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***European Economic and Social Committee***

Brussels, 25 June 2019

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| **PLENARY SESSION  19 AND 20 JUNE 2019  SUMMARY OF OPINIONS ADOPTED** |
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The following opinions were adopted in the plenary session of 19 and 20 June 2019:

# **Economic and Monetary Union, Economic and Social Cohesion**

**ECO/479**

1. ***Economic convergence and competitiveness within EU macro-regions  
   -transnational clusters***

**Rapporteur:** Dimitris DIMITRIADIS (Employers' Group – EL)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion requested by the Romanian Presidency

EESC-2018-04910-00-00-AC

**Key points**

* The EESC recognizes that interregional, cross-national cooperation building upon pre-existing, historical socio-economic and cultural links is the necessary response to the challenges resulting from a rapid evolving expansion of the European Union (EU). Establishing an interconnected cross-border and cross-sectoral system of collaboration and delivering a strategic framework for thematic poles for funding institutions to implement well-targeted projects in a macro-region is of great importance.
* In their first 10 years of operation, the four macro-regional strategies served as useful tools for cohesion policy, primarily by enhancing integration and cooperation and identifying important development processes involving citizens and regions.
* Nevertheless, performance, in terms of reducing social and spatial disparities and boosting environmental sustainability, remains modest. This is due to the complexity of governance and intergovernmental arrangements, the level of bureaucracy, the lack of cross-regional homogeneity and insufficient involvement of the social partners, socio-economic agents and civil society organisations.
* The EESC supports that macro-regional strategies should be understood as laboratories for developing a bottom-up approach to solving the new challenges facing Europe’s society and economy.
* Macro-regional strategies can boost European integration, serving as the major strategic framework for cohesion and sustainability policy.
* Additionally, macro-regional strategies should also be geared towards the range of policies being promoted under the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015.
* The EESC provides a list of specific policy proposals. These can be summarised as follows: along with the necessity for strengthened policy interventions, we need to reduce the bureaucratic burden, introduce functioning networking, interconnection and management of existing databases and prioritise networking and clustering of the social partners, local socio-economic agents and civil society organisations. In the future, macro-regional strategies will significantly benefit from efficient networks for educational activities.
* The development and implementation of macro-regional communication strategies for the stakeholders has a strong supportive role in enhancing visibility, fostering networking and participation.

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**ECO/486**

1. ***Investment Plan for Europe: stock-taking and next steps***

**Rapporteur:** Petr ZAHRADNÍK (Employers' Group – CZ)

**Co-rapporteur:** Javier DOZ ORRIT (Workers' Group – ES)

**Reference:** COM(2018) 771 final

EESC-2019-00069-00-00-AC

**Key points**

The EESC:

## welcomes the Investment Plan for Europe for its contribution to the promotion of investment in the EU and more effective utilisation of limited financial resources for the purpose of strategic pan-European investments as a new type of EU financial redistribution;

## recommends setting an investment target in the EU as one of the criteria for a long-term and sustainable investment policy;

## considers that further guidance would be necessary to achieve greater geographical and sectoral balance in achieving the strategic goals of the Investment Plan for Europe as well as the InvestEU programme;

## calls for regulatory simplification is needed when combining several programmes or projects;

## calls for more effort be made to get the Member States on board to supporting large- scale European projects such as SESAR, ERTMS or the EU smart grid, as this is one of the most important added-values of the InvestEU Programme;

## very much supports the Commission's effort to identify the primary obstacles to more intensive investment activities in the areas of the Single Market environment, integrating infrastructure, education and skills requirements, and the alignment of state-aid rules;

## calls on the EU authorities to strengthen InvestEU's financial capacity within the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027;

## proposes to enhance the scope of the InvestEU programme in order to provide European companies with the necessary guarantees that enable them to invest outside the EU area and promote EU trade;

* strongly recommends that the Commission step up its efforts to raise awareness among European businesses and citizens about the benefits obtained from the Investment Plan for Europe, especially with regards to SMEs, thus making them aware of the EU contribution.

