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| **OPINION** |
| European Economic and Social Committee |
| **Long-term competitiveness strategy** |
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| 1. **Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions The single market at 30**   [COM(2023) 162 final]   1. **Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Long-term competitiveness of the EU: looking beyond 2030**   [COM(2023) 168 final] |
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# Conclusions and recommendations

## The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the European Commission's communication on the EU's long-term competitiveness, published on 16 March 2023. Therein, the Commission acknowledges that the EU's competitiveness is currently lagging behind, especially as regards productivity and certain cross-cutting technologies. When it comes to tackling future challenges beyond 2030, the EESC believes that competitiveness is determined by a plurality of actors and factors that shape complex ecosystems and must be considered in an integrated vision. These factors affecting the competitiveness and productivity of the ecosystem each have their own specific features, and comprise territorial systems, businesses in their many and different forms, workers, the social partners and public administrations.

## The EU must adopt a competitiveness agenda which, in line with the principles of the single market and the social market economy, is forward-looking, well-defined and coordinated, and promotes the prosperity of businesses, quality jobs, raising living standards for EU citizens, and inclusiveness, while improving the ability of the EU system to innovate, invest and trade and compete in the global marketplace for the common good and drive our transition to climate neutrality.

## The EESC recognises that the single market must continue to play its role and function smoothly both in normal circumstances and in times of crisis. To ensure that the single market functions properly, market barriers must be systematically detected and eliminated, and new ones prevented from arising. The EESC urges the Member States in particular to firmly commit to properly implementing and enforcing EU legislation. All of this has to be accompanied by proper control and protection tools regarding the quality of work, a level playing field for all companies, citizens' rights and consumer protection. Moreover, the EESC maintains that the EU's open strategic autonomy must be developed as a key feature of the European project, the uniqueness and strengths of which build on the combination of economic and social integration, to guarantee a "highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment", as laid down in Article 3(3) of the Treaty of European Union.

## The EESC supports the implementation of an investment- and growth-friendly EU budgetary framework that guarantees economic sustainability and enables both the private and public sectors to engage in long-term planning and to pursue better policies, in line also with the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## The EESC believes that to revitalise the EU's competitiveness it is necessary to activate an integrated European industrial strategy, which, by promoting an integrated European industrial system, has as its key players: the company and its workers.

## The EESC agrees with the Commission that a high level of public services and infrastructure in all European areas and regions, especially those that lag behind the average, is also necessary for the single market to function. For the EESC, proper provision of physical and social infrastructure is of strategic value to ensuring the competitiveness of the EU ecosystem. This strategic action requires: i) a cohesion policy that drives economic convergence and resilience; ii) investments in quality public services and in future-proofed transport, energy and data networks, with a particular emphasis on the provision of critical infrastructure, and cross-border and multi-country projects; and iii) investments in education and lifelong learning for a skilled workforce prepared for the challenges of tomorrow, and in a quality health system, long-term care and social care, and in affordable housing.

## The EESC appreciates the efforts made by the Commission in identifying 17 key performance indicators (KPIs) for the nine dimensions of competitiveness. However, the EESC believes that: i) for certain dimensions of competitiveness some key indicators have been left out; and ii) the European dimension of the KPIs hides the existing territorial differentiations.

# Background

## The EU has set itself the goal to strengthen its resilience and influence in the world, but is losing the competitiveness needed to achieve this goal. The EU's share of the world economy is predicted to steadily decrease from nearly 15% to only 9% by 2050[[1]](#footnote-1). Therefore, it is imperative to improve the EU's productivity and competitiveness. To that end, the EU must adopt a competitiveness agenda, which, in line with the principles of the single market and the social market economy, is forward-looking, well-defined and coordinated, and promotes the prosperity of businesses and workers, improving their ability to innovate, invest and trade and compete in the global marketplace for the common good and drive our transition to climate neutrality. This is essential not only to ensure future prosperity, innovation, investment, trade and growth, but also to create quality jobs and raise living standards.

