

**FOLLOW-UP PROVIDED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION**

**TO THE OPINIONS OF THE**

**EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE**

**PLENARY SESSION OF JULY 2021<sup>1</sup>**

**DISCLAIMER:**

**Due to current circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, announcements made in this report may be subject to revision in coming weeks or months.**

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<sup>1</sup> Including the follow-up to one opinion adopted during the June 2021 Plenary session.

Nº	Title	References
<b>SG.G2</b>		
1.	<a href="#"><b>EU action plan on the defence and space industries</b></a>  Rapporteur: Manuel GARCÍA SALGADO (ES-II) Corapporteur: Jan PIE (SE-Cat. I)	CCMI/179  COM(2021) 70 final  EESC-2021-01790-00-00-AC
<b>BUDG</b>		
2.	<a href="#"><b>NextGenerationEU funding strategy</b></a>  Rapporteur: Judith VORBACH (AT-II)	ECO/548  COM(2021) 250 final  EESC-2021-02011-00-00-AC
<b>EMPL</b>		
3.	<a href="#"><b>Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities</b></a>  Rapporteur: Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL-III)	SOC/680  COM(2021) 101 final  EESC-2021-01644-00-00-AC
4. (Asoc EAC)	<a href="#"><b>Adult learning (Exploratory opinion at the request of the Slovenian Presidency)</b></a>  Rapporteur: Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ (LT-II)	SOC/684  EESC-2021-02708-00-00-AC
5.	<a href="#"><b>Action plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights</b></a>  Rapporteur: Carlos Manuel TRINDADE (PT-II) Corapporteur: Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO-III)	SOC/679  COM(2021) 102 final  EESC-2021-01689-00-01-AC
6. (Asoc JUST)	<a href="#"><b>EU strategy on the rights of the child/Child Guarantee</b></a>  Rapporteur: Kinga JOÓ (HU-III) Corapporteur: Maria del Carmen BARRERA CHAMORRO (ES-II)	SOC/682  COM(2021) 137 final  COM(2021) 142 final  EESC-2021-01883-00-00-AC

MOVE			
7.	<a href="#"><u>Intermodal transport and multimodal logistics (own-initiative opinion)</u></a>  Rapporteur: Thord Stefan BACK (SE-I)	TEN/747  EESC-2021-02457-00-00-AC	
CLIMA			
8.	<a href="#"><u>New EU strategy on adaptation to climate change</u></a>  Rapporteur: Dimitris DIMITRIADIS (EL-I) Corapporteur: Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT-III)	NAT/815  COM(2021) 82 final  EESC-2021-01138-00-00-AC	
TRADE			
9.	<a href="#"><u>Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy</u></a>  Rapporteur: Timo Marko Johannes VUORI (FI-I) Corapporteur: Christophe QUAREZ (FR-II)	REX/539  COM(2021) 66 final  EESC-2021-02032-00-00-AC	
NEAR			
10.	<a href="#"><u>A new Agenda for the Mediterranean</u></a>  Rapporteur: Helena DE FELIPE LEHTONEN (ES-I)	REX/540  JOIN(2021) 2 final  EESC-2021-01801-00-00-AC	
CNECT			
11. (Asoc SG.D1)	<a href="#"><u>2030 Digital Targets</u></a>  Rapporteur: Gonçalo LOBO XAVIER (PT-I)	INT/933  COM(2021) 118 final  EESC-2021-01530-00-00-AC	
12.	<a href="#"><u>Economic and social opportunities of digitalisation (exploratory opinion requested by the presidency of the Council of the EU)</u></a>  Rapporteur: Antje GERSTEIN (DE-I)	INT/942  EESC-2021-02564-00-00-AC	

13.	<p><b><u>Digitalisation for all (exploratory opinion requested by the presidency of the Council of the EU)</u></b></p> <p>Rapporteur: Philip VON BROCKDORFF (MT-II) Corapporteur: Violeta JELIĆ (HR-I)</p>	INT/943 EESC-2021-02647-00-00-AC
14.	<p><b><u>Review of the Roaming Regulation</u></b></p> <p>Rapporteur: Christophe LEFÈVRE (FR-II)</p>	INT/934 COM(2021) 85 final EESC-2021-01368-00-00-AC
<b>GROW</b>		
15.  Opinion adopted during the Plenary session of June 2021	<p><b><u>Towards circular public procurement (Own-initiative opinion)</u></b></p> <p>Rapporteur: Ferdinand WYCKMANS (BE-II) Corapporteur: Gonçalo LOBO XAVIER (PT-I)</p>	INT/902 EESC-2021-00087-00-00-AC

**N°1 EU Action Plan on synergies between civil, defence and space industries**  
**COM(2021) 70 final**  
**EESC 2021/1790 – CCMI/179**  
**562<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Manuel GARCIA SALGADO (ES-II)**  
**Co-rapporteur: Jan PIE (SE-Cat. I)**  
**SG – Executive Vice-President VESTAGER**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.1 The EESC believes that the initiative to promote synergies between EU-funded instruments, while also facilitating cross-fertilisation between civil, defence and space industries, can enhance European strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, improve the security of citizens, further develop the single market, and boost competitiveness, economic growth and employment. The EESC therefore fully supports the objectives of the Action Plan and calls for a rapid, forceful and ambitious implementation of the 11 actions.</p>	<p>The Commission appreciates the support of the Committee for the Action Plan.</p>
<p>1.2 A key priority of the Action Plan should be the uptake of new digital and other emerging technologies in defence and security. To facilitate this uptake, it should be ensured that relevant civil initiatives take into account defence and security requirements from the outset. This would also help optimise the scope and efficiency of defence and security-specific funding instruments.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance of the uptake of new digital and other emerging technologies in the defence, security and space ecosystem. It will seek to maximise the opportunities while respecting the provisions in the legal basis of each funding instrument.</p>
<p>1.10 Historically, innovations in defence have been adopted by civil products. Today, emerging technologies are driven by huge investment from commercial sectors, and technological dissemination increasingly flows in the opposite direction, from civil to</p>	

<p>defence. In this context, digitalisation is of particular importance. The Action Plan is fundamental to foster the integration of new digital and other emerging technologies in the defence, security and space ecosystem.</p>	
<p>1.3 The EESC takes the view that the Action Plan should not limit itself to identifying existing opportunities for synergies. It should also point the way to moving from an <i>ad hoc</i> approach to a more systematic one that creates synergies by design. The EESC therefore encourages the Commission to introduce new forms of integrated planning across relevant programmes.</p> <p>4.7.2 ACTION 2: [...] The EESC considers this action to be one of the centrepieces of the Action Plan. The EU should exploit potential synergies horizontally between R&amp;I programmes (e.g. EDF and Horizon Europe) to foster cross-fertilisation, but also vertically between R&amp;I and deployment programmes (e.g. security research and the Internal Security Fund) to foster market uptake of research results. Differences in the rules and conditions for programmes risk becoming obstacles to synergies and will necessitate careful consideration of legal and technical issues such as IPR. It will be particularly important to establish, within the Commission, new forms of integrated programming and planning to ensure that synergies occur not by coincidence but design.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance of exploring all - existing and new - opportunities for synergies between among relevant EU programmes and instruments.</p>
<p>1.4 In the EESC's view, the approach of linking capabilities, technologies and value chains can achieve greater coherence and a more strategic use of EU funding. We therefore call on the Commission to frame relevant EU programmes accordingly.</p> <p>1.5 The EESC considers the envisaged</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the importance of linking capabilities, technologies and value chains. To this end the results of the observatory of critical technologies, including the technology roadmaps, will be important for planning future flagship projects.</p>

<p>Observatory for Critical Technologies to be an essential element of this approach. To foster cross-fertilisation between civil, defence, security and space, the observatory should in particular develop a common technology taxonomy applicable to all sectors.</p> <p>1.6 The EESC considers the Action Plan to be a pillar of the EU Industrial Strategy. The successful translation of technology roadmaps into fully-fledged industrial flagships is therefore crucial. We call upon the Commission to ensure that the work of the observatory leads to tangible results.</p> <p><b>4.7.4 ACTION 4:</b> [...] The EESC fully supports the establishment of an observatory and its mission to develop technology roadmaps that bring together defence, space and related civil industries. We also welcome the intention to include value chains in the assessment, as it paves the way towards the coherent and combined use of industrial policy tools to support technological leadership in strategic sectors. At the same time, the success of this action depends on numerous factors. The observatory will have to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- develop strong links to relevant capability planning processes;</li> <li>- actively monitor worldwide technology trends and detect at the earliest possible stage technological breakthroughs and disruptions;</li> <li>- establish objectives, rules and criteria for the assessment of technologies;</li> <li>- develop a common taxonomy applicable to all relevant sectors must be developed to ensure that space, defence and security speak the same “technological language”.</li> </ul> <p>Finally, it must be ensured that the roadmaps generated by the observatory do</p>	<p>The work on the observatory and roadmaps will build on the best available experience and practices on capability planning, technology assessments and taxonomies. In addition, the Commission is already working on a roadmap on technologies and value chains that will present in February 2022 in response to a request by the European Council of February 2021.</p>
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<p>not end up as pure paper exercises, but are actually implemented into work programmes and flagships. To achieve all this, we recommend that the observatory also builds on lessons learned from similar existing processes, such as the Joint Task Force (EDA-ESA-EC) on critical space technologies.</p>	
<p>1.7 In the EESC's view, the full engagement of relevant stakeholders, in particular industry and real-time operating systems (RTOs), is crucial for the successful implementation of the Action Plan. In this context, we welcome the Commission's intention to launch targeted actions to support start-ups, SMEs and RTOs to raise awareness about EU programmes and instruments.</p> <p>1.9 The EESC believes that SMEs play a key role in the process of implementing the Action Plan. It is therefore important to ensure that they have access to all the measures envisaged.</p> <p>4.7.3 ACTION 3: [...] The EESC agrees that start-ups and SMEs are crucial drivers of innovation and play an important role for synergies, as they often operate in different sectors and across the dividing line between civil and defence. At the same time, they normally lack the capacities to execute complex projects and the financial strength to operate independently on purely public, highly regulated markets with very specific customer needs. Consequently, they need strong links to system integrators to drive innovation into the market. The Action Plan should therefore support the integration of start-ups and SME into cross-border supply chains and foster the link between RTOs and industry.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that real-time operating systems (RTOs), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and start-ups can play a key role in the process of implementing the Action Plan.</p> <p>A series of targeted actions are planned to raise awareness about the several relevant EU programmes and instruments as well as facilitate their integration in cross-border supply chains. As an example, the CASSINI initiative<sup>2</sup> (aimed at supporting space-based new entrepreneurs and SMEs) will deliver as of the first quarter of 2022 matchmaking activities to ease access to big system integrators and other potential industrial partners/customers.</p>

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<sup>2</sup> [CASSINI.europa.eu](http://CASSINI.europa.eu)

1.8 Equally important is raising public awareness of the economic and technological dividends of EU funding on defence and security for EU citizens. To achieve this, the Commission should launch specific information campaigns in which civil society representatives must be involved.