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**ECO/489**

1. ***Towards a stronger international role of the euro***

**Rapporteur:** Philip VON BROCKDORFF (Workers' Group – MT)

**Co-rapporteur:** Dimitris DIMITRIADIS (Employers' Group – EL)

**Reference:** COM(2018) 796 final

EESC-2019-00073-00-00-AC

**Key points**

The EESC:

## notes that the international role of the euro has not yet recovered to the pre-financial crisis level;

## considers that social cohesion, economic upward convergence and the promotion of competitiveness and innovation should be the basis on which the euro area's economy gathers pace and supports a stronger international role for the euro;

## believes that this requires *inter alia* the completion of the Economic and Monetary Union and the Banking Union;

## reiterates in this connection the relevance of supporting SMEs and further increasing productivity as a means to enhance the euro area's competitiveness in international markets;

## believes that the fragmentation of the euro area's sovereign bond market should be addressed by investigating options for creating more liquid and safer euro assets;

## considers that the ECB may facilitate a stronger international role of the euro by fulfilling its mandate of maintaining price stability and by supporting deeper Economic and Monetary Union and Capital Markets Union;

## believes that additional measures are required to deepen the European financial sector, including a stronger European financial market infrastructure and solid interest rate benchmarks;

## considers that the promotion of a wider use of the euro in strategic sectors is also crucial in contributing towards an increased international role of the euro;

* urges Member States to take a more unified approach in international diplomacy and a more pro-active stance to promote the EU's interests, which could result in enhanced trade opportunities.

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# **SINGLE MARKET, PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION**

**INT/871**

* ***European legal framework/social economy enterprises***

**Rapporteur:** Alain COHEUR (Diversity Europe Group – BE)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2019-00346-00-00-AC

**Key points**

In its opinion, the EESC calls on the Commission to:

* launch a study on the concept of "limited profitability" and on business models that operate in this way, in order to better identify needs and, where appropriate, to prescribe good practice;
* extend to all social economy enterprises the relevant provisions of the communication on the classification of State aid;
* draft an interpretative communication on Article 54 of the TFEU and on the Treaty articles relating to competition law, in order to clarify the concept of "not-for-profit" in EU law;
* annex to the TFEU a protocol on diversity in types of enterprise, along the same lines as Protocol No 26 on SGIs.

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# **Transport, Energy, Infrastructure and Information Society**

**TEN/692**

* ***For better implementation of the Social Pillar, promoting essential services***

**Rapporteur:**  Raymond HENCKS (Workers' Group – LU)

**Co-Rapporteur**: Krzysztof BALON (Diversity Europe Group – PL)

**Reference:** Own-initiative opinion

EESC-2019-00989-00-00-AC

**Key points**

Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights introduces the concept of "essential services" into the EU, something which does not exist as such in the Treaties but which provides that *"[e]veryone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need".*

Given the examples of the services described as "essential" in principle 20, the EESC considers this to be a reference to services of general economic interest, which are already covered by EU law, in particular by Protocol 26 on services of general interest which is annexed to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). Although its interpretative provisions go further than a mere guarantee of *access to quality*, some of them – to widely varying degrees – are insufficiently regulated and implemented in the Member States.

The EESC therefore welcomes the fact that principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights reaffirms the right to access essential services. These are a vital component of social justice and are underpinned by the principle of equal treatment of users, prohibiting any kind of discrimination or exclusion whatsoever, and by the principle of universal access to services of a high level of affordability and quality.

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# **AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT**

**NAT/774**

* ***Union Civil Protection Mechanism***

**Rapporteur:** Panagiotis GKOFAS (Diversity Europe Group – EL)

**Reference:** COM(2019) 125 final – 2019/0070 (COD)

EESC-2019-01772-00-00-AC

**Key points**

The EESC welcomes this proposal to revise and reinforce the current framework of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

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# **EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP**

**SOC/625**

* ***Employment guidelines***

**Rapporteur:** Ana Bontea (Employers' Group – RO)

**Reference:** COM(2019) 151 final

EESC-2019-01577-00-00-AC

**Key points**

In its opinion, the Committee reiterates and builds on the findings and recommendations it made in its previous opinions regarding the guidelines for Member States' employment policies. It also reiterates its conclusions and recommendations on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The EESC welcomes the measures taken at European and national level that have led to progress in the field of employment, and recommends that they be maintained and developed in order to foster economic and social sustainability, a workforce that is skilled, trained and therefore better prepared for new developments, particularly technological ones, and labour markets that can respond rapidly to economic change.

When designing policies for regulating the labour market and social rights, competitiveness, productivity and social sustainability/workers' rights should form a seamless part of those policies. All policies should take into account an appropriate balance between economic sustainability, and social and environmental sustainability.

Policies and structural reforms are needed that facilitate the creation of quality jobs, and foster responsible entrepreneurship and the growth of SMEs and social enterprises.

The EESC underlines the importance of ensuring inclusive, equitable and high-quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including higher education, of ensuring a high level of relevant skills and knowledge, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Finally, the Committee recalls that the proper functioning of social dialogue is essential to improving the design, implementation and follow-up of reforms.

