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Brussels, 26 April 2021

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| **559TH PLENARY SESSION24 AND 25 MARCH 2021SUMMARY OF OPINIONS ADOPTED** |
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# **ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COHESION**

* ***Tackling non-performing loans in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic***

**Rapporteur**: Kęstutis KUPŠYS (Diversity Europe Group – LT)

**Reference**: COM(2020) 822 final

 EESC-2020-05865-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points**:

The EESC:

* welcomes the presentation of the new Commission Action Plan (communication) on non-performing loans (NPLs), but regrets that it essentially lacks new proposals fit for COVID-19 times, leaving Europe to face an extraordinary time with rules written for ordinary times;
* recommends tackling first and foremost the root causes of NPLs in order to prevent their build-up in the future, and also proposes a careful review and temporary adaptation of the definition of default, ensuring a "soft landing" for European households and businesses;
* notes that in the present COVID-19 crisis, there is a need for monetary and fiscal policy and financial sector regulation to be coherent with the times we live in;
* stresses that the most effective ways to avert the build-up of high volumes of would be to ensure constantly improving competitiveness, focusing on business continuity an economic recovery, building solid social security systems, combating poverty, over-indebtedness and unemployment, guaranteeing adequate wages and implementing countercyclical economic policy measures in times of crises;
* argues that "pre-COVID-19" NPLs should be dealt with in a very different manner to "post-COVID-19" (COVID-19-induced) NPLs;
* suggests a careful, targeted and strictly temporary review of the EBA guidelines on the definition of default and recommends that the EBA Guidelines on credit moratoria stay in place as long as needed;
* calls for relief measures for credit institutions to go hand in hand with governmental aid measures for borrowers who have only become distressed as a result of the pandemic;
* with regards a cross-border NPL market, the Committee is concerned with plans to provide an EU-wide operating "passport" to debt collectors without proper supervision from both their "home" and "host" countries;
* notes that the AECE could provide a balanced solution for debtors but demands that extra-judicial enforcement does not become a default option in loan contracts;
* urges against fusing the NPL issue with issues related to preserving financial stability;
* calls for the option of selling NPLs to asset management companies to remain an exceptional case and for preference to be given to bilateral workout agreements between the credit institution and the borrower;
* recommends that capital requirements – including the NPL backstop regulation – be kept firmly in place to ensure that banks have full capacity to withstand losses, however, temporary flexibility could be looked into and applied to the definition of default and the provision of the NPL backstop in order to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

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# **EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND CITIZENSHIP**

* ***Challenges of Teleworking***

**Rapporteur**: Carlos Manuel TRINDADE (Workers' Group - PT)

**Reference**: EESC-2020-05278-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking has helped save jobs, and limited the loss of economic activity. Millions of European workers began working from home – around 40%. The pandemic expedited the shift to teleworking, and it became essential in tackling the health crisis. Businesses, workers and society faced huge challenges. Obviously, there will be numerous lessons to be learned from the pandemic, enabling us to make the most of opportunities and eliminate the risks associated with telework.

The EESC:

* urges the Commission and Member States to monitor the implementation of the Framework agreements by the European Social Partners, the 2002 Agreement on Telework and the 2020 Agreement on Digitalisation. In the light of the experience gained from the pandemic existing regulations in the EU and in the Member States could be amended and new regulations created so as to promote the positive aspects of telework and protect the fundamental rights of workers. The EESC notes that the organisation of working time, the risks to health and safety at work, work-life balance, the right to disconnect and the effectiveness of labour rights when teleworking must be given special attention.
* highlights the need for Member States, with the involvement of the social partners, to ensure that there is an appropriate national framework for teleworking, setting out the rules of play for companies and workers interested in adopting this form of work.
* is of the view that, in terms of regulation, the key issues are to ensure: that teleworking is voluntary and reversible and that teleworkers have the same individual and collective rights as comparable workers in the companies that they work for, including by organising work so as to ensure that workload is comparable; that the teleworking arrangements are set out in written form; and that specific measures are established, where necessary, to guarantee the effectiveness of teleworkers' rights, including health and safety conditions at work. The EESC recognises that it is important for all issues relating to equipment, responsibilities and costs to be clearly defined before commencing telework.
* suggests that in relation to teleworking, and in accordance with European and national legislation on telework and collective bargaining agreements at national, regional, sectoral and company level, companies should use appropriate mechanisms to measure normal working hours and overtime, and it stresses that teleworkers must not be disadvantaged in their working life.