1.11 Targeted recruitment, retention and advancement of women in the defence and security sectors should be prioritised, along with ensuring quality jobs and qualifications for young people, in order to foster social inclusion and gender equality in a still male-dominated ecosystem.

1.12 Alongside the rights to equal opportunities and non-discrimination, quality employment is part of a new social contract to be established with European citizens.

1.13 Social factors need to be incorporated into investments. In other words, a return on investment should not only be viewed in economic terms, but also in terms of key aspects such as employment, job creation and the quality of employment. Space must be made accessible to SMEs by facilitating their access to resilience funds, increasing synergies in relation to the training, qualification and mobility of SME workers, strengthening ecosystems along the value chain, avoiding the duplication of resources and ensuring that all countries in the EU work together.

1.14 Likewise, we see a need, even if dealing with investments of high strategic value, to include a requirement to carry out evaluations of investments and to monitor them against set corporate social responsibility standards.

1.15 These requirements should be

The Commission agrees on the importance of public support for the increasing EU investments in defence, security and space.

The social dimension of these investments is also important as they can create opportunities for new quality jobs for women and young people, thus fostering social inclusion.

In line with the updated industrial strategy, the skills agenda and the gender equality strategy, the Commission will organise outreach activities such as challenges, hackathons, start-up-labs, technology days, innovation forums, serious gaming, foresight and skills development workshops to increase public awareness and address shortages of skills as well as equality and inclusion goals.

<p>introduced for investments at EU level, in order to ensure that no area in which public money is invested is left out of these provisions.</p>	
<p>4.7.1 ACTION 1: [...] From the EESC's perspective, this action is most welcome since a capability-driven approach is key to overcoming the current fragmentation of Europe's security market and enable security end-users to be ahead of current and future security threats. The envisaged capability-planning process for integrated border management is welcome, but its establishment must be accelerated considerably to have an impact on related spending programmes before the end of the current MFF. To cope with the diversity of security end-users and give some stability to planning processes, we would recommend establishing, at EU level, security missions that are broad enough to capture diverse and evolving capability requirements. The envisaged approach should be strategic and long term, but also flexible enough to cover possible low-probability but high-impact events (such as a pandemic) and react to the sudden emergence of unexpected threats.</p>	<p>The Commission will present in the coming months its proposals for fostering the capability driven approach across security sectors.</p>
<p>4.7.5 ACTION 5: [...] The EESC considers standards to be a powerful tool to shape markets. The use of hybrid standards makes sense where it is appropriate, and the examples of CBRN or Security Data Space are indeed promising. The challenge, however, is the slowness of the standardisation process for technical standards, which seems to be increasingly struggling to keep pace with new innovation development. Standards requirements should also be part of Horizon Europe's calls to ensure that new innovations will actually be usable for end-users.</p>	<p>The Commission considers essential the promotion and application of common standards across sectors. The Commission will closely work with stakeholders, including European standardisation organisations and the European Defence Standardisation Committee (EDSC) run by the European Defence Agency, to promote the use of existing hybrid standards and the development of new ones.</p>

<p>4.7.6 ACTION 6: [...] The EESC considers the establishment of a dual-use innovation incubator and defence innovation networks to be interesting and worth exploring. In this context, special attention should be paid to the rapid obsolescence of many commercial technologies, which is often a major obstacle for their use in defence applications. We also encourage the Commission to actively foster cross-sectoral transfers of technologies with accompanying administrative and financial support measures. Since it opens new avenues, the EESC would recommend active monitoring and regular assessment of this action to measure its success.</p>	<p>Based on the European Innovation Council and the European Defence Fund, the Commission is currently exploring different options for developing an EU ‘virtual innovation incubator’ and for supporting cross-border defence innovation networks.</p>
<p>4.7.7 ACTION 7: [...] The EESC believes that the activities covered in Action 7 are essential for Europe’s sovereignty in key technology areas. Cybersecurity and cyber defence are obvious choices for synergies between security, defence and space and should indeed be given high priority. Close cooperation between public authorities and the private sector is particularly important here.</p>	<p>The Union needs to adapt quickly and continuously to the emerging threat landscape. In this direction, the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre and Network of National Coordination Centres will be the Union’s main instruments to pool investment in cyber research, technology and industrial development. Cooperation will be ensured with all relevant stakeholders.</p>
<p>4.7.8 ACTION 8: [...] The EESC welcomes the support of potentially disruptive technologies as the logical complement to a more traditional capability-based approach and suggests relating it closely to the envisaged technological observatory. We also support the use of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and DEP (Digital Europe Programme) for such activities and recommend further developing a fully-fledged European agency similar to Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) in the medium term.</p>	<p>The Commission appreciates the support of the Committee. The Commission will explore all options within the scope of existing regulations.</p>
<p>4.7.9. ACTION 9: Drones provide</p>	<p>The Commission appreciates the</p>

<p>numerous illustrations of technologies used in commercial aeronautics, and in space, security and defence cross-fertilisation is of the essence in drone technology, and inclusion of civil and military drones in the aerospace sector is dual-purpose as well. Hence, the EESC fully supports the launch of a drone flagship project as an obvious choice and recommends underpinning it with a specific technology roadmap that prioritises the relevant technological building blocks in line with their relevance for European strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty.</p>	<p>support of the Committee.</p>
<p>4.7.10. ACTION 10: The EESC considers this flagship project to be highly important, as it covers key elements of European autonomy and technological sovereignty. At the same time, it remains unclear how this project will create or benefit from synergies with the defence sector. We believe that one option for additional synergies would be to place additional payloads on board satellites in this system. This could include sensors for space surveillance, which would create synergies between the two space-related flagships.</p>	<p>The Commission will assess different implementation options and present its proposals based on the results of a study carried out by an industrial consortium.</p>
<p>4.7.11 ACTION 11: Space Traffic Management (STM) is crucial for the security of space-based assets and infrastructures that are increasingly important for the functioning of modern societies. The EESC therefore supports the launch of a specific STM flagship. At the same time, we are concerned that this initiative is limited to regulatory and standardisation aspects, which are important but not sufficient. The Commission should therefore also consider the creation of a marketplace for space surveillance data (as is the objective in the US). In order to develop a credible European STM approach,</p>	<p>The Commission will present its proposals for an EU approach to Space Traffic Management (STM) in 2022.</p>

Europe should also significantly improve its space surveillance capabilities (new sensors, analysis and calculation capacity, etc.).	
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**N° 2 NextGenerationEU funding strategy**  
**COM(2021) 250 final**  
**EESC 2021/2011 – ECO/548**  
**562<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Judith VORBACH (AT-II)**  
**DG BUDG – Commissioner HAHN**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
1.1. and 3.1. The EESC welcomes that all Member States have adopted the Own Resources Decision and calls on all stakeholders to go through the next steps swiftly in order to start the money flowing.	There is a common understanding between the Commission and the Committee that it is important to swiftly mobilise the funds to finance the EU's economic and social rebound from the pandemic. The Commission has started disbursing the Recovery and Resilience Facility's (RRF) pre-financing without delay as soon as the Council approved the first Recovery and Resilience Plans in July 2021 and the Financing and Loan Agreements were signed. As of 13 December 2021, the Council has approved the Recovery and Resilience Plans of 22 Member States and the Commission has disbursed 54.2 billion euro of RRF pre-financing to 18 Member States and more than 6 billion euro as top-ups to other EU budget programmes.
1.2. The EESC emphasises that borrowing and debt management has to be based on democratic control, legitimacy and transparency.  1.4. and 3.5. The EESC notes that the NGEU	The Commission agrees with the Committee that there should be a high degree of accountability and transparency regarding the funding operations. The Interinstitutional Agreement (IIA) <sup>3</sup> , Own Resources

<sup>3</sup> Interinstitutional Agreement of 16 December 2020 between the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission on budgetary discipline, on cooperation in budgetary matters and on sound financial management, as well as on new own resources, including a roadmap towards the introduction of new own resources; OJ L 433I , 22.12.2020, p. 28–46.

funding strategy is accompanied by an extension of responsibility to the Commission and welcomes the obligation to keep the European Parliament and the Council regularly informed about all aspects of the debt management strategy along with the provisions of the Interinstitutional Agreement. The provision of annual updates will start from the third quarter of 2021. Given the strong public interest in solid NGEU funding, this appears to be a minimum level of involvement. The Committee proposes that a NGEU funding advisory board be established. Members of the NGEU Risk and Compliance Committee should meet on a semi-annual basis with selective representatives competent in financial market questions from the European Parliament, the Council, the social partners and organised civil society.

Decision<sup>4</sup>, Financial Regulation<sup>5</sup>, and Governance Decision<sup>6</sup> include procedural arrangements that ensure regular reporting by the Commission about the funding operations more often than once a year.

For example, based on the IIA, the European Parliament, Council and Commission will meet at least three times a year to discuss the state of play and outlook for external assigned revenue under the European Union Recovery Instrument. The Governance Decision requires the Commission to report on the execution of the NextGenerationEU (NGEU) operations twice per year. The Financial Regulation requires that as part of the Annual Budget process the Commission reports on contingent liabilities.

In addition, the Commission publishes annually a borrowing Decision and semi-annually a funding plan. Both are forward-looking. The annual borrowing Decision sets a ceiling on the borrowing operations over the coming year in order to cap the overall liability of the Union budget. The 6-monthly funding plan operationalises the borrowing decision by determining the key financial parameters of the borrowing, such as the mix of short and long-term funding, the maximum average maturity, the upper bound on the average liquidity to be

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<sup>4</sup> Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2020/2053 of 14 December 2020 on the system of own resources of the European Union and repealing Decision 2014/335/EU, Euratom; OJ L 424, 15.12.2020, p. 1–10.