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**SOC/627**

* ***Further strengthening the Rule of Law within the Union. State of play and possible next steps***

**Rapporteurs:** Jukka Ahtela (Employers' Group – FI)

José Antonio Moreno Díaz (Workers' Group – ES)

Karolina Dreszer-Smalec (Diversity Europe Group – PL)

**Reference:** COM(2019) 163 final

EESC-2019-02454-00-00-AC

**Key points**

The EESC welcomes the Commission's Communication, and its efforts to use other instruments to strengthen the rule of law. The EESC believes essential to involve as much as possible the civil society in the conception and implementation of these instruments and to amplify the voices standing up for fundamental rights and rule of law in the Member States. The EESC therefore regrets that the reflection period around the Communication has not been longer to allow for a deeper consultation.

Civil society organisations, human rights defenders, journalists and whistle-blowers play key watchdog functions. The EESC calls the EU and Member States to increase their protection. The next Multiannual Financial Framework should reinforce these actors' capacity to perform monitoring, awareness raising, advocacy and litigation activities as regards fundamental rights and the rule of law in all Member States.

The future Vice-President of the European Commission in charge of Fundamental Rights should also be in charge of the supervision of an enabling environment for the civil society, human rights defenders and journalists. The EESC also repeats its call for the creation of an EU Ombudsman on civic space.

The EESC recalls its support for an inter-institutional framework to monitor respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law in EU Member States. This legally binding mechanism should encompass a preventive component allowing experts and civil society representatives to propose early warning on specific developments and debate proposals for solutions including all relevant stakeholders.

The EESC proposes to establish an EU annual Forum on Fundamental Rights and the Rule of Law to allow EU decision-makers to receive early warning about emerging challenges to Article 2 TEU directly from grassroots organisations. This forum would also facilitate mutual learning, confidence-building and transnational collaboration between all relevant stakeholders (businesses, trade unions, civil society organisations, National Human Rights Institutions, and public authorities).

Education, both formal and non-formal, has a key role to play in building the democratic and rule of law culture. The EESC calls on the European Commission to propose an ambitious Strategy on communication, education and citizen awareness of fundamental rights, the rule of law and democracy.

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# **STRATEGY FOR LONG-TERM EU GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS REDUCTION**

**SC/051**

* ***Strategy for long-term EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction (Communication)***

**Rapporteur:** Pierre Jean COULON (Workers' Group – FR)

**Co-rapporteur:** Stefan BACK (Employers' Group – SE)

**Reference:** COM(2018) 773 final

EESC-2018-05700-00-00-AC

**Key points**

The EESC strongly supports the objective of making the EU a climate neutral economy by 2050 in a socially fair and efficient manner. Such a transition is possible and beneficial for Europe. The EESC endorses the overriding priorities set out in the European Commission's Communication. The EESC calls on the Member States to support the objective of making the European Union a climate neutral economy by 2050. The EESC calls on businesses, trade unions, NGOs and national Economic and Social Committees to support this objective.

The EESC considers that it is urgent to rapidly define a strategy for beyond 2030, in order to achieve a transition to a climate neutral society by 2050.

The EESC stresses that the transition to a climate neutral society must be implemented through a competitive, socially fair and multilateral approach and that appropriate tools must be put in place to achieve full involvement and acceptance of civil society, including all citizens, businesses and organisations. This includes conception and implementation of carbon pricing taking into account its effects on businesses and citizens.

The EESC underlines the importance of action taken at local and regional level and the importance of fully involving local and regional authorities.

The EESC underlines the importance of third country relations as a means of getting more countries on board in a proactive climate strategy and to ensure a level playing field for European industry and influence standard setting.

Financing is key to the implementation of the planned strategy. The EESC therefore reiterates its recommendations that adequate budgetary resources be provided to support research, development and industrial deployment.

The EESC points out the important role of bio energy with carbon capture and storage and natural carbon sinks, such as forests, conservation agriculture, pasture land, peatland, etc.

The EESC considers that Europe needs a social pact for the transition to a climate neutral economy, to be agreed by the EU, Member States, regions, cities, social partners and organised civil society, in order to ensure that the transition leaves no-one behind.

The EESC proposes that a permanent citizens' dialogue be set up as a compulsory preparatory element of all major political decisions and all pertinent law-making initiatives at EU, national and subnational levels. Input into the dialogue and the way it is taken into account should be publicly visible. The visibility of the dialogue should be ensured by making it a Commissioner-level responsibility.

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