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* ***Teleworking and gender equality***

**Rapporteur**: Milena ANGELOVA (Employers' Group - BG)

**Co-rapporteur**: Erika KOLLER (Workers' Group - HU)

**Reference**: EESC-2020-05159-00-01-AC-TRA

**Key points**:

The EESC:

* draws the attention to the risk of using teleworking as a possibility of taking up the double burden of paid and unpaid work. It welcomes the European Commission (EC) campaign on combating gender stereotypes, reiterates the need for a cultural change and for removing any structural barriers in order to achieve more equal distribution of the unpaid domestic work and urges the Member States (MS) to promptly and efficiently implement the Work-Life Balance Directive;
* notes that there is no consolidated European framework on telework. It therefore recommends an assessment of the existing rules to determine their effectiveness in the light of the rapid expansion of telework, awareness of new risks, and the lessons learnt. In particular, it encourages the social partners to review the 2002 Framework Agreement on Telework and give it new impetus;
* considers that social partners can play a significant role in advancing teleworking in a way that contributes to gender equality, promoting well-being at work and productivity, e.g., through collective bargaining;
* reiterates its call for investing in digital infrastructure and connections for all, including local shared spaces that facilitate teleworking outside the home, as well as enhancing digital skills, with special attention to women, in order to enable them to fully participate in labour markets and address any form of digital divide;
* calls for a "Care Deal for Europe", ensuring the provision of greater quality services for all throughout the life-cycle. It urges the MS to ensure and invest in the availability of high quality, affordable, accessible and diverse care services to respond to various demands and situations;
* calls for research into the gender implications and prerequisites of teleworking under conditions not dominated by the pandemic and taking into account long-term developments in different sectors of the economy and society, as well as collecting and disseminating existing good practices across the EU. This would allow for a gender-sensitive approach in achieving the necessary technological and social innovation to ensure that teleworking contributes to promoting gender equality;
* calls for targeted actions and campaigns to reduce and break down stereotypical thinking. The EESC encourages social partners and civil society organisations (CSO) at EU and national level to take an active role in advocating non-stereotypical family roles and choices of women and men with respect to studies, professions and jobs;
* and calls on EU and national decision makers, in dialogue and cooperation with the social partners, to make every effort to combat any form of violence against women – including at work, at home and on-line –, and invites the MS to swiftly ratify the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Istanbul Convention.

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1. ***Adequate minimum wages directive***