<sup>5</sup> Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2018/1046 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 July 2018 on the financial rules applicable to the general budget of the Union, amending Regulations (EU) No 1296/2013, (EU) No 1301/2013, (EU) No 1303/2013, (EU) No 1304/2013, (EU) No 1309/2013, (EU) No 1316/2013, (EU) No 223/2014, (EU) No 283/2014, and Decision No 541/2014/EU and repealing Regulation (EU, Euratom) No 966/2012; OJ L 193, 30.7.2018, p. 1–222.

<sup>6</sup> Commission Implementing Decision of 14 April 2021 establishing the necessary arrangements for the administration of the borrowing operations under Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2020/2053 and for the lending operations related to loans granted in accordance with Article 15 of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council; C/2021/2502 final.

	<p>held in reserves.</p> <p>The Commission has set up a website<sup>7</sup> to inform the general public and investors about its funding operations, and publishes after each transaction a press release with background information and key data.</p> <p>The Risk and Compliance Committee will invite regularly external experts to ensure proper peer review and benchmarking of the NGEU funding operations with best practices in other comparable institutions.</p>
1.4. and 3.4. The EESC stresses how important it is that the Commission manages the funding strategy directly and it welcomes the Commission's increase in its human resources in this domain. However, this should be done in a gender-balanced way.	<p>The Commission agrees with the Committee that it was necessary to step up human resources and competencies for the execution of the NGEU funding operations.</p> <p>The Commission has been recruiting experts, including from debt management offices of Member States and international organisations (such as the European Stability Mechanism) and has now the expertise in house to carry out these operations.</p> <p>These experts have different backgrounds, nationalities, and genders. The Staff Regulation does not allow the Commission to discriminate among applicants when it comes to recruitment.</p> <p>The Commission promotes the equal representation of women in decision-making and contributes to the efforts to further instil gender equality in the Commission's corporate culture and <i>modus operandi</i>.</p>
1.5., 1.7., 3.6., 4.2., and 4.4.1. The EESC stresses the importance of preserving the	The Commission agrees with the Committee that solid risk-management

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<sup>7</sup> [The EU as a borrower – investor relations | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#).

<p>EU's high creditworthiness and calls on the Commission to anticipate crises.</p> <p>The EESC supports the establishment of solid risk-management systems and the holding of the 'NGEU account' with the ECB. The EESC calls on the Commission to ensure accountability, transparency and sound financial management from the very beginning of NGEU borrowing, particularly during the period prior to the appointment of the Chief Risk Officer (CRO) and the three-month period planned for drawing up the High-Level Risk and Compliance Policy.</p> <p>Given the public interest in sound risk management, the EESC suggests that the CRO could consult the European Parliament and the Council when drawing up the High-Level Risk and Compliance Policy.</p>	<p>is key.</p> <p>The College appointed on 2 June 2021 Ms Iliyana Tsanova as Deputy Director-General in Directorate-General for Budget and the Commission's Chief Risk Officer (CRO). Ms Tsanova took up her responsibilities on 1 September 2021.</p> <p>The role of the CRO is enshrined in Chapter 4 of the Governance Decision<sup>8</sup>.</p> <p>The CRO will ensure that the systems and processes used to implement the NextGenerationEU operations are designed and implemented in a manner that guarantees, to the greatest extent possible, the protection of the financial interests of the Union and the sound financial management of the proceeds.</p> <p>The CRO will also be responsible for the definition and oversight of the high level risk and compliance policy on which she will report annually to the College. This policy will entail a set of technical limits, which will need to be drawn up in light of risk management best practices.</p>
1.5., 3.3. and 3.6. The EESC suggests that the ECB may act as a buyer of last resort.	The Commission considers that it is not appropriate to give a response to this opinion of the Committee, given that the ECB determines its monetary policy independently (cf. article 130 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union <sup>9</sup> ).
1.6. and 4.3.1. The EESC welcomes that one precondition for participation in the Primary	The Commission agrees with the Committee that primary dealers play a

<sup>8</sup> Commission Implementing Decision of 14 April 2021 establishing the necessary arrangements for the administration of the borrowing operations under Council Decision (EU, Euratom) 2020/2053 and for the lending operations related to loans granted in accordance with Article 15 of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council; C/2021/2502 final.

<sup>9</sup> Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 47–390.

<p>Dealer Network (PDN) is, among other things, supervision by a competent authority of the Union and supports the possible involvement of OLAF in this supervision.</p>	<p>key role in the NGEU funding. The Primary Dealer Network Decision<sup>10</sup> foresees a role of the European Anti-Fraud Office if warranted (cf. recital 16).</p>
<p>1.7. and 3.7. The EESC supports the swift introduction of new own resources and calls on the Commission to bring forward the proposals scheduled for 2024.</p>	<p>A roadmap for the introduction of new own resources was included in the Interinstitutional Agreement signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 16 December 2020. The Commission remains committed to a full implementation of this roadmap. The Commission will respect the shared commitment to ‘work towards introducing sufficient new own resources with a view to covering an amount corresponding to the expected expenditure related to the repayment’ of NGEU borrowing. The Commission will make a proposal on 22 December 2021. The Commission hopes that this comprehensive package will achieve the necessary support of the European Parliament and of all Member States in the Council. The Commission will, together with an amended Own Resources Decision also propose the necessary budgetary provisions for the Social Climate Fund proposed as part of the fit for 55 package in July 2021.</p>
<p>1.7. and 4.6. The EESC warns against excessive borrowing from investors outside the EU, which could, particularly in times of crisis, go along with increasing risks such as, for example, a sudden stoppage of lending activities.</p>	<p>A roadmap for the introduction of new own resources was included in the Interinstitutional Agreement signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission on 16 December 2020. The Commission remains committed to a full implementation of this roadmap. The Commission will</p>

<sup>10</sup> Commission Decision (EU, Euratom) 2021/625 of 14 April 2021 on the establishment of the primary dealer network and the definition of eligibility criteria for lead and co-lead mandates for syndicated transactions for the purposes of the borrowing activities by the Commission on behalf of the Union and of the European Atomic Energy Community. OJ L 131, 16.4.2021, p. 170–182.

	<p>respect the shared commitment to ‘work towards introducing sufficient new own resources with a view to covering an amount corresponding to the expected expenditure related to the repayment’ of NGEU borrowing. The Commission will make a proposal on 22 December 2021. The Commission hopes that this comprehensive package will achieve the necessary support of the European Parliament and of all Member States in the Council. The Commission will, together with an amended Own Resources Decision also propose the necessary budgetary provisions for the Social Climate Fund proposed as part of the fit for 55 package in July 2021.</p>
1.8. and 4.7. The EESC proposes that the issuance of NGEU social bonds be considered to complement the volume of EUR 100 billion dedicated to SURE.	<p>The programs funded under NGEU are not single policy programs like the ‘Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency’ (SURE). In particular, the use of the resources under national Recovery and Resilience Plans are quite diverse while adhering to the necessary requirements of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, such as fostering the digital and green transitions. Hence, it is not possible to identify <i>a priori</i> a single social framework that would allow the issuance of social bonds like under SURE. However, up to 30% of NGEU bonds will be issued as green bonds.</p>

N°3

**Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030)**

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**EESC 2021/1644 – SOC/680**

**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**

**Rapporteur: Ioannis VARDAKASTANIS (EL-III)**

**DG EMPL – Commissioner DALLI**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
1.2. The commitment to set up a Disability Platform shows great promise, but also has the potential to disappoint if poorly implemented. There must be transparency regarding members, meeting agendas (with the possibility for input on agenda items) and outcomes. The Platform must also ensure that organisations of persons with disabilities have a strong voice. We believe that the EESC has a role to play and must have a seat at the table.	<p>The Commission welcomes the Committee's overall support and its willingness to contribute to the follow-up of the Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (hereafter the Strategy). In view of stepping up cooperation of EU institutions on disability, as indicated in the Strategy, the Commission will arrange an annual exchange of views with the Committee.</p> <p>The new Disability Platform was established by the Commission in October 2021 and held its first meeting on 15 December 2021. It brings together national focal points for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), EU-level organisations of persons with disabilities, other relevant civil society organisations, providers of services for persons with disabilities, and the Commission, to support the implementation of the Strategy as well as national disability strategies. The online presence of the Platform will offer information on all its activities.</p>
1.3. The link between the Strategy and the significant investments to come under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)	To support the implementation of the Strategy and of the UNCRPD, the Commission will continue to promote

<p>should be made stronger. The link with the implementation and monitoring of the Action Plan for the EU Pillar of Social Rights and particularly of Principle 17 of the Pillar should also be ensured and maximised. The EESC would like to see a clearer and stronger agenda from the Commission on how to promote the use of the national RRF in order to help persons with disabilities recover from the pandemic. The Commission must address those Member States which have not been transparent about their plans or have not followed the Commission's guidelines to ensure meaningful consultation of civil society. The Commission must also be resolute about opposing plans that propose investments that go against the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), such as investments in institutional care settings.</p>	<p>the use of EU funding by the Member States as provided for in the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and by new funding opportunities under NextGenerationEU, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). EU funding is available to support the transition from institutional care to community-based services and independent living, and to strengthen the socio-economic inclusion of persons with disabilities, accessibility and access to services.</p> <p>As mandated by the RRF Regulation, national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) need to contain an explanation of how they contribute to foster equal opportunities for all, to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and how local and regional authorities, social partners and stakeholders have been involved in the preparation of the RRPs.</p>
<p>1.10. [...] The EESC strongly recommends that work begin on setting out indicators to monitor the implementation of these actions, and that efforts be made to align these measures with those for civil protection and for health and safety at work. As regards employment in the Member States, this could be achieved in part by the Commission's proposal to include indicators on the disability employment gap in the Social Pillar's new Social Scoreboard, and to include disaggregation around disability in some of the other indicators. We therefore suggest that the scoreboard contain indicators on the quality of employment of persons with disabilities, such as whether they have full-time and</p>	<p>The revised social scoreboard proposed in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan includes the disability employment gap as new indicator. The Commission will work with the Member States to establish national targets by 2024. Aspects of quality of employment will be explored under the flagship initiative to improve labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities in 2022.</p> <p>The Commission will also develop a set of new disability indicators with a clear roadmap for implementation by 2023, a monitoring framework for the objectives and actions of the Strategy and a new dashboard to present</p>