## The EESC welcomes the European Commission's communication on the EU's long-term competitiveness, published on 16 March 2023. Therein, the Commission acknowledges that the EU's competitiveness is currently lagging behind, especially as regards productivity and certain cross-cutting technologies. The purpose of its communication is thus to present competitiveness objectives capable of achieving the EU's long-term strategic objectives, tackling future challenges beyond 2030. From this perspective, the EESC believes that in order to bridge the growth and innovation gap, it is necessary to create favourable conditions for sustainable growth, bearing in mind that, in the current global context, competitiveness is determined by a plurality of actors and factors that shape complex ecosystems and which must be considered in an integrated vision. These factors affecting the competitiveness and productivity of the ecosystem each have their own specific features, and comprise territorial systems, businesses in their many and different forms, workers, the social partners and public administrations.

# General comments

## The EESC agrees with the Commission that the single market is "one of the greatest achievements of the EU" and the foundation for peace, prosperity, and geopolitical influence in the world.

## However, the EESC points out that, three decades after its entry into force, the single market remains fragmented and its integration is stagnating. According to the Commission, intra-EU trade in goods has increased by only 3.5% since 2006 relative to the size of the EU economy; intra-EU trade in services accounts for only 6% of EU GDP[[2]](#footnote-2). The free movement of goods, services, people, capital and data is still not the reality in many areas. Businesses, especially start-ups and SMEs, find it difficult or impossible to expand and grow across borders due to a multitude of barriers. As a result, the EU is missing out on enormous economic potential of up to EUR 713 billion by the end of 2029 for goods and services alone[[3]](#footnote-3). Recent shocks, however, including the pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine, have shown not only how vulnerable the single market can be to crises, but also the extent to which the EU economy relies on a fully functioning single market. What is more, a healthy single market can reinforce the EU's resilience and response to future crises.

## At the same time, businesses, most notably SMEs, are confronted with a large and growing amount of regulatory costs and burdens stemming from EU and national legislation. Urgent measures are needed, both at European and national levels, to better manage the flow of regulatory costs and burdens, offset unnecessary bureaucracy and actively support companies in transforming and complying with the cumulative impacts of the multiple new regulations. The transition depends on many factors and businesses play an important role here.

## The EESC welcomes the measures proposed by the Commission to advance the integration of the single market, notably in the area of services. The EESC also welcomes the latest Council conclusions which call for "deepening the single market, preserving its integrity, its four freedoms and its openness, ensuring a level playing field and creating a growth-enhancing regulatory framework that reduces administrative burden, while strengthening industrial policy and reducing strategic dependencies, in particular in the most sensitive areas"[[4]](#footnote-4). However, the EESC points out that, in practice, the Member States often lack the political will to implement and enforce this commitment. Furthermore, the EESC notes that the communication lacks a holistic political vision spanning across the various directorates-general to deepen the single market in all areas. The EESC therefore strongly calls for the completion of the single market to once again become a central project for the future of the EU and be accorded the highest political priority in all EU institutions.

## On the competitiveness check, the EESC welcomes its introduction to support enterprise creation and improved working conditions and refers to its recent recommendations[[5]](#footnote-5). It calls for the check to be fully and swiftly applied. In addition, the EESC urges the Commission to communicate clearly and rapidly how the check will be applied in practice. Due attention and weight should already been given to competitiveness when shaping all new initiatives.

## Enhancing the role of the social partners and reinforcing collective bargaining are important elements for improving competitiveness.

## Based on the most up-to-date data, there are 2 950 regional industrial clusters in the EU, which account for around a quarter of European employment (61.8 million jobs, 23.4% of total European employment)[[6]](#footnote-6). Given that they are such a key player in the real economy, there needs to be a specific focus on these clusters and their workers in any long-term strategy for the EU.