**Rapporteur**: Milena ANGELOVA (Employers' group - BG)

**Co-rapporteur**: Cinzia DEL RIO (Workers' group - IT)

**Reference**: EESC-2020-05731-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* strongly supports the underlined goal for Europe to lead the way from fragility towards a new vitality by creating opportunities and prosperity by promoting innovation, sustainable growth and fair competition, in order to stimulate upward economic and social convergence;
* agrees with the overall objectives of achieving adequate minimum wages and strengthening collective bargaining systems across the EU, making work pay, fighting poverty, and strengthening the role of social partners and social dialogue, in line with national industrial relations systems;
* agrees with the overall objectives of the proposal and expects that it is carefully designed to respect national traditions, laws and practices, and that it leaves discretion for adaptation to the domestic context in its obligations;
* states that the social partners should be autonomous and employers' organisations and trade unions should be protected from any form of restriction of their right to organise, represent or take collective action. At the same time, the EESC reiterates the importance of joint actions and capacity-building programmes at European and national level managed directly by the European and national social partners;
* supports the objective of increasing collective bargaining coverage, according to national laws and practices and in full respect of and compliance with the division of competences and autonomy of social partners;
* believes that national action plans could play a crucial role in upward wage convergence and in establishing the most appropriate measures and mechanisms for wage setting and increasing coverage at national level, also in order to close the gender and age pay gap and reduce inequalities and discrimination, with particular attention to young workers;
* recommends that any national action plan shall be designed by social partners and agreed in a tripartite process;
* recognises that in countries where a self-regulatory collective bargaining system exists, which ensures fair and adequate wage floors, together with other agreed working conditions, any intervention of the State should be avoided in order to safeguard/preserve a well-functioning industrial relations system, which is able by itself to guarantee the achievement of the objectives set in the proposed directive;
* believes that the representativeness of social partners is an important factor, as it guarantees their democratic mandate. Different criteria exist which could represent good practice to be considered in designing action plans according to national laws and practices. There is a number of complex factors/criteria that could be taken into account when assessing the representativeness of social partners at national level, bearing in mind that they vary across the Member States.

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# **TRANSPORT, ENERGY, INFRASTRUCTURE AND INFORMATION SOCIETY**

* ***Recognition of third countries certificates in inland navigation***

**Reference**: Category C opinion

 COM(2021) 71 final

 EESC-2021-01205-00-00-AC-TRA

Since the Committee endorses the contents of the proposal, it decided to issue an opinion endorsing the proposed text.

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* ***State of the Energy Union Report 2020 and Assessment of National Energy and Climate Plans***

**Rapporteur**: Lutz RIBBE (Diversity Europe Group – DE)

**Reference**: COM(2020) 950 final

 COM(2020) 564 final

 EESC-2020-04915-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* is relieved to learn that the energy and climate objectives for 2020 have largely been met. However, this must not lead to complacency. The objectives for the next 30 years, starting with the 2020s, are much more ambitious. The pace of transformation needs to be significantly increased, but the social and economic situation in the individual Member States should not be overlooked in the process, as this could jeopardise social acceptance of investment and reforms aimed at accelerating the energy transition;
* The most important objective that the Commission set out in the framework strategy is that citizens should be at the core of the Energy Union. In its assessment, the Commission believes that insufficient attention is paid to the development of community energy in the Member States' NECPs. Therefore, the EESC thinks that, in future reports, the Commission should more carefully analyse the level and quality of implementation, compliance and enforcement with regard to the third energy package in the Member States, in particular in terms of how they intend to put "citizens at the core".
* A critical view should also be taken with regard to three of the Energy Union's other objectives: reducing energy dependency by cutting down energy imports, eliminating subsidies for climate- and environmentally harmful energy sources, and taking a leading role in renewable energy, energy efficiency and electro-mobility. These three objectives have all been missed.

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* ***Methane Strategy***

**Rapporteur**: Udo HEMMERLING (Employers' Group – DE)

**Reference**: COM(2020) 663 final

 EESC-2020-04972-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* supports the goal and basic thrust of the EU Methane Strategy, aimed at further significant reductions in methane emissions for climate protection. The methane strategy should be tied in with the bioeconomy and circular economy strategies;
* strongly supports the focus on better measurement of methane emissions and on international mitigation initiatives. Methane emissions often come from decentralised, diffuse sources along international production and supply chains. Improved monitoring should be developed in a consistent, comparable way for the sectors concerned, such as agriculture, energy, waste and the chemicals industry
* Member States should in their climate change plans set out their progress with and the potential for using biogas from slurry and manure, bio-waste, waste water, landfills and mine gas and define measures to increase the use thereof. There is still considerable potential in agriculture for cutting back methane emissions, above all through the digestion of slurry and manure in biogas plants, as well as progress in feeding and breeding farm animals and low-emission fertiliser use. This potential should be further defined as part of the implementation of the EU Methane Strategy.

