

## **PRIORITIES OF THE SECTION FOR EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP (SOC) FOR THE 2025-2028 HALF-TERM**

### **1. Introduction**

Europe's people, workers and businesses continue to face many pressing challenges as a result of the multiple crises of recent years and the ongoing transformations to the way they live and work. The section will continue its work against the background of overarching challenges such as geopolitical instability, climate change, economic uncertainty, the cost-of-living crisis and the erosion of democratic values and norms. It will also focus on cross-cutting issues such as enhancing EU competitiveness and addressing labour shortages, future-oriented skills, persistent forms of inequality and discrimination, the impact of demographic shifts and the transformative rise of artificial intelligence.

With the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, defence and security are a major concern for Europeans, and peace building and conflict resolution must be part of the EU's policy response. Rising political extremism, polarisation and mistrust in institutions put social cohesion at risk, requiring stronger efforts to foster dialogue and mutual understanding and combat growing social intolerance, racism, xenophobia, homophobia and sexism, including violence against women and girls.

The European Union's social dimension needs to go hand in hand with European competitiveness, and environmental sustainability, economic prosperity and social and territorial cohesion are key drivers. Action must be taken to promote growth and enhanced productivity and cut red tape, while maintaining high standards for workers and consumers. Effective and regular civil and social dialogue are critical tools for shaping the European social agenda and implementing it at EU and national level. As part of the negotiations on the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, the best solutions must be identified to ensure that EU spending is optimised, while guaranteeing adequate resources for social investment complementing European competitiveness. A reinforced social economy is part of the solution.

The section will continue to draw on the work of its standing bodies (the **Labour Market Observatory (LMO)**, the **permanent groups on Immigration and Integration (IMI)**, **Disability Rights (DIS)**, **Roma Inclusion (ROMA)** and **Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)**), coordinating their activities and ensuring that their added value is fully captured in the section's work. Their work during the half-term will be in line with the section's priorities, the annual work programme and further initiatives by the European Commission, and they will identify synergies with other standing bodies and with other EESC structures. The section will also continue to enhance **cooperation with other sections and the CCMI** on cross-cutting issues and will work with the Equality and Youth Groups on matters of common interest.

The section will continue to work with the European institutions and the specialised agencies in its area of competence (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA), the European Labour Authority (ELA) and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)).

## 2. Priorities for the section

In accordance with the issues set out above, the section will work on the following priorities during the 2025-2028 half-term:

### 2.1 New action plan to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights

The section will work on the implementation of the new **Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)**, which should be ready by the end of 2025, so as to fully integrate economic and social objectives. The action plan will steer the section's work in the areas covered by the EPSR. The EPSR remains the EU's compass for upward social convergence, covering three strands: equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion. The EESC's opinion on the action plan (SOC/822) calls for measurable targets, stronger accountability, monitoring and adequate funding. Strong and effective social dialogue together with continuous engagement with civil society organisations, where relevant, is key to ensuring shared ownership and effective implementation of the EPSR across the EU.

### 2.2 Advancing the Union of Skills, delivering on inclusive quality jobs and boosting innovation in the green and digital transitions

The section will work to ensure that the **green and digital transitions** foster **quality, inclusive jobs** across all regions, addressing forms of inequality among groups, anticipating labour market changes and addressing skills needs for the jobs of the future, including through the work of its **Labour Market Observatory**.

The section will continue to stress that the social partners must participate meaningfully in decision making at all levels and in line with national industrial relations systems. The social partners and civil society organisations play a key role in ensuring that no one is excluded from the opportunities created by the digital and green transitions. Vulnerable groups are particularly affected by these transitions and therefore need specific attention and targeted measures.

It is important to advance the **Union of Skills** by ensuring lifelong learning pathways, targeted investment in upskilling, reskilling and the attraction, development and retention of talent throughout Europe and from non-EU countries, fully implementing the Talent Pool Regulation and addressing the issue of brain drain. The effective implementation of the Union of Skills is a key factor in ensuring and fostering the competitiveness of the European economy and addressing the challenge of labour and skills shortages and the need to equip the workforce with future-ready skills. The section will continue to promote effective active labour market policies.

The section will advocate for faster and more transparent recognition of qualifications and training across borders, unlocking the full potential of the internal labour market and facilitating **fair and effective labour mobility**. It will also continue to underline the importance of regulated labour migration from third countries to address labour shortages.

Accordingly, the section will contribute to and monitor the European Commission's Fair labour mobility package which includes a stronger mandate for the **European Labour Authority** in order to safeguard workers' rights and ensure a level playing field for businesses in the internal market.