# An efficient single market and regulatory framework

## Like the Commission, the EESC recognises the role of the single market as the main pillar of the Union's business environment, and agrees that its functioning must be ensured both in normal circumstances and in times of crisis. To ensure that the single market functions properly, market barriers must be systematically detected and eliminated, and new ones prevented from arising. All of this must be accompanied by proper control and protection tools regarding the quality of jobs, a level playing field for all companies – including avoiding unjustified goldplating – citizens' rights, and consumer protection.

## The EESC refers back to the Commission's single market governance package of March 2020, which clearly set out all the necessary measures to be taken to improve the implementation and enforcement of EU law and remove existing barriers in the single market. The EESC is concerned that not enough progress is being made on implementing the announced measures and asks the Commission to provide an update on the progress made to date, the work underway and the next steps.

## The EESC points to its recommendations on subsidiarity and proportionality in its previous opinions[[7]](#footnote-7). It reiterates that the Union should act only where these principles are fully respected and where common action adds value for all.

## The EESC points out that a well-functioning single market is the responsibility of all EU institutions and all Member States. It specifically calls on the Member States to more ambitiously europeanise their national markets as per the recommendations in the European Semester and single market scoreboard and make good on the many commitments made at political level.

## Where Member States fail to correctly and fully transpose and implement EU law within the required timeframe, the Commission should take decisive action. However, the EESC notes with concern that the Commission's actions against internal market infringements by Member States have been significantly decreasing over the past three Commission administrations. It is essential that the Commission play its role as guardian of the Treaties and ensure appropriate harmonisation. To this end, the Commission must ensure that it has sufficient capacities and resources available.

## The EESC considers that of all the new challenges facing the single market, priority must be given to promoting the EU's open strategic autonomy. It underlines that, at the very core of the EU's open strategic autonomy lies a well performing and competitive single market and a strong industrial base, building, in particular, on the combination of economic and social integration, to guarantee a "highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment", as laid down in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union.

## On reducing reporting obligations by 25%, the EESC welcomes the target set and calls for its full and timely realisation. That said, it points out that reporting obligations only make up a very small part of costs and burdens for businesses. It therefore calls on the Commission to go beyond reporting obligations alone and capture administrative costs in a more complete sense. Likewise, compliance and adjustment costs, which present the largest costs for companies, need to be properly addressed.

# Access to capital and private investment

## The EESC strongly calls for the completion of the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union and the establishment of a coherent EU tax framework. Regulatory arbitrage and regulatory loopholes must be avoided to ensure stability and legal certainty. Other tools identified by the Commission as having leverage effects are sustainable finance and public seed funds.

## The EESC supports the implementation of an investment- and growth-friendly EU budgetary framework that guarantees economic sustainability and enables both the private and public sectors to engage in long-term planning and to pursue better policies, in line with the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights. Attention must be paid to budgetary discipline in the medium and long term. Higher taxes and inefficient public spending and debts for future generations should be avoided. To strengthen economic sustainability, the EU needs to fight tax evasion, tax avoidance and fiscal dumping, and the tax system must be conducive to investment and entrepreneurship, encourage economic activity and work and guarantee its progressivity.

## Furthermore, as access to finance at a reasonable cost is vital for businesses, and given the need to avoid critical dependence on external decisions, the Union should promote efficient and stable capital markets and a strong and independent banking sector within the Union. The Union must also avoid unnecessary regulatory measures that could compromise, directly or indirectly, access to finance, particularly for SMEs. This must be taken into account in the regulation of banks. The same principle applies to the development of sustainable finance criteria. In addition, access to different channels and forms of financing must be facilitated so that funds reach businesses quickly.

# Public investment and infrastructure

## The EESC agrees with the Commission that a high level of public services and infrastructure in all European areas and regions, especially those that lag behind the average, is also necessary for the single market to function. For the EESC, an adequate provision of physical and social infrastructure is of strategic value to ensuring the competitiveness of the EU ecosystem. In the EESC's view, improving connectivity within the single market for all Member States, including by developing and upgrading infrastructure and interconnections for transport and energy, including grids, is essential.