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* ***The Single European Railway Area***

**Rapporteur:** Stefan BACK (Employers' Group – SE)

**Reference:** Exploratory opinion requested by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU

 EESC-2020-05425-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

Regarding the questions raised by the Portuguese Presidency,

The EESC:

* considers that while a lot has happened in respect of opening up markets and technical harmonisation in the course of thirty years of liberalisation, a lot remains to be done at political, regulatory and cultural level. Measures must include more attention to development, adaptation and efficient implementation of social legislation. They must seek to achieve the increased market share foreseen in the Commission Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy and improve environmental and social sustainability. Measures are needed to facilitate cross border operations by reducing the need for border checks and eliminating administrative problems and delays at border crossings;
* Traffic planning priorities, capacity planning and information need to be improved to enable both greater flexibility and optimised capacity planning both with regard to rail infrastructure but also regarding, for instance, terminals to optimise multimodal flows. Investments are needed in infrastructure but also in digitalisation and updating of rolling stock, for instance digitalisation through deployment of ERTMS and automated couplings, including investment in just transition and skills development, to improve smooth traffic flows and optimise resource utilisation and ensure employment. To improve rail freight traffic, the EESC recommends additional measures, e.g. cooperation among companies and transport modes to better achieve environmental, social sustainability and efficiency, relaunch a European single wagon load system, link of strategic infrastructure (e.g. ports) to rail solutions, investments in industrial sidings, involvement of large logistics companies in a modal reorientation of their flows, ensuring environmentally and socially exemplary performance of all transport modes.
* recommends with regards to public debt an exception from the Maastricht criteria for public investments in transport infrastructure also beyond the COVID-19 crisis. Efforts to encourage investments in the rail sector should be enhanced, to promote socially and environmentally sustainable transport;
* Infrastructure development including timely implementation of the TEN-T Core Network Corridors and the freight network corridors are key and warrant high priority regarding financing and planning.
* underlines, that skilled and motivated workers and good working conditions are of vital importance for the successful evolution of rail transport. It is therefore important that adequate social legislation is in place, including with respect to posting of railway staff. The EESC underlines the importance in this respect of a well-functioning social dialogue
* The experiences from the COVID-19 crisis must be used to develop a more resilient and effective rail system. Resilience planning needs to be adopted in close consultation with the social partners.
* The status of the infrastructure manager initially provided for has as such undoubtedly contributed to ensuring that infrastructure capacity has been allotted in an independent, fair and non-discriminatory manner and has improved the confidence of operators in fair treatment. However, subsequent changes to the regulatory framework in Directive 2012/34/EC provide for a wider choice as to the organisational model, focusing on the independence of the infrastructure manager in the so-called essential functions (slot allocation, charging and collection of charges) and the transparency granted by separated accounts. The current provisions are perfectly adequate to ensure the independence and transparency required for the good functioning of the internal market.
* underlines that integrated railway systems can guarantee fair allocation as well as non-integrated systems. The EESC points to the fact that many of the big and the successful railway countries in Europe decided in favour of integrated railway companies to ensure synergies, better coordination, flexibility and an internal labour market for safeguarding employment.
* The coordination mechanism between infrastructure managers and operators as well as the European Network of Infrastructure Managers are essential elements to help towards the achievement of optimised efficiency.