One of the priorities identified by the European Commission in its work programme is the **Quality Jobs Roadmap** and the section will contribute to this. It should support the EPSR's employment, skills and anti-poverty targets. In line with the Commission's priorities, the Quality Jobs Roadmap, developed with the social partners, will support fair wages, good and safe working conditions, training and fair job transitions for workers and self-employed people, in part by increasing collective bargaining coverage.

Particular attention will be paid to improving **working conditions** and **access to social protection** for vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including women, young people, the elderly and persons with disabilities. The section will continue to promote measures for **delivering an inclusive labour market** that maximises society's potential

by providing **targeted support to specific groups** (such as caregivers, people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, older unemployed people, women returning to work, NEETs and migrants).

The section will closely monitor developments in **occupational health and safety (OSH)**, with particular emphasis on implementing the EU strategic framework for health and safety at work (2021–2027) and addressing new and emerging risks. This framework focuses on three cross-cutting objectives: anticipating and managing changes resulting from the green, digital and demographic transitions; improving the prevention of workplace accidents and work-related diseases; and increasing preparedness for potential future health crises. The section will also highlight the importance of strengthening compliance and enforcement of existing OSH directives as a key step toward achieving the Zero Deaths goal.

### **2.3 Demographic changes and healthcare**

Demographic trends are another transformative challenge for European society. To address Europe's accelerating **demographic change**, marked by an ageing population, low birth rates and a shrinking workforce, the section will explore opportunities for **innovation in inclusive work organisation** and monitor the impact of demographic change on national public healthcare, pension and social protection systems, public finances and labour markets. The section will a) focus on measures to promote active and healthy ageing by adapting care and family policies so as to ensure affordable and accessible childcare and long-term care and achieve a genuine work-life balance; b) look into ways to maintain sustainable and adequate welfare systems that foster and protect **intergenerational fairness and solidarity**; c) strengthen **social cohesion and resilience** at regional and local level by improving access to social services and investing in local care and health infrastructure while promoting the uptake of European funds; d) continue advocating for the need to **integrate demographic considerations** into all **relevant policy areas** and **impact assessments**.

Healthcare — including mental health, particularly among young people and children — continues to be a key priority and a growing concern for Europeans. The section will continue to focus on addressing health inequality, the need to ensure equal access to high-quality health services across and within Member States, and preparedness for future pandemics, particularly at a time when public budgets are under pressure. The section will monitor innovations in healthcare and how these can help address these challenges, including chronic labour market shortages, while safeguarding patients' choices and data and the healthcare workforce. Some form of follow-up on the SOC/799 opinion on *Mental Health Community Services* should be considered.

### **2.4 Fighting the causes of poverty in an equal and inclusive society**

Poverty and social exclusion undermine social justice, equality and the legitimacy and stability of the European project. It is therefore crucial to address the root causes of poverty. Following up on the opinion on the EU Anti-poverty Strategy (SOC/829), the section will contribute to measures geared to **reducing poverty** during the half-term, and closely monitor the European Commission's forthcoming EU anti-poverty strategy which is expected in 2026, with the ultimate goal of eradicating extreme poverty. In line with the EESC president's priorities, the section and the president's cabinet may cooperate to develop a comprehensive strategy that mainstreams poverty-reduction efforts, supporting the EU's 2030 headline targets of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, including at least 5 million children. Measures could focus on integrating poverty reduction into relevant policies, shifting the narrative, mobilising civil society and people experiencing poverty and improving monitoring processes. Anti-poverty measures are closely linked to other areas, such as affordable housing, access to quality services of general interest, including energy and water, and the promotion of adequate income support and social protection.

### **2.5 Promoting and defending democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law**

The section will prioritise the effective implementation of recent EU initiatives **supporting democracy and countering disinformation**, including clearer rules for political advertising, the European Democracy Action Plan and the Defence of Democracy Package. Particular attention will be paid to the adoption and subsequent implementation of the European Democracy Shield, following the recent SOC/835 opinion. The section will

continue to champion a comprehensive approach to democracy that goes beyond free and fair elections to include **participatory democracy, robust social and civil dialogue and the vital role of civil society and the social partners**. It will also monitor developments in civic space and media freedom, aiming to ensure the effective application of key legislative instruments such as the European Media Freedom Act and the anti-SLAPP Directive, as well as addressing new initiatives such as the Media Resilience Programme. In addition, the section will follow up on the SOC/840 opinion on the EU strategy to support, protect and empower civil society, and work towards making the European Civil Society Strategy an effective vehicle to support, protect and empower civil society and expand civic space in the EU, **with the EESC as a central pillar**. It will work closely with the European Commission and civil society organisations in setting up and informally or formally steering the **civil society platform**, focusing on democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law. The EESC is, however, open to exploring additional tasks with which the platform might be entrusted at a later stage.