## For this reason, the role of public investment takes on strategic importance in terms of investing in physical and social infrastructure in Europe[[8]](#footnote-8). This strategic action requires:

## a cohesion policy driving economic convergence and resilience and investment in decarbonised infrastructure, which will guarantee that sustainable and inclusive growth are the European Commission's key tools for ensuring European competitiveness in the long term;

## investments in quality public services and in future-proof transport, energy and data networks, with particular emphasis on the provision of critical infrastructure, and cross-border and multi-country projects, which is crucial for emergency preparedness, and which must meet Europe's social and environmental objectives;

## investments in education and life-long learning; in health, long-term care and social care, and in affordable housing; investments in quality health systems and in skilled workforces prepared for the challenges of tomorrow.

## European social infrastructure should be supported by appropriate investment measures and fiscal policy measures.

# Research and innovation

## The EESC considers innovation to be the key to increasing productivity, and innovation is essential to the development, improved adaptability and renewal of businesses. Both public and private investment in research and innovation are necessary for the Union's future success.

## Cooperation between companies, universities and innovation organisations must be facilitated, as this is a significant practical means of encouraging productive innovation. For the EESC, it is clear that excellence in key technologies requires a significant increase in both public and private investment in research and innovation, the development of world-class RDI infrastructures, the attraction of talent, and the creation of ecosystems based on cooperation between businesses, universities and research institutions[[9]](#footnote-9).

## According to the Commission, tax-based incentives, public-private partnerships, R&D&I support measures and cohesion funds are the tools needed to accelerate innovation and neutralise regional imbalances in R&D spending in the EU.

# Energy and raw materials

## Access to basic production resources – energy, raw materials, capital and data – under competitive conditions is crucial for keeping industrial production and related activities competitive, and ultimately for keeping them in the EU. With high energy prices severely impacting the competitiveness of European energy-intensive industries, together with increased requirements on environmental sustainability including the need for electrification, the EU needs to enhance measures that simultaneously consider all of the basic energy policy objectives: security of supply, affordable prices and climate-neutrality.

## The same applies to raw materials. Industrial investments, mining, infrastructure, construction and electricity supply are all connected, and each individual stage in the value chain is relevant for the final product. All raw materials are important. For instance, cement, rock material and construction materials are required for mining, wind turbines and fossil-free industrial facilities. Specifically, the transition to a net-zero economy will be raw-materials intensive. As the move towards cleaner technologies progresses, the raw materials sector will be crucial for the energy transition. Price fly-ups and bottlenecks will be unavoidable as demand outstrips supply and price volatility creates uncertainty around the large up-front capital investments needed for production. Supply, demand, and pricing interplays will emerge across different commodities, leading to feedback loops followed by a combination of technology shifts, demand volatility, and materials substitution. Raw materials will be at the centre of decarbonisation efforts and electrification of the economy as we move from fossil fuels to wind and solar power generation, battery- and fuel-cell-based electric vehicles, hydrogen and other sorts of clean energy technologies.

## As the raw-materials supplier to the economy, the mining sector will need to grow at an unprecedented pace in order to enable the required technological shifts. The sector will be expected to move at a faster pace, despite its traditional reputation as a long lead-time, highly capital-intensive industry. In addition, workable solutions are needed to effectively combine the economic use of natural resources and the protection of biodiversity and the environment. The emissions of carbon dioxide need to be reduced as quickly as possible, by moving away from the traditional methods of combustion of crude oil, natural gas and coal. As new technologies emerge for generating and storing energy, the demand for raw materials will also alter (increasing the use of metals, while decreasing our reliance on fossil fuels).

# Circularity

## The EESC acknowledges the role that EU public procurement rules can play in making the transition towards a sustainable and circular economy and recommends "minimum environmental criteria" for public procurement, as already provided for in EU directives, to minimise and in the best case to avoid negative environmental impacts and waste creation across the whole life cycle of products[[10]](#footnote-10).