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* ***Revision of the TEN-E Regulation guidelines***

**Rapporteur:** Philippe CHARRY (Workers' Group – FR)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 824 final

 EESC-2020-05835-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* is in favour of adapting European rules on the trans-European energy networks (TEN-E) to the objectives of the Green Deal for a "clean, affordable and secure energy supply". It calls for the proposed legal basis for the Regulation to be supplemented by an explicit reference to Article 194 TFEU;
* calls for the Regulation to fit more clearly into the process of integrating the energy system in order to promote all decarbonised forms of energy, and for any form of break-up to be made impossible. The EESC calls on the Commission, the Council and the Parliament to promote carbon-free energy sources, while respecting technological neutrality, and would like to see projects set up to create the conditions needed to pave the way for an era of hydrogen and fusion;
* calls for priority to be given to innovation and the design of energy networks aimed at reducing transport-related energy losses and, where offshore wind is concerned, to radial connection projects. The EESC calls for projects concerning natural gas transmission infrastructure not to be excluded from the Regulation's selection criteria for projects of common interest or projects of mutual interest;
* calls for an explicit reference to the Community objectives of providing energy supplies to all communities at an affordable price and ensuring a "high level of quality, safety, equal treatment and the promotion of universal access and of user rights";
* calls for the Commission's use of delegated acts to be kept to the absolute minimum and for multi-actor governance to be implemented. The EESC suggests that the Regulation establish Community responsibility for the financing of projects of common interest (PCI) by combining financing methods without ranking them in terms of priority;
* calls on the Commission to study the possibility of a trans-European operator of extra-high-voltage electricity transmission networks, which would be both integrated and decentralised.

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# **SINGLE MARKET, PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION**

* ***Customs Union Action Plan***

**Rapporteur:** Anastasis YIAPANIS (Diversity Europe Group – CY)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 581 final

 EESC-2020-05102-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* is not sure that all Member States are ready to embrace the proposed timetable and put their share of the money on the table;
* believes that customs authorities should be provided with adequate resources for all the non-financial responsibilities;
* recommends immediately exploring the introduction of blockchain technology in the proposed action plan; and
* suggests giving specific emphasis to the most vulnerable entry and exit points.

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***Customs single window***

**Rapporteur:** Athanasios IOANNIDIS (Diversity Europe Group – EL)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 673 final **-** 2020/0306 (COD)

 EESC-2020-05113-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* believes that the European Single Window, along with the national windows, should not just be a digital gateway for data collection and information exchange processes;
* points out that coordination will be required, both within and between Member States, in order to carry out the proposed measure; and
* deems it crucially important to prepare and train the staff who will be involved in operating the IT systems, the national single window environments and the European single customs window.

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* ***Strategic foresight***

**Rapporteur:** Sandra PARTHIE (Employers' Group – DE)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 493 final

 EESC-2020-05345-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* welcomes the planned inclusion of the foresight methodology into the EU's future policy-making process. It expects synergies as well as the structural involvement of all EU institutions, including the EESC.
* The resilience of the EU has been selected as the first topic in the foresight exercise. The four dimensions of the resilience topic, i.e. "social and economic", "geopolitical", "green" and "digital" represent central megatopics of our time, which will continue to be of outstanding importance for shaping European policy.
* Foresight will only achieve its stated objectives if it is an open and pluralistic as well as diverse, cross-disciplinary exercise, involving organised social partners and civil society, in particular the EESC, at all stages of the foresight process and definition of reference scenarios and employing a set of methods and tools to direct different perspectives towards the future.
* see some areas for improvement regarding the implementation of foresight in the decision-making process:
* the concrete modalities for the full integration of foresight into the multi-annual planning, the Better Regulation agenda, or the Conference on the Future of Europe remain unclear,
* the 2020 report falls short of the necessary quantitative assessment of rating the identified megatrends and strategic topics in the spectrum of probability and relevance, thus rendering it harder to prioritise action,
* the foresight process should offer a permanent monitoring and control mechanism, which will allow for such things as for ex-post evaluations by civil society,
* the report already proposes the topics for the next foresight reports but does not explain how the foresight process was actually used in arriving at these topics.