<p>long-term contracts, and whether they are employed in the open labour market. [...]</p>	<p>progress made in implementing the Strategy at EU level and in the Member States.</p>
<p>1.4. The EESC is pleased to see the proposal for AccessibleEU, although at this stage it falls short of the EESC's request for an EU Access Board to be set up. The Commission needs to be clear and transparent about how it plans to fund and staff this agency, and how it will make sure that persons with disabilities are represented; they must be represented internally, as employees and experts and not just externally, as consulted actors.</p>	<p>The AccessibleEU cooperation framework, to be launched in 2022, will bring together national authorities responsible for implementing and enforcing accessibility rules with experts and professionals from all areas of accessibility. It will help share good practices across sectors, inspire policy development at national and EU level, and develop tools and standards to facilitate the implementation of EU law. The Commission will start preparations within the newly established Disability Platform, thus being closely developed with national UNCRPD focal points and organisations of persons with disabilities.</p>
<p>1.5. The EESC strongly endorses the flagship initiative on the EU Disability Card and considers that it has the potential to foster great change. However, the EESC regrets that there is yet no commitment on how to ensure that it is recognised by the Member States. The EESC stresses the need for the Disability Card to be implemented by means of a regulation which would make it directly applicable and enforceable throughout the EU.</p>	<p>The proposal for a European Disability Card, announced as one of the planned flagship initiatives under the new Strategy, will build on the experience of the ongoing EU Disability Card pilot project implemented in eight Member States and upon the European parking card for persons with disabilities, with a view to be recognised in all Member States. Activities on the recognition of the disability status will respect the competences of the Member States in this area.</p>
<p>1.6. The EESC supports the plan for a guide on good electoral practice addressing the participation of persons with disabilities in</p>	<p>Following the 2019 elections to the European Parliament, the Commission issued a report including best practices</p>

<p>the electoral process, planned for 2023. It also supports the work planned with the Member States, the European Cooperation Network on Elections and the European Parliament to guarantee the political rights of persons with disabilities on an equal footing with others. The EESC advises to bring this deliverable forward to ensure that national and local authorities have time to adopt more accessible practices in advance of the 2024 European elections.</p>	<p>to support citizens with a disability. In its 2020 EU citizenship report<sup>11</sup> and in the Strategy, the Commission reaffirmed its determination to work with the Member States and the European Parliament to guarantee the political rights of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others, and to ensure that this right is enjoyed in the elections to the European Parliament in 2024.</p> <p>In 2023 the Commission will establish a guide of good electoral practice regarding persons with disabilities involving the European Cooperation Network on Elections and the expert group on electoral matters. The preparatory work will start in 2022. In addition, in the framework of the high-level event on elections announced in the European Democracy Action Plan, the Commission will discuss practices on inclusive democracy to make candidate lists reflect the diversity of our societies. Moreover, the Commission will seek to address the needs of citizens with a disability in the compendium on e-voting envisaged under the European Democracy Action Plan. Finally, the Commission will support inclusive democratic participation, also for persons with disabilities, through the Citizenship, Equalities, Rights and Values programme (CERV).</p>
<p>1.7. There is a lack of specific actions addressing the needs of women and girls with disabilities. The EESC calls for</p>	<p>The Strategy on disability applies a gender mainstreaming approach based on the concept of intersectionality.</p>

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/eu-citizenship-report-2020\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/eu-citizenship-report-2020_en)

<p>remedies by ensuring that the gender dimension is mainstreamed into all actions already included in the Strategy. This should be approached carefully in actions tackling violence. The focus on women should also be extended to family members providing long-term and informal care to their relatives with disabilities, as women are particularly likely to take on caring roles. After the mid-term review of the Strategy, the EESC would like to see a specific flagship initiative proposed on women with disabilities in the second half of the period of the Strategy.</p>	<p>This approach is applied in the other Union of Equalitystrategies<sup>12</sup>, including the Gender Equality Strategy<sup>13</sup>. The gender dimension is reflected throughout the Strategy on the Rights of People with Disabilities,e.g. with regards to employment, care or in ensuring safety and protection from and the prevention of violence). The Commission remains committed to ensuring funding opportunities for projects and organisations tackling discrimination, notably under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme.</p>
	<p>The Gender Equality Strategy as well as the Directive on Work-life balance<sup>14</sup> adopted in 2019 promote a more gender-equal sharing of care responsibilities.</p> <p>As announced in its Work Programme 2022, the Commission will present a “European Care Strategy” to address both carers and care receivers, from childcare to long-term care. The strategy will set a framework for policy reforms to guide the development of sustainable long-term care that ensures better and more affordable access to quality services for all. It will also address childhood education and care with particular attention being paid to children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged groups. It will help</p>

<sup>12</sup> President von der Leyen announced as one of the priorities of her Commission to build a Union of Equality in all of its senses. At the [European Day of Persons with Disabilities 2020](#), President von der Leyen also announced the presentation in 2021 of the new Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, aiming to a Union of Equality, a Union where everyone can enjoy the same rights and opportunities.

<sup>13</sup> Commission Communication (COM/2020/152 final): [A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#).

<sup>14</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on [work-life balance for parents and carers](#).

	close the gender employment gap, increase women's empowerment and contribute towards gender equality, including by revising the Barcelona targets.
1.8. The actions dealing with access to justice for persons with disabilities and actions where persons with disabilities as victims of violence are hugely important. The EESC considers that these actions, particularly those on training of professionals in the justice system and law enforcement officers, must also give guidance on how to ensure that persons with disabilities are not denied access to justice due to legal incapacitation or subjected to delays when seeking justice because of accessibility issues, lack of support in decision-making or a lack of availability of assistance for communication, such as sign language interpretation.	Persons with disabilities should have effective access to justice, including through the provision of adequate accommodations. In the Strategy, the Commission commits to provide guidance to Member States on access to justice for persons with disabilities in the EU, building on international guidance provided by the United Nations. The Commission also commits in the Strategy and in the European judicial training strategy <sup>15</sup> to upscale training of legal professionals on the protection of persons with disabilities.
1.9. The proposed guidelines on improvements in independent living and inclusion in the community is a point that the Commission needs to address with particular attention. The guidelines must be based on very clear definitions of what we understand by institutional care, community-based services and independent living. The EESC recommends that the Commission base its definitions on those established and agreed upon by the European Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care, as well as CRPD General Comment 5 on Article 19.  4.1.1. As regards the flagship initiative on guidelines for independent living for	The Commission will by 2023 issue guidance recommending to Member States improvements on independent living and inclusion in the community. Regarding definitions, the UNCRPD and expert positions as well as the work on deinstitutionalisation under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund will be taken into account. Persons with disabilities and their representative organisations will be consulted.  For the programming period 2021-2027, promoting deinstitutionalisation remains a priority for the cohesion

<sup>15</sup> Commission Communication (COM(2020) 713) on [Ensuring justice in the EU — a European judicial training strategy for 2021-2024](#).

<p>Member States to improve independent living and inclusion in the community. The EESC sees this as a potentially crucial initiative. Its strength will rely on a clear and strict definition of what constitutes institutional care, why it should be avoided, and what is understood by investment in community-based services and independent living. The guidelines must be drawn up with input from persons with disabilities and their representative organisations.</p>	<p>funds, supported by the enabling conditions for funding set out in the Common Provisions Regulation<sup>16</sup>, in line with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and the UNCRPD. The funds should be implemented in a way that promotes the transition from institutional to family- and community-based care.</p>
<p>1.11. The Strategy proposes a number of actions on education. The EESC stresses that the action on training for Special Needs Teachers should also focus on training teachers in mainstream education settings to offer inclusive classroom learning. Member States must be encouraged to allocate Special Needs Educators to inclusive settings to allow children with disabilities to receive the specialised support they might need, while being part of a mainstream school attended by learners without disabilities.</p>	<p>In the Strategy, the Commission committed to support Member States to further develop their teacher education systems to address shortages of teachers in Special Needs Education and competences of all education professionals to manage diversity in the classroom and develop inclusive education.</p> <p>Inclusive education is one of the strategic priorities of the European Education Area (EEA) and of related initiatives, such as the Toolkit for inclusive early childhood and care<sup>17</sup> or the Pathways to School Success initiative<sup>18</sup>. In light of the rise of inequality in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission will also promote inclusive and accessible teaching and learning through the New Digital Education Plan and EU funding (Erasmus+, ESF+).</p>
<p>1.13. The action on supporting Member</p>	<p>The UNCRPD and the 2000 Hague</p>

<sup>16</sup> Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy, OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159–706.