## Moreover, as an extension of the single market, international markets and open, rules-based external trade remain further foundations of the EU economy. To help businesses take advantage of global market opportunities, the EU must actively combat protectionism and promote bilateral trade and a level playing field.

# Digitalisation

## Digital technologies and the vertical sectors essential to them (AI, etc.), as well as their infrastructure, have a profound impact on competitiveness. We need to develop our future connectivity, AI, research and innovation, combining large amounts of data with fast, iterative processing and intelligent algorithms, allowing the software to learn automatically from patterns or features in the data. The Commission also reminds us that we need to maintain our efforts in terms of cybersecurity and digitalisation. The EESC believes that the challenges of the single market that derive from the digital transition must be addressed through social dialogue and through the EU taking a leading position in the application of shared legislation on digital technologies, so as to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that the efficiency pursued does not undermine social, economic and territorial cohesion, or the health and safety of workers and individuals, while also ensuring that it does not damage political stability[[11]](#footnote-11).

## While maintaining high standards, any regulation must be conducive to the successful digitalisation and competitiveness of businesses. The public sector also needs to digitalise its own operations and services, including administrative processes, without leaving anybody behind. Speeding up the permit procedures for investments and other business operations is an example of an urgent need where digitalisation would be part of the solution.

## Among other things, the EESC stresses that since data are essential raw materials for the present and the future, their availability, accessibility and fluid circulation must be guaranteed. This requires favourable regulation and rules, as well as advanced technologies.

## At the same time, the EESC supports the need to invest in cybersecurity to continue protecting increasingly digital and integrated products and processes.

## The EESC supports the position of the European Commission and of the European High-Performance Computing Joint Undertaking (EuroHPC JU) that investment in the development of key competences in high-performance computing in European science and industry should be increased.

# Education and skills

## The EESC will continue its work in this area after the European Year of Skills[[12]](#footnote-12).

## Furthermore, as the Commission points out, due to demographic changes, labour shortages are increasingly becoming one of the main obstacles to business growth and continuity at both national and regional level, and this is due to a multiplicity of factors. As stated in the European Labour Authority's 2022 Eures report: "new technologies, the transition to a climate-neutral economy, the ageing of the workforce and conditions of work and employment have all made significant contributions to the evolving relationship between labour demand and supply in Europe"[[13]](#footnote-13). A successful policy initiative in this area will require a holistic approach that addresses all of the different dimensions of the challenges. The EESC supports the work of the social economy and the implementation of active labour market policies aimed at mobilising inactive and unemployed people, and fostering the opportunities provided by, for example, female employment, and entrepreneurship, as well as legal migration, and incentives to opt for apprenticeships, including support for cross-border apprenticeships, with reviews of apprenticeship systems to check their attractiveness and mobility.

## In addition, cooperation between the public and private sectors must be strengthened, given the role played by businesses as employers, social partners and training providers. Changes in work and working life also require a resilient workforce. The cross-border mobility of workers, students and talent must be encouraged and facilitated, both within the EU and in cooperation with third countries, for example by helping to match supply to demand. The EU must therefore establish the right conditions to attract a highly skilled workforce and to ensure recognition of qualifications.

# Trade and open strategic autonomy

## The EESC agrees with the Commission. To make the most of foreign trade, we need to: avoid critical dependence on countries that are not democratically governed and promote cooperation and bilateral agreements with like-minded partners. The EESC supports the comprehensive review setting a new benchmark for Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD)[[14]](#footnote-14).

## For example, the disruption to international supply chains and markets caused by recent crises has highlighted the need to reduce the EU's critical dependencies, particularly on Russian fossil fuels and Chinese metals. The EU's industrial capacity and resources must therefore be strengthened, and new entrepreneurial ecosystems designed. Energy sources and supply chains for raw materials, intermediate products and components also need to be diversified.

## In the EESC's view, the responsibility of businesses to reorganise production and supply chains in response to societal demands should be framed within an industrial strategy that promotes the creation of an integrated European industrial system.