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* ***Retail Payments Strategy***

**Rapporteur:** Antonio GARCÍA DEL RIEGO (Employers' Group – ES)

**Co-rapporteur:** Kęstutis KUPŠYS (Diversity Europe Group – LT)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 592 final

 EESC-2020-05186-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* believes that further work is needed to enable payment transactions within the single market using new home-grown, pan-European payment solutions;
* considers that the Commission should act as a political catalyst, whilst it is the private sector that should design the innovative digital payment solutions;
* emphasises that cash remains consumers' preferred means of payment for their point-of-sale and person-to-person retail transactions;
* calls on the Commission to:
* consider as premature any legislative action on the area of payment instruments;
* ensure full enforcement of the SEPA Regulation by the Member States;
* focus its efforts on interoperability among existing and nascent e-ID solutions;
* extend data-sharing between different sectors;
* propose legislation to secure the right of access under fair, reasonable and non-discriminatory conditions to technologies considered necessary to support the provision of payment services.

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* ***A new ERA for R&I***

**Rapporteur:** Paul RÜBIG (Employers' Group – AT)

**Reference:** COM(2020) 628 final

 EESC-2020-05146-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* welcomes the new vision for the ERA agenda and the focus on rapidly translating R&I results into sustainable business;
* advocates the need for new governance in the research area in order to remove administrative and regulatory barriers to innovation; recommends immediately exploring the introduction of blockchain technology in the proposed action plan;
* welcomes the fact that the new ERA document supports the Sustainable Development Goals;
* points out that an intelligent blending of R&D instruments at all levels is important and that R&D and innovation should be promoted by making use of the EU structural funds;
* emphasises the fact that EU research is lagging behind in patent performance and also
in entrepreneurial culture, which must be a key competence in the new ERA;
* underlines the need to incorporate the principle of scientific and ethical integrity, so as to prevent losses in terms of human health, money and scientific failure; and
* encourages the Commission to aim for a good equilibrium between "excellence" and "speed" in transferring R&D results into successful products and services.

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# **AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ENVIRONMENT**

* ***Extension of the term of Community plant variety rights for the species asparagus and the species groups flower bulbs, woody small fruits and woody ornamentals***

**Reference:** Category C opinion

 COM(2021) 36 final - 2021/0019 COD

Since the Committee endorses the content of the proposal and feels that it requires no comment on its part, it decided, at its 559th plenary session of 24 and 25 March 2021 (meeting of 24 March), by 268 votes in favour with 15 abstentions, to issue an opinion endorsing the proposed text.

# **EXTERNAL RELATIONS**

* ***Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans***

**Rapporteur:** Andrej ZORKO (Workers' Group – SL)

**Co-rapporteur:** Ionuţ SIBIAN (Diversity Europe Group – RO)

**Reference:** EESC-2020-05956-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* welcomes the Commission's communications adopted in 2020 in connection with the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans and agrees that integrating the Western Balkan partners into the EU represents a geostrategic investment in the peace, stability, security and economic growth of the entire continent. The Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe and a geostrategic priority for the EU;
* welcomes the European Green Deal, which includes specific objectives for the Western Balkans, as well as the Guidelines for the Implementation of the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans accompanying the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans;
* is convinced that, in addressing common challenges and problems that are not only political but also economic and social, social partners and other civil society organisations (CSOs) should play a greater role in, and be more actively involved in, the entire enlargement process. The Commission should define the concept of 'key stakeholders' more clearly;
* stresses that building the national capacity of CSOs and facilitating regional cooperation, as well as expertise exchange, should be maintained among the priorities of the EU and of national funding;
* welcomes the revised enlargement methodology adopted by the Commission in 2020. It welcomes the fact that negotiating chapters will be organised in thematic clusters and that negotiations on each cluster will be opened as a whole. The EESC is also particularly satisfied by the emphasis placed on the importance of the Fundamentals cluster and the fact that progress here will determine the overall pace of negotiations;
* Given the difficulties experienced by the Member States in reaching unanimity on enlargement, the EESC considers that the Council should revisit the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting, at least for all intermediary stages of the EU accession process;
* To rebuild confidence in enlargement and strengthen the ways in which the EU reaches out to its natural allies in the region, the EESC is convinced that the EU should allow political leaders and citizens from the Western Balkans to join the activities and discussions held in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), on a consultative basis;
* calls for High-Level Civil Society Conferences or Fora to be organised just before, or as side events to, the regular EU-Western Balkans Summits in order to allow the voice of civil society to be heard on subjects addressed at the summits.