<sup>17</sup><https://op.europa.eu/fr/publication-detail/-/publication/4c526047-6f3c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-191896644>

<sup>18</sup>[Pathways to School Success | Education and Training \(europa.eu\)](#)

<p>States to implement the 2000 Hague Convention would clash with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) with regard to issues such as forced treatment and coercion. This needs to be addressed with input from disability organisations before the Commission takes any further action.</p>	<p>Convention on the international protection of vulnerable adults are complementary instruments<sup>19</sup>. The Hague Convention was designed to address, and provide a mechanism to mitigate any conflict of laws between States with respect to persons with disabilities and older persons. It does not deal with substantive rules. As indicated in the Strategy, the Commission will work with the Member States to implement the 2000 Hague Convention on the international protection of vulnerable adults in line with the UNCRPD. A legal study on the cross-border protection of vulnerable adults has been completed in 2021. In December 2021, the Commission published a call for evidence and launched a public consultation on the need for a future EU initiative.</p>
<p>1.15. The proposed strategy for data collection is one of the crucial proposals. The EESC underlines the need to ensure more systematic collection of disaggregated data, possibly with the use of the Washington Group's Short Set of Questions.</p> <p>5.1.1. Strengthening EU data collection on persons with disabilities in EU-funded humanitarian aid is necessary, for example by promoting the use of the Washington Group's Short Set of Questions. This is an excellent proposal that responds to requests previously made by the EESC. The EESC would like to see disaggregated data collection improved on all fronts, particularly regarding people living in institutions. [...]</p>	<p>In the EU, indicators addressing poverty risk, education and employment levels are disaggregated by sex, age and disability. For the monitoring in other domains, the EU data collection strategy envisages the inclusion of a disability variable in all existing EU social surveys (EU Labour Force Survey, EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, Adult Education Survey, European Health Interview Survey, Information and Communication Technologies Survey, Household Budget Survey and Time Use Survey). This will allow for the availability of comparable and reliable data to measure the gap between persons with disabilities and without</p>

<sup>19</sup> See Sonia E. Rolland, Alex Ruck Keene (2021): [Interpreting the 2000 Hague Convention on the International Protection of Adults Consistently with the 2007 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), study commissioned by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities.

	disabilities in various life domains.
1.17. The Strategy states that persons with disabilities should participate fully in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The EESC would like to see the Commission deliver on this commitment by including persons with disabilities and their representative organisations in all areas of the Conference, not just those relating specifically to disability.	As set out in the Strategy, persons with disabilities should participate fully in the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Commission works to ensure that persons with disabilities and their representative organisations are fully involved throughout the whole process, for example as speakers, panellists and contributors.
1.18. The EESC calls on the Commission to start preparing for the selection of an EU candidate for the CRPD Committee, and recommends that the candidate be a European woman with a disability.	As announced in the Strategy, the Commission will propose to the Member States a candidate for the elections of the UNCRPD Committee, in line with the Joint Communication on Multilateralism <sup>20</sup> .
2.7. In the Strategy, the Commission promised to address certain issues through other EU strategies and action plans such as the EU Digital Government Strategy and the Action Plan on Social Economy. The Commission does not always provide details on exactly how disability issues will be addressed within these strategies. More details should be provided on precisely how the Commission proposes to do this.	In its Communication “2030 Digital Compass: the European Way for the Digital Decade”, the Commission presented a vision, targets and avenues for a successful and inclusive digital transformation of Europe by 2030. To translate the EU’s digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete action, the Communication proposes a digital compass with four cardinal points, one of which is the digitalisation of public services. The Communication and the related legislative proposal for establishing the 2030 Policy Programme “Path to the Digital Decade <sup>21</sup> ” also propose concrete targets, one of which is 100% online accessible provision of key public services for Union citizens and businesses by 2030.  Furthermore, in the Communication

<sup>20</sup> Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on ‘[Strengthening the EU’s contribution to rules-based multilateralism](#)’, JOIN (2021) 3 final, 17.2.2021.

<sup>21</sup> Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the 2030 Policy Programme “Path to the Digital Decade” COM/2021/574 final

mentioned above, the Commission refers to accessible and human-centric digital public services and administration as a principle that could be included in a possible set of digital principles and rights. The Commission will propose in early 2022 to include such a set of principles and rights in an interinstitutional declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council.

On 8 December 2020, in the Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-Based Digital Government<sup>22</sup>, the Member States have taken a political commitment for a digital transformation inclusive of and accessible for persons with disabilities.

In the area of employment, the Commission will explore pathways to the open labour market for persons with disabilities, where the social economy is an important player. The Commission action plan for the social economy, presented in December 2021<sup>23</sup>, includes opportunities related to persons with disabilities. In particular, the action plan explicitly recognises the role of the social economy and work integration social enterprises in contributing to the social and labour-market inclusion of persons with disabilities. In addition, the plan puts forward initiatives which will help such organisations develop, such as actions aiming to raise awareness of the existing legal possibilities to achieve social objectives through public procurement, tailored business support

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<sup>23</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=10117&furtherNews=yes#navItem-1>

	or facilitated access to funding.
3.1.3. Evaluating the application of the Web Accessibility Directive and assessing whether the Directive should be revised. This evaluation is an opportunity to analyse whether this legislation is fit for purpose in an increasingly digital public sector, particularly after COVID-19. The EESC considers that the EC should discontinue the exemption from the scope of the Directive applying to certain websites (e.g. schools, kindergartens and nurseries), as these potential exclusions may have had a negative impact on persons with disabilities who can only access these public services via digital tools. We would also like to see a clearer explanation about what action will be taken in the case of MS which fail to meet the Directive's requirements.	<p>Under the Web Accessibility Directive<sup>24</sup>, public sector websites and mobile apps in the Member States must be accessible to persons with disabilities. A review of the directive is underway, to be completed by June 2022. The review will take into account Member States' reports on the outcome of monitoring and use of enforcement procedure provided for in Article 9 of the Directive. A Commission study<sup>25</sup> is investigating how to improve web accessibility for persons with cognitive disabilities. A Commission study<sup>26</sup> is investigating how to improve web accessibility for persons with cognitive disabilities. Further, the Commission will launch in 2022 a European resource centre AccessibleEU to facilitate access to relevant knowledge.</p> <p>The Commission is monitoring the implementation of the Directive by Member States. Article 258 TFEU provides an enforcement mechanism for the Commission if a Member State fails to meet the Directive's requirements.</p>
3.1.4. Reviewing a number of existing pieces of legislation, namely the legislative framework related to the energy performance of buildings including its impact on accessibility improvements as a result of renovation requirements; the regulatory framework on passenger rights; the Regulation on Union Guidelines for the development of the trans-European	In December 2021, the Commission adopted a proposal to revise the legislative framework related to the energy performance of buildings <sup>27</sup> , which also has an impact on accessibility improvements due to renovation requirements. One of the key principles of the Renovation Wave Strategy (2020) highlights the

<sup>24</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/2102.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.cognitiveaccessibilitystudy.com/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cognitiveaccessibilitystudy.com/>

<sup>27</sup> Directive 2010/31/EU [on the energy performance of buildings](#).

<p>transport network to strengthen accessibility; and the Urban Mobility Package. [...]</p>	<p>need to ensure accessibility in buildings.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Commission is reviewing the passenger rights regulatory framework including rights for persons with disabilities and reduced mobility in transport by air, water, bus and coach after having finalised the evaluation of these three Regulations until the end of 2021.</p> <p>On 14 December 2021, the Commission presented a proposal on reviewing the Regulation on Union Guidelines for the development of the trans-European transport network. The proposal aims to enhance the accessibility of transport infrastructure for all users, including for persons with disability.</p>
<p>4.1.2. A framework for social services to improve service delivery for persons with disabilities and to enhance the attractiveness of jobs in this area. The EESC considers that this framework must focus not only on how to make the social service sector more attractive in terms of salary and working conditions, but also ensure that service providers receive adequate training on how to provide support that is guided by the choices of services users and takes a person-centred, human rights-based approach.</p>	<p>The Strategy highlights the importance of quality, accessible, person-centred and affordable services. By 2024, the Commission will issue a specific framework for Social Services of Excellence for persons with disabilities, including through upskilling and reskilling of service providers.</p>
<p>4.1.4. A 2022 study on social protection and services for persons with disabilities followed by guidance to support Member States with the reform of social protection, focusing on disability assessment frameworks. The study should focus on social services as the basis for ensuring a dignified life for persons with disabilities as well as the role of families and carers. The</p>	<p>The Commission will put the focus of the study on both mainstream social protection and coverage of additional financial needs persons with disabilities are facing.</p> <p>This complements other actions of the Strategy dedicated to the quality of services, mainly the planned flagship initiative on a quality framework for</p>

<p>guidance should thus underline that services must be able to meet the individual needs of persons with disabilities, be based within the community and not in isolated settings, and be accompanied by adequate disability allowance payments. It is crucial that guidance on social protection reforms address the heightened cost of living for persons with disabilities and we should urge Member States to be more flexible in allowing people to retain disability allowances regardless of their own income, or that of their spouse or partner. [...]</p>	<p>social services in connection with the flagship initiative on independent living.</p>
<p>4.1.9. The EESC would have liked to see more attention paid to health-related issues. The Strategy focuses on the Beating Cancer Plan, which we welcome, but is very vague on mental health, the accessibility of information related to health and the provision of healthcare to persons with disabilities still living in institutions.</p>	<p>The Commission acknowledges in the Strategy that further action is needed to improve access of persons with disabilities to healthcare. The support to Member States' implementation of validated good practices related to (mental) health and disability can be addressed through the Steering Group on Promotion and Prevention.</p>

**N°4      Adult learning**  
**(Exploratory opinion at the request of the Slovenian Presidency)**  
**EESC 2021/2708 - SOC/684**  
**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Tatjana BABRAUSKIENĖ (LT-II)**  
**DG EMPL – Commissioner SCHMIT**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.1. The EESC appreciates the increased focus on adult learning, training and skills development reiterated in the recent Commission initiatives, mainly in the European Skills Agenda. The EESC calls for immediate well-targeted policy measures to be designed and implemented, accompanied by incentives to support Member States as already pointed out in EESC opinion ‘Supportive education systems to avoid skills mismatches – what transition is needed?’<sup>28</sup>.</p>	<p>The Commission reiterates the importance of adult learning, training and skills development as a means to put into practice the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights '<i>everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning</i>', supporting a job-rich recovery and socially fair green and digital transitions. In line with the European Skills Agenda<sup>29</sup>, the aim is to ensure a skilled EU workforce and strengthen Europe's sustainable competitiveness, enabling and empowering individuals to fully participate in society and successfully manage transitions in the labour market. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan<sup>30</sup> set an EU headline target of at least 60% of adults participating in learning activities every year by 2030, which was welcomed by the European Council, in line with the Porto Declaration.</p> <p>One year after the launch of the European Skills Agenda in July 2020, nine of the 12 actions have already been launched by the Commission.</p>

<sup>28</sup> [OJ C 228, 5.7.2019, p. 16-23](#)

<sup>29</sup> COMMUNICATION European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience COM/2020/274 final

<sup>30</sup> COMMUNICATION The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan COM/2021/102 final.

1.2. The EESC points out that the rapid invention and spread of new technologies need to be accompanied by effective upskilling and reskilling. The EESC underlines that the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Europe's society and economy further highlighted the importance of effective education and training policies and high-quality jobs in supporting a sustainable and just social and economic recovery and resilience, which is crucial in helping Europe overcome the consequences of the pandemic. Investment in adult learning and skills development can play a crucial role in economic recovery and a social Europe.