In line with the EESC president's priorities, the section will continue to contribute proactively to strategies intended to **create an enabling environment in which civil society can better manage crises and engage in civil preparedness, as a follow-up to SOC/812**. Effective preparedness and the management of security risks require **holistic approaches** and close cooperation between civil society, the public sector, Member States and the EU, and investments in social cohesion, defence of fundamental rights, democracy and resilience are crucial.

Through its country visits, the **permanent group on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law (FRRL)** will continue to amplify the voice of civil society on key developments in EU Member States and candidate countries, focusing on the fundamental rights of the social partners, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of expression (including media freedom), non-discrimination, including anti-racism, and the rule of law, contributing its specific socio-economic focus. In addition to contributing to the EU's annual rule of law mechanism, the FRRL Group will support the implementation of the Civil Society Strategy with regard to democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, and keep up active engagement with civil society, national authorities, EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, Fundamental Rights Agency, etc.), and international bodies (Council of Europe, United Nations) in order to foster constructive dialogue on democracy, fundamental rights and freedoms and the rule of law.

The section will emphasise the importance of a Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) that upholds the rule of law, fundamental rights, equality and civil society, advocating for stronger financial support for civil society organisations and the effective, efficient and transparent application of the conditionality regime. It will contribute to the evaluation of the Whistleblower Protection Directive (information report SOC/847) and monitor developments in EU policies fighting corruption. The section will also monitor the European Internal Security Strategy, supporting initiatives to combat organised crime and drug and human trafficking, and protect victims' rights.

The section will work on strengthening the Union of Equality by monitoring and following up on the revision of the 2020–2025 equality strategies, including the new Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030, the new LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and the Anti-racism Action Plan, ensuring that these frameworks prioritise an inclusive, horizontal and intersectional approach and deliver tangible progress on advancing equality and non-discrimination, and tackling the rising intolerance and polarisation in society. It will also foster debate on European Citizens' Initiatives, including the proposed ban on conversion practices and 'My voice, My Choice' for safe and accessible abortion. It will coordinate with the EESC's Equality Group and support the EESC's activities in the field of multilateral relations, such as the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

The **permanent group on Roma Inclusion** will continue to bring together civil society views on the implementation of National Roma Integration Strategies, promote active involvement, facilitate the sharing of good practices and issue reports and recommendations on Roma inclusion. It will monitor and, where relevant, contribute to the European Commission's 2026 progress report on the National Roma Strategic Frameworks, in conjunction with the implementation of the EU Roma Strategic Framework on Equality, Inclusion and Participation.

The **permanent group on Disability Rights** (DIS) will continue to contribute to the EU's periodic reporting to the UNCRPD Committee through the activities of the DIS and the EESC at large, participate in the Conference of State Parties to the UNCRPD with a sufficient delegation of DIS members from each group, provide a platform for organisations representing persons with disabilities, raise awareness of the challenges facing them and promote good practices. The group will stay abreast of the Commission's flagship initiatives for the second half of the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030, particularly the Framework for Social Services of Excellence for Persons with Disabilities.

## **2.7 A humane and fair migration management system and safeguarding respect for international humanitarian law**

Migration, asylum and integration will remain priorities due to their strong implications for international solidarity, demographic change, social cohesion, the economy and politics. With migration policy being instrumentalised at political level and the social tensions which are the result, promoting legal pathways for third-country nationals to enter the EU labour market remain the priority for ensuring transparent, protected and regulated access to EU countries. The entry into force of the Pact on Migration and Asylum is a turning point in Europe's approach to migration management. Over the coming years, effective and transparent implementation will be crucial to ensure that new procedures **uphold fundamental rights and international humanitarian law**, share **responsibilities fairly** between Member States and foster **inclusive integration pathways**. The section and its **permanent group on Immigration and Integration** will therefore focus on monitoring and supporting the implementation of the Pact in order to help ensure that its measures deliver a real and functioning common migration and asylum system. This will include advocating for the right balance between security and border control measures and full respect for human rights and international protection obligations, with a view to achieving effective and realistic migration management that is both humane and sustainable.

The section's work will include following up on the Returns Regulation and related measures, with close attention to their impact on human rights (SOC/836). The section will closely follow the coming five-year European Migration and Asylum Strategy, providing analysis and feedback with an emphasis on safe and legal migration pathways, social inclusion and long-term integration that foster the socio-economic participation of migrants and refugees. It will also continue to support the **European Migration Forum** organised jointly by the EESC and the European Commission, with the involvement of civil society organisations active in the field.

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