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# **CONSULTATIVE COMMISSION ON INDUSTRIAL CHANGE**

* ***Critical Raw Materials Resilience***

**Rapporteur:** Dumitru FORNEA (Workers' Group – RO)

**Co-rapporteur:** Michal PINTÉR (Cat.1 - SK)

**Reference:** EESC-2020-05078-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

* The Action Plan represents an important step forward in improving resilience of critical raw materials, and the European Parliament and the Council should support this approach;
* The proposed measures can indeed enable the EU to implement the ambitious objectives of the Green Deal while ensuring new jobs and a fair transition in communities affected by industrial change, and while preserving a solid industrial basis in Europe;
* Primary sourcing is essential, and therefore support to investments for exploration projects is needed, along with a streamlined authorisation process for mining activities. Social acceptance is also key in this process;
* With regard to the external dimension of the provision of primary raw materials, all instruments (including trade agreements and strategic partnerships) must be used to develop relations with resource-rich countries, especially from Africa and South America, while always taking account of responsible sourcing and best practice on business conduct;
* It is crucial to invest in recycling of critical and strategic raw materials. For this reason, export of waste containing valuable materials should be carefully assessed, also through a revision of existing instruments such as the Waste Shipment Regulation. Still in this respect, the proposal to map the potential supply of secondary critical raw materials from EU stocks and wastes should be anticipated to the end of 2021;
* The revision of the critical raw materials list should be carried out every two years instead of the current revision every three years. New dimensions should be included in the methodology, most notably compliance with the ethical dimension and with international human rights, labour and sustainability standards. New types of materials, such as wood-based materials, should also be included in the scope of critical raw materials;
* Education and training, along with investments in research and development, are key in strengthening critical and strategic raw materials resilience and ensuring the provision of raw materials through primary and secondary sourcing and substitution.

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* ***Sustainability requirements for batteries in the EU***

**Rapporteur**: Bruno CHOIX (Employers' Group – FR)

**Co-rapporteur**: Franck UHLIG (Cat.2 - FR)

**Reference**: EESC-2021-00122-00-00-AC-TRA

**Key points:**

The EESC:

* supports the measures set out by the regulation [COM(2020) 798 final - 2020/0353 (COD)] proposed by the European Commission (EC);
* considers avoiding fragmentation of the internal market through possible divergent approaches by Member States to be a key issue to be addressed by all stakeholders;
* calls for more precise and functional governance instruments and arrangements to be set out to implement the new regulation, involving all the different stakeholders;
* Recycling, refurbishing and re-use make it possible to secure the upstream value chain. It is essential to support research and development on ecodesign. The EESC suggests that this should take the form of an "important project of common European interest" (IPCEI);
* In line with the EU's carbon neutrality commitments, the EESC proposes rapidly introducing maximum carbon footprint thresholds for battery manufacturing and upstream material supply logistics and increasing the resources allocated by the Commission to rapidly develop and implement the tools for assessing and monitoring the carbon footprint of the battery industry;
* considers it necessary to establish producer liability that is compatible with the promotion of ecodesign. In this context, it seems necessary to separate the end of life of batteries from the end of life of the devices that use them;
* proposes that the concept of "end-of-use" be introduced in addition to "end-of-life" in order to promote the re-use, refurbishing or second life and recycling of batteries.

The provisions of the draft regulation concerning labelling should include an obligation to better inform people about the potential risks of hazardous substances other than cadmium, lead and mercury and other safety risks to allow for informed choices and better use of batteries.

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