1.14. The EESC underlines that upskilling and reskilling are of the utmost importance in supporting the green and digital transitions of industries and they need to be seen as a social and economic responsibility to ensure inclusive training for quality jobs, and a just transition for all. Forward-looking industrial strategies, including effective skills policies, are needed to support upskilling and reskilling of the workforce. [...]

The Commission strives to ensure that no one is left behind in the context of the green and digital transitions.

The Skills Agenda for Europe aims to provide effective upskilling and reskilling opportunities to react to these challenges. The Skills Agenda encourages public and private investment in adult learning, for instance through the Pact for Skills. In addition, it recalls the available EU funding opportunities available for up- and reskilling e.g. via the European Social Fund Plus (ESF +) and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

On 14 July 2021, the Commission adopted the “Fit for 55” package<sup>31</sup> to achieve the green transition leaving no one behind. The Package includes measures to address negative social impacts, notably the new Social Climate Fund, and the Commission intends to present before the end of the 2021 a proposal for a Council Recommendation on the social and labour aspects of the climate transition.

The Commission, through its Pact for Skills<sup>32</sup> initiative, aims to incentivise and mobilise stakeholders to take actions for up- and reskilling the workforce in key industrial ecosystems for Europe, building on the blueprints for sectoral cooperation on skills, which have been successfully piloted in several sectors since 2018.

Furthermore, basic digital skills and the need for more ICT specialists in Europe is also in the focus of the

<sup>31</sup> [EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Pact for Skills - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

	<p>Commission's Communication on '2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade' and the legislative proposal establishing the related 2030 Policy Programme 'Path to the Digital Decade' (see under point 1.7 below for more details).</p> <p>Finally, as announced by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech 2021, the Commission proposed a Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills. It will also propose two Council recommendations in the area of digital education and skills, one on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training, and one on enabling factors for digital education.</p>
1.3. The EESC recommends that the Commission and the Member States enhance adult learning policies by taking a holistic view and improving its accessibility, quality and inclusiveness while respecting national competences and the principle of subsidiarity.	<p>The Commission agrees with this point, it recognises the need for a holistic approach, improving accessibility, quality and inclusiveness in adult learning.</p> <p>Together with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Commission is supporting Member States to prepare holistic, whole-of-government national skills strategies.</p>

<p>1.5. The EESC underlines the importance of adult learning and regrets that the EU institutions and several Member States do not consider it a political priority while adult learning is essential for tapping the full potential of employment and social inclusion and to enable adults to actively participate in the labour market and be democratic citizens.</p>	<p>The Commission considers adult learning as a policy priority. The first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights states the right of everyone to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. Furthermore, its fourth principle on active support to employment states the right of everyone to receive support for job search, training and requalification. As mentioned above under point 1.1., the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan sets an EU headline target on adults' participation in learning as one of three headline targets.</p>
<p>1.6. The EESC suggests that the Commission and Member States set achievable long-term goals and establish a continuous monitoring system for adult learning participation and high-quality and accessible lifelong learning, including employee training, for each Member State, taking into consideration regional differences. This system should aim to ensure that everyone has the knowledge, skills, competencies and attitude needed for Europe to establish a just, cohesive, sustainable, digital and wealthy society. It is also important to improve research and skills intelligence at sectoral and national level on skills needs and skills forecasts to update adult learning for adults facing transitions and to improve data on Member States' investment in it and to ensure frequent monitoring and data collection on learning and training courses obtained by employees. Social partners and civil society should be actively involved in improving national skills intelligence, including analysing, forecasting and anticipating skills needs.</p>	<p>The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan invited Member States to set their own national targets, in order to contribute to achieving the new EU-level headline targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction. Commissioner Schmit asked Member States to present to the Commission their initial proposals for national targets by mid-September 2021. The aim is to finalise the process by early 2022, so that national targets can be monitored in the context of the European Semester. Also, the European Skills Agenda put forward four adult learning targets by 2025, which will be monitored through the European Semester, disaggregating data by gender.</p> <p>Concerning improving skills intelligence, Action 2 of the European Skills Agenda includes concrete actions to strengthen and disseminate skills intelligence, with the involvement of social partners. For instance, building on Cedefop's Skills</p>

OVATE project<sup>33</sup>, a permanent online tool will be created, including real-time information for all interested stakeholders. In addition, through the Pact for Skills, the Commission is mobilising stakeholders to take concrete action for upskilling and reskilling based on skills anticipation at sectoral level and widely disseminate skills intelligence. The Commission also encourages public and private employment services to increase their use of skills intelligence and to promote early identification of skills shortages to tailor better training courses. Furthermore, work is ongoing to present skills intelligence information tailored to individuals' needs in Europass, the EU's platform for people to manage their learning and careers.

With regard to data collection, Eurostat has been working on creating “satellite accounts” for education and training since 2015 and has piloted an approach with national statistical offices. Four voluntary Member States developed possible supplementary tables (to national accounts), including monetary and non-monetary data e.g. adults in continuing vocational training and lifelong learning. The results from this exercise were integrated, in 2018, into the work of the international task force on developing an international Compilation Guide for Satellite Accounts of Education and Training (SAET). The SAET Guide was published in 2020<sup>34</sup> and proposes specific classifications and tables for

<sup>33</sup> [CEDEFOP DATA VIS & TOOLS - Skills OVATE | Cedefop \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>34</sup> <https://unece.org/statistics/publications/satellite-account-education-and-training-compilation-guide>.

	education and training satellite accounts.
1.7. Member States need to step up the implementation of the Council Recommendation of 19 December 2016 on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults <sup>35</sup> to ensure that all low-skilled and low-qualified adults develop their basic skills and be guided and motivated to participate in training to improve their life and employability. To ensure that 80% of adults have basic digital skills, the EESC calls on the Commission and on Member States to support adults in the acquisition of a minimum of basic digital skills for free to support their skills acquisition for work and in daily life.	<p>The Commission continues to support the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways, including through mutual learning activities between Member States. Basic digital skills are part of the skills to be developed through Upskilling Pathways. Progress on the implementation of the Council Recommendation is under evaluation and the Commission will report on it in 2022.</p> <p>The updated Digital Education Action Plan<sup>36</sup>, the European Skills Agenda, the Digital Compass Communication and the legislative proposal establishing the related 2030 Policy Programme ‘Path to the Digital Decade’ address digital skills needs at all levels.</p> <p>In particular, Action 6 of the European Skills Agenda aims to support the acquisition of skills for the digital transition. For instance, the Commission is updating the Digital Competence framework for citizens to take account of new emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and emerging trends.</p> <p>In the Digital Compass Communication, the Commission identified a digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals as one of the four ‘cardinal points’ for mapping the EU’s trajectory to translate the EU’s digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete targets and to ensure that these objectives are met. The Communication and the proposal include targets to</p>

<sup>35</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC\\_2016\\_484\\_R\\_0001](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=OJ%3AJOC_2016_484_R_0001)

<sup>36</sup> COMMUNICATION Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 Resetting education and training for the digital age COM/2020/624 final.

	<p>increase the share of adults with basic digital skills to 80% by 2030 (also a target of the European Pillar of Social Rights) and to increase the number of employed ICT specialists to 20 million by the same year, with convergence between women and men.</p> <p>Also in the Digital Compass Communication, the Commission refers to universal digital education and skills for people to take an active part in society and in democratic processes as a principle that could be included in a possible set of digital principles and rights. The Commission will propose to include such a set of principles and rights in an interinstitutional solemn declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council in early 2022.</p> <p>See also on the Structured Dialogue and proposals for Recommendation in this area under points 1.2 / 1.14 above.</p>
1.9. The EESC asks the Commission and Member States to launch information and awareness campaigns with the social partners for adults and workers affected by the green and digital transition to help the workforce acquire the skills needed. The Commission should organise yearly events following the example of the VET Skills Week to inform and motivate adults about adult and further learning and to assist national policies.	<p>Apart from the European Vocational Skills Week, which addresses both young people and adults, the Commission organised events on topics such as: the high-level forum on Individual learning accounts (March 2021), a workshop on skills within the European Youth Event in Strasbourg (October 2021) and a panel discussion on “regions providing skills and jobs for a green society” (October 2021) as part of the European Week of Regions and Cities.</p> <p>In addition, the partnerships to be set up under the Pact for Skills will have among their aims outreach to potential skills development beneficiaries.</p>
1.12. [...] The EESC points out that social	The Commission agrees that social

<p>dialogue and interaction between trade unions and employers is instrumental in increasing access to adult learning for all, promoting flexibility and guidance, aligning training with labour market needs, ensuring training quality and financing training.</p>	<p>partners and civil society organisations have a crucial role to play in the design of policies. This is why the Commission has organised a series of targeted consultations within the preparation of the planned initiatives on individual learning accounts and a European approach to micro-credentials. These included a social partners' hearing, consultation with the European Parliament's Employment Committee (EMCO), exchanges of views with Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT), Directors General for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT), the Public Employment Services (PES) Network, policy networks, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions.</p>
<p>1.15. The EESC advocates for sustainable national financing for adult learning, complemented by the effective use of EU funds, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), to support economic growth and resilient society in the context of the digital and green transitions of the economy. This can be done by ensuring quality and inclusive adult learning for all, including the unemployed and other people outside of the labour market, paying special attention to making training available and accessible for all workers. This requires a clear commitment at the European and national levels to devote an appropriate share of the available resources to promote the development of systematic and coordinated adult learning systems as a key part of the national plans.</p>	<p>Many EU funds are available to support adult learning, including structural funds, such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), as well as the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). Moreover, other funds can equally invest in re- and upskilling, notably Erasmus, the Just Transition Fund, the Modernisation Fund, the Digital Europe Programme, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund for displaced workers and the Brexit Adjustment Reserve.</p>
<p>1.16. The EESC underlines the importance of ensuring quality, relevance, effectiveness and inclusiveness in adult learning and training.</p>	<p>The Commission supports the call to further work on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on Key</p>

