (“Aurel Vlaicu” Theoretical High School, Romania) and by “Educating young people of damage of environmental pollution and ways to improve it, their impact on climate changes, an exhibition of sculptures made of recycled material” (Public Institution Technical School Center Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina). The three winning schools will respectively use their prize to take their students to the UN Headquarters in New York; to the UN Headquarters in Geneva; and to improve the school lighting system.
- **Feature Events and Prizes** – the CEI has further promoted its “Feature Events”. These events either carry the name of the CEI in their title or dedicate a special segment to the CEI, providing valuable opportunities for networking, training and mobility in the fields of culture and media. Moreover, in order to honour and encourage initiatives and activities of talented and often young people from the Member States in these fields, several CEI Prizes have been offered. In particular, the Serbian director Milica Tomović received the *CEI Award at Trieste Film Festival*, Oleg Vereshchagin from Ukraine won the *CEI Award at the International Design Contest “Trieste Contemporanea”*, Croatian Luiza-Katica Bouharaoua won the *CEI Award for Young Writers at Vilenica International Literary Festival*, and the Ukrainian Anna Babinets won the *CEI SEEMO Award at the he South East Europe Media Forum*.
- **Know-how Exchange Programme (KEP)** – financed out of the CEI Fund at the EBRD funded by Italy, through this Programme the CEI provides support to bilateral/multilateral projects involving EU and non-EU CEI Member States and focusing on the transfer of know-how, exchange of best practices and capacity building activities, such as trainings, study visits, etc. Indeed, this Programme, has proven to be an effective and stimulating mechanism for promoting European integration through cooperation in many CEI areas of activity. In 2022, 8 KEP projects for a total commitment amounting to around 300.000 EUR have been approved bringing together know-how providers and beneficiaries from the CEI region and covering a broad range of areas pertaining to institutional capacity building concerning the EU Cohesion Policy, migration, corruption, seismic hazard, regulatory frameworks related to in water, forest and food sector. Moreover, 4 KEP Projects have been implemented tackling the objectives PoA 2021-2023.
- **Technical Cooperation (TC) Programme** – financed out of the CEI Fund at the EBRD, entirely funded by Italy, through this Programme the CEI offers grant-type assistance in support of specific components of investments and operations of the EBRD. TC operations include support for feasibility and pre-feasibility studies, sector and environmental engineering, management training, capacity building, pre-loan audits. In 2022, the CEI Fund at the EBRD has provided financing for 8 TC projects for a total commitment amounting to over 3,1 million EUR, a record year in terms of commitments. In addition, 5 TC Projects have been implemented this year.
- **EU-funded Projects** – the CEI, through its Executive Secretariat, makes use of EU funding programmes as a valuable tool for the attainment of the strategic objectives - the promotion of regional cooperation for European integration and sustainable development - as well as for the implementation of its tri-annual Plan of Action. In 2022, 14 EU-funded projects have been implemented in the following sectors: connectivity, sustainable mobility, judicial cooperation, innovation, social innovation, health, circular bioeconomy, energy and environmental protection.