### The EU will need to drive forward an integrated European industrial system capable of ensuring that the different parts and economic sectors of the EU's Member States work together in a synergistic and coordinated way to achieve greater efficiency, competitiveness and overall value for the EU as a whole. Collaboration and cooperation between the different parties involved (EU businesses) needs to be maximised, to grow the economy of the entire continent.

## Rapid progress is needed in the ratification and implementation of finalised trade agreements and in the completion of ongoing negotiations. Full use should also be made of existing trade agreements, paying particular attention to the internationalisation needs of SMEs.

## The EESC will be paying particular attention to the new initiatives negotiated with the United States, in addition to those aimed at resolving the current issues (US Inflation Reduction Act, the steel and aluminium safeguard disputes, etc.).

# Comments on drivers and KPIs

## On the Commission's proposal to establish 17 KPIs to be updated annually before the European Council in March, the EESC believes this to be generally useful. In order to trigger the necessary political discussions and follow-up actions in the Council, the EESC recommends that, first, the KPIs should set clear and binding targets and need to be carefully monitored, evaluated and reported on. Second, the development of targets should happen in coordination with other indicators including the Single Market Scoreboard, the Digital Decade Policy and the European Semester. Third, the EESC urges the Member States to fully endorse this system and commit to reaching the targets set. Finally, the EESC urges the Commission to take forceful action where Member States fail to meet these targets.

## The EESC appreciates the efforts made by the Commission in identifying 17 key performance indicators (KPIs) for the nine dimensions of competitiveness. However, the EESC believes that, for certain dimensions of competitiveness, some key indicators have been left out, and that the European dimension of the KPIs hides the existing territorial differentiations. For these reasons, additional KPIs need to be included.

## It is somewhat incomprehensible that indicators pointing to the level of competitiveness of an economic system such as those concerning employment in high tech industry (*i: high tech; ii: medium-high; iii: medium-low; iv: low*) and in knowledge-intensive services (*i: high-tech knowledge-intensive services; ii: knowledge-intensive market services; iii: knowledge-intensive financial services; iv: other knowledge-intensive services*) are neglected, as well as employment in the R&D sector.

## The EESC believes it would be more appropriate to replace the KPI on "Public investment as a share of GDP" with "Investment by asset", including six groups : *i) dwellings*; *ii) other buildings and structures* (roads, bridges, airfields, dams, etc.); *iii) transport equipment* (ships, trains, aircraft, etc.); *iv) cultivated biological resources* (managed forests, livestock, etc.); *v) intellectual products* (R&D, software and databases, etc.); and *vi) Information and Communication Technology equipment* (computer, software, databases, telecommunication equipment, hardware). Each asset would be measured as a percentage of total gross fixed capital formation[[15]](#footnote-15).

## The EESC has the same concerns regarding the KPI "Trade with the rest of the World" as a share of GDP. It would be better to proceed with FTAs concluded with partner regions/countries: Mercosur, Mexico, Australia, United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, etc., and here again taking into account the existing regional differences between the regional areas of the EU.

## The EESC aims, while respecting the roles of the Commission and Eurostat, to ensure that civil society organisations and the social partners help to identify the domains of competitiveness and the related indicators that are more suited to more accurately identifying the problem.

## The EESC agrees with the Commission that the KPI system will need to be carefully monitored and evaluated, integrating this system with other indicators: the Single Market Scoreboard, the Digital Decade Policy and the European Semester.

Brussels, 24 April 2024

*The President of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Oliver RÖPKE

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2. [COM(2023) 162 final, "The Single Market at 30"](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0162). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [COM(2023) 162 final, "The Single Market at 30".](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0162) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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9. [OJ C 228, 29.6.2023, p. 17](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023AE0254). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [OJ C 47, 11.2.2020, p. 92](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A52019AE2306). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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14. [OJ C 140, 21.4.2023, p. 69.](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022AE4926) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [OECD Economic Outlook, 2023](https://data.oecd.org/gdp/investment-by-asset.htm). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)