<p>The EESC suggests encouraging Member States to ensure that all educational learning and employee training programmes and curricula clearly define the learning outcomes and key competences, and that the Commission should further work on implementing the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning<sup>37</sup> and supporting joint actions among social partners. It is important to improve adult learning quality assurance systems and further develop the Commission's EQAVET Network to apply to adult learning, continuous Vocational Education Training (VET), apprenticeships and employee training. This should take into consideration translating the needs of the economy, employers and workers into adult learning programmes and curricula.</p>	<p>Competences for Lifelong Learning also in the area of adult learning.</p> <p>Defining through learning outcomes all qualifications and the programmes leading to them is the main concept of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training ('EQAVET'). The EQAVET Framework aims to strengthen quality assurance arrangements in vocational education and training, either in initial VET, or in continuous VET or work based learning (WBL). One of the main objectives of the EQAVET Framework remains the strengthening of the link to the labour market, and adult learning provision can make use of the EQAVET Framework where relevant.</p> <p>The Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training of 20 November 2020<sup>38</sup> replaces the EQAVET Recommendation of 2009 and includes an updated EQAVET Framework with quality indicators and descriptors applying to both initial and continuing VET and applicable to all learning environments: school-based provision and work-based learning including apprenticeships schemes.</p> <p>The EQAVET network supports the implementation of the EQAVET framework together with the National Reference Points (NRPs).</p>
<p>1.18. The EESC calls on the Commission and Member States to strengthen adult learning policies to make quality and inclusive. Adult learning for life skills a right</p>	<p>The Commission fully supports the objective of making adult learning a right for all adults as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights and in</p>

<sup>37</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-key-competences-for-lifelong-learning\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/council-recommendation-on-key-competences-for-lifelong-learning_en)

<sup>38</sup> Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience 2020/C 417/01 OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1–16.

for all adults and to meet and increase the target of 60% of adult learning participation per year. The latter can be done by addressing skills mismatches and enhancing governance and financing for adult learning, including employee training. The EESC calls on the Commission to reinstate open methods of coordination between the relevant ministries dealing with adult learning in the Member States, the social partners and civil society as part of a working group and to ensure that the fruitful work done by previous adult learning working groups is continued. The EESC also calls for a platform to be set up for national adult learning coordinators, social partners and stakeholders, separate from the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE)<sup>39</sup>, and for these various players to meet regularly as a network.

the Skills Agenda. Two of the actions of the latter, the proposals for Council Recommendations on individual learning accounts and on a European approach to micro-credentials, have been presented in December 2021. . Both are instrumental to strengthen adult learning policies in the EU. This is also why the Commission has asked Member States to include upskilling and reskilling actions in their national Resilience and Recovery Plans, as one of the seven flagship areas (i.e. “Reskill and Upskill”). An open method of coordination working group on adult learning has been set up. The national adult learning coordinators have regularly met and their working methods were further defined for a new period. Further priorities for adult learning are indicated in the recently adopted Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021- 2030<sup>40</sup>.

The Commission recalls that the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE)<sup>41</sup> has recently been revamped. It is undergoing interactive fine-tuning and is constantly adding new features (e.g. Erasmus+ Space) to be more user-friendly and to better serve educators' and other users' needs.

Current experience and feedback from stakeholders indicate that duplication of IT tools and platforms does not serve efficient cooperation amongst stakeholders. Therefore, the Commission suggests to add and reinforce any functionalities needed in EPALE and other relevant platforms to

<sup>39</sup> <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en>

<sup>40</sup> Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021- 2030

<sup>41</sup> EPALE | Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe ([europa.eu](http://europa.eu))

	achieve the objectives proposed.
3.4. The EESC [...] underlines that sustainable public investment in adult learning and effective private investment in employee training are prerequisites for the success of policy measures for the social and economic inclusion of learners of all ages and support for companies. Therefore, the Recovery Plan, Next Generation EU and other EU funds (e.g. ESF+, Just Transition Funds) must be used efficiently and consistently to support education and training policies within the European Semester.	Please see answers to points 1.6. and 1.15.
3.8. Setting up a European Exchange Platform for digital materials and courses within the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-27 and European standards on micro-credentials can be useful for enhancing access to and trust in adult learning courses. Learners need comprehensive information on whether courses lead to full or partial qualifications or to micro-credentials, who validates and ensures the quality of the courses, whether and how they are recognised, and how they could be converted to full qualifications.	<p>Please see answer to point 1.18.</p> <p>Substantial work is currently ongoing to make the existing platform EPALE more accessible, interactive, engaging and enabling networks, cooperation, peer learning, training courses and materials, etc.</p> <p>Work on setting up a dedicated European Exchange Platform is underway. The feasibility study is exploring different possibilities, including a repository of multilingual high quality digital learning resources such as the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), augmented services such as pedagogical and peer learning support and add-on services such as active curation of learning services and/or provision of certification.</p> <p>The Commission has adopted in December 2021 a proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials. An open public consultation was launched in April 2021, while a number of specific consultation meetings were held (with social partners - April 2021, Members</p>

of the European Parliament - June 2021, Committee of Regions and the Committee in May 2021).

N°5

**Action Plan on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights**

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**EESC 2021/1689 - SOC/679**

**562th Plenary Session – July 2021**

**Rapporteur: Carlos Manuel TRINDADE (PT-II)**

**Co-rapporteur: Cristian PÎRVULESCU (RO-III)**

**DG EMPL – Commissioner SCHMIT**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
1.5. [...] In implementing the social pillar, a balanced mix of legislation and soft law should be sought. The legislation should be fully compliant with the Charter of Fundamental Rights as well as with the better regulation principles, and be subject to thorough consultation with the social partners and civil society organisations at EU and national level.	In its 29 April 2021 Communication “Joining forces to make better EU laws and to prepare for the future” <sup>42</sup> , the Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to Better Regulation. Guidelines and detailed guidance (Toolbox) for Commission services on how to implement the Better Regulation principles exist and have been lastly updated in November 2021 <sup>43</sup> . This includes also detailed instructions on how to assess fundamental rights in the impact assessments accompanying the Commission’s proposals.
1.7. The EESC considers that specific objectives and targets should be set for all of the 20 principles of the Pillar. The EESC also invites the Member States to be ambitious in voluntarily setting their own targets so that all Member States together with the social partners and civil society organisations, contribute to the achievement of the European targets. The quality and results of the dialogue related to the Pillar and the Action Plan should be	The Commission views ambitious targets as essential to help focus policy efforts on reaching impactful results, as they constitute an important incentive for reform and investment in the Member States. The three EU headline targets on employment, skills and poverty reduction, which were prepared by the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) Action Plan, welcomed by EU leaders at the Porto Social Summit and

<sup>42</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/better\\_regulation\\_joining\\_forces\\_to\\_make\\_better\\_laws\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/better_regulation_joining_forces_to_make_better_laws_en_0.pdf)

<sup>43</sup>[swd2021\\_305\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/swd2021_305_en.pdf) and [Better regulation toolbox | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/info/better-regulation/what-is-better-regulation_en)

<p>monitored, supported and communicated by the Commission. [...]</p> <p>1.8. The EESC proposes that in order to make the planned mid-term review more effective, intermediate objectives and targets for this Plan for 2025 may be defined by the Member States in a constructive dialogue with social partners, so that progress in the first half of its implementation can be assessed. Guidance in using the existing coordination mechanisms should be a priority for the Commission in relation to the Member States.</p> <p>2.1.6. The EESC is pleased that the employment target is complemented by commitments to promote inclusive employment and reduce employment gaps, notably by unleashing the labour market's potential, halving the gender employment gap, decreasing the rate of young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) and ensuring that other under-represented groups participate in the labour market to the maximum of their capacity. The EESC encourages the Commission to quantify all of these commitments in cooperation with the Member States and social partners.</p>	<p>endorsed by the European Council on 24-25 June 2021<sup>44</sup>, are ambitious and realistic at the same time. The Commission is currently working with Member States<sup>45</sup> to establish corresponding national targets. The Commission also provided the Member States with some technical guidance to support the reflection on the identification of national targets.</p> <p>The targets are supported by a revised Social Scoreboard, with a view to further improving the monitoring of Member States' progress in the context of the European Semester. The Commission proposal for the revised Scoreboard included 17 headline indicators and 31 secondary indicators, comprehensively covering the principles of the EPSR. Breakdowns by age group, gender, country of birth, disability status of the Social Scoreboard indicators can be used to monitor other commitments, depending on availability.</p>
<p>1.9. The EESC suggests that the framework of the European semester should be used as European coordination mechanism for the application of the Action Plan. This coordination mechanism could take the form of an EU inter-institutional forum on the social pillar, which would convene on a regular basis to assess progress and give new impetus to the Action Plan.</p>	<p>By means of the Porto Declaration of 8 May 2021<sup>46</sup>, the key role of the European Semester to monitor the new targets as well as the implementation of the principles of the EPSR has been confirmed notably through the revised Social Scoreboard, as indicated in the Action Plan. The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) of 14 June endorsed</p>

<sup>44</sup> [European Council - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>45</sup> ARES (2021) 4718073

<sup>46</sup> [The Porto declaration - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

	<p>the new headline indicators of the Social Scoreboard, which is part of the draft Joint Employment Report<sup>47</sup>, while confirming the need for further discussion regarding whether to include secondary indicators in the Social Scoreboard, as proposed by the Commission.<sup>48</sup> The Commission will continue to involve stakeholders through the established channels, including the Tripartite Social Summits and the Strategic Dialogues.</p>
1.14. The EESC believes that greater efforts can be made at EU and national level in the area of combating poverty, in line with the first Sustainable Development Goal under the UN 2030 Agenda. In particular, the EESC believes that the EU should set the objective of reducing the proportion of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion from 22.8% in 2019 to 10% in 2030, with similar voluntary commitments in every Member State.	The Commission points out that the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan put forward an integrated approach to address needs at all stages of life and target the root causes and manifestations of poverty and social exclusion. The definition of the indicator (people at risk of poverty or social exclusion) is a more ambitious concept than extreme poverty used in Sustainable Development Goal 1 of the UN 2030 Agenda, and demonstrates the determination of the EU to strive for high standards of living for all.
1.16. The EESC considers that the Action Plan should promote not only the creation of new jobs – a justified objective – but also the quality of employment, including combating precarious work. Proper legal and administrative checks at national level should be in place to ensure that workers have safe working conditions, adequate and predictable pay and an organised voice in the workplace. The EESC is especially worried about the conditions of work for many seasonal workers, EU and non-EU	The Commission points out that the EPSR Action Plan, under its chapter on ‘more and better jobs’ includes a range of key EU-level initiatives in the areas of ‘Making work standards fit for the future of work’ (including notably the proposed Directive on a framework for adequate minimum wages in the EU <sup>49</sup> and improving working conditions in platform work <sup>50</sup> ); ‘Occupational safety and health standards for a new world of work’ (with a new Occupational Safety

<sup>47</sup> [EUR-Lex - 52019DC0653 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020PC0682)

<sup>48</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9314-2021-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>49</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020PC0682>

<sup>50</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24992&langId=en>

<p>citizens working in agriculture, services and construction and calls for the efficient implementation of Directive 2019/1152 (EU) on transparent and predictable working conditions which aims at improving working conditions by promoting more transparent and predictable employment while ensuring labour market adaptability. The EESC considers that the in-work-at-risk-of-poverty rate should be significantly reduced. The objective of eradicating in-work poverty should be pursued through setting minimum European common standards at the EU level.</p>	<p>and Health Strategic Framework 2021-2027<sup>51</sup>); and labour mobility (including the guidelines issued by the Commission on the free movement of workers and on seasonal workers in the EU in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak<sup>52</sup>).</p> <p>Furthermore, in the Common Agricultural Policy reform agreed at the end of June 2021<sup>53</sup>, a social conditionality mechanism has been introduced, linking farm payments with respect of Directive 2019/1152 as well as certain occupational safety and health Directives.</p>
<p>1.18. The EESC notes that the Action Plan does not include a proposal for a directive on minimum income security, which it considers necessary to combat the most serious forms of poverty.</p> <p>2.4.4. The EESC notes that the Action Plan does not include a proposal for a directive, but a recommendation instead, on minimum income security, which it considers necessary to combat the most serious forms of poverty.</p>	<p>The Commission has announced it will present a proposal for a Council Recommendation on minimum income in the EPSR Action Plan and in its Work Programme for 2022, after careful consideration of the most adequate initiative to address the challenges in the field of minimum income protection. The forthcoming Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation will seek to build on the existing Council Recommendation of 24 June 1992 on common criteria for sufficient resources and benefits in social protection systems (92/441/EEC) and take into account the current socioeconomic circumstances and reality. It will modernise the policy guidance, enhancing further the active inclusion approach and reflecting on the 2008 Commission Recommendation on active inclusion of people excluded from the labour market (2008/867/EC)].</p>

<sup>51</sup> EUR-Lex - 52021DC0323 - EN - EUR-Lex (europa.eu)

<sup>52</sup><https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020XC0330%2803%29> ;  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/guidelines on seasonal workers in the eu in the context of the covid-19 outbreak\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/guidelines_on_seasonal_workers_in_the_eu_in_the_context_of_the_covid-19_outbreak_en.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> [The new common agricultural policy: 2023-27 | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/info/legislation/bills-and-legislative-initiatives/the-new-common-agricultural-policy-2023-27_en)

<p>1.23. The EESC urges greater emphasis on the potential contribution of public procurement as an instrument towards the realisation of the objectives of the Action Plan.</p> <p>2.5.3. The EESC expects that socially responsible public procurement practices defined and promoted by the Commission should be streamlined in the implementation of the Action Plan. Amounting to more than seven times the equivalent of the combined MFF and RRF (an estimated EUR 2 trillion, i.e. 14% of GDP p/a), it offers huge potential as a market to incentivise employee organisation, representation and collective bargaining, and sustainable quality employment and environmental practices.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that public procurement can be used to support many – if not all – of the principles of the EPSR. Promoting socially responsible and sustainable practices in procurement is a key priority of the Commission’s current procurement strategy<sup>54</sup>.</p> <p>The Commission is working on a cycle of digital talks and outreach initiatives to public buyers to promote the “Buying Social” guide on socially responsible procurement<sup>55</sup> which was published at the end of May 2021, and the collection of good practices “#WeBuySocialEU – Making Socially Responsible Public Procurement Work: 71 Good Practice Cases - Policies and approaches”<sup>56</sup>. The goal is not only to raise awareness, but to proactively engage the wider community of stakeholders having an interest in pursuing social objectives through procurement.</p> <p>The Commission is also reflecting on further awareness-raising, networking and training actions on socially responsible procurement, to be carried out in the Member States, and in particular those which were not initially covered by the Buying for Social Impact project<sup>57</sup>.</p>
<p>2.2.4. The EESC believes that the allocation of EU funds for the priorities should be monitored, both in terms of the resources available from the Commission and in terms of resources allocated by Member States and the social partners.</p>	<p>Investments under the Cohesion Funds are implemented in line with the priorities highlighted in the country specific recommendations and the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Commission ensures monitoring of the investments through the Annual Implementation Reports</p>

<sup>54</sup> [Public Procurement | Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>55</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/45767>

<sup>56</sup> [Making socially responsible procurement work - 71 good practice cases | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

<sup>57</sup> [Buying for social impact - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

	<p>submitted by the Member States. The Open Data Platform<sup>58</sup> provides access to data on financing and achievements under the Cohesion Funds, both at EU and at national level.</p>
2.2.10. The EESC calls on the Commission and the Member States to take all necessary measures to ensure that digitalisation does not create precariousness and vulnerabilities while ensuring that the opportunities provided by digitalisation are fully utilised.	<p>Digitalisation can create jobs, increase labour productivity and lead to innovation, investment and economic prosperity. However, such benefits are not automatic nor are they evenly distributed.</p> <p>The EPSR and its Action Plan is the Commission's response to the social challenges posed by digitalisation and new forms of work. As part of the announced initiatives in the EPSR Action Plan, the Commission presented in December 2021<sup>59</sup>, a legislative proposal to improve the working conditions of people working through platforms. The initiative aims to enable the full potential of new forms of work by ensuring the sustainable growth of the platform economy through improved legal clarity for platforms and better working conditions for people working through them.</p> <p>To pursue digital policies that empower people and businesses to seize a human centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future, the Commission put forward its Digital Compass for 2030 (Digital Decade Communication)<sup>60</sup> in March 2021 and a related legislative proposal establishing the 2030 Policy Programme “Path to the Digital Decade” in September 2021.</p>

<sup>58</sup> [Open Data Portal for the European Structural Investment Funds - European Commission | Data | European Structural and Investment Funds \(europa.eu\)](https://opendata.ec.europa.eu/)

<sup>59</sup> Commission presents Action Plan to boost the social economy and create jobs - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission (europa.eu)

<sup>60</sup> [EUR-Lex - 52021DC0118 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/legdoc/2021/dc/0118/html)

These initiatives reinforce the ambition set in the EPSR Action Plan that by 2030, at least 80% of all adults should have basic digital skills. In addition, to ensure secure, performant and sustainable digital infrastructures, they set the objectives that by 2030, all EU households should have gigabit connectivity and all populated areas should be covered by 5G. Furthermore, they include the targets of 100% online provision of key public services available for European citizens and businesses, 100% of European citizens with access to medical records (e-records), and 80 % of citizens using a digital ID solution, also by 2030.

In the same Communication, the Commission refers to universal digital education and skills for people to take an active part in society and in democratic processes, to universal access to internet services, and to accessible and human-centric digital public services and administration as principles that could be included in a possible set of digital principles and rights. The Commission will propose to include such a set of principles and rights in an interinstitutional solemn declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council in early 2022.

Furthermore, as announced by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech 2021, the Commission proposed a Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills. It will also propose two Council recommendations in the area of digital education and skills, one on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training, and one

	on enabling factors for digital education.
2.2.11. The EESC would like to see a stronger link between the ambitious goal for skills, education and lifelong learning and the financial means available to achieve it. The EESC draws attention to the fact that public expenditure on education in the EU dropped from 5% in 2010 to 4.7% in 2019, and stresses that the Social Pillar's targets and goals cannot be pursued without more public investment in education. It also emphasises the need for public and private investment to support training and lifelong learning and encourages employers to increase opportunities for employees to undertake work-based learning and training.	<p>The EPSR Action Plan includes an EU headline target on skills, taking into account the funding opportunities described in the European Skills Agenda released in July 2020<sup>61</sup>, which recognises the link between the need for a skills revolution and appropriate funding and envisages action to this purpose. It includes an action to improve the framework to unlock investments by both public authorities and private actors.</p> <p>Besides, the European Skills Agenda invites Member States to make appropriate use of the important financial means made available by the EU budget, namely through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Regional Development Fund and the Just Transition Fund, and programmes such Erasmus+, Horizon Europe and Digital Europe. Crucially, the European Skills Agenda notes that the Recovery and Resilience Facility makes available an amount of €560 billion euros for activities such as reskilling and upskilling, an area explicitly indicated by the Commission as a flagship priority of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans.</p>
2.3.3. The EESC regrets that there is no objective on gender equality in access to lifelong learning and encourages the Commission to define one. The EESC points to the need for a gender mainstreaming approach in all EU policies and strategies.	Principle 1 of the EPSR states that the right to education, training and lifelong learning is for all, without any discrimination based on either gender or any other ground. The European Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 <sup>62</sup> pursues a dual approach of gender mainstreaming combined with targeted actions. This is

<sup>61</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=22832&langId=en>

<sup>62</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>

	<p>facilitated by the establishment of a Task Force on Equality whose members (Equality Coordinators) from each Directorate-General ensure that the implications for equality, including gender, are duly considered in the formulation of new actions and policies. For example, the European Skills Agenda calls for fighting gender stereotypes, by encouraging female participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics programmes which provide skills highly requested on the labour market.</p> <p>As concerns access to adult learning, the European Skills Agenda puts forward four adult learning targets by 2025, which will be monitored through the European Semester, disaggregating data by gender.</p>
2.4.2. [...]. The EESC [...] reiterates its call for "a 'Care Deal for Europe', ensuring the provision of greater quality services for all throughout the life-cycle" and for Member States to invest in the availability of high-quality, affordable, accessible and diverse care services. [...]	<p>In her last State of the Union address, the President of the European Commission announced a new European Strategy for Care for 2022, to support men and women in finding the best care and the best life balance for them.</p> <p>In line with what has been announced in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan<sup>63</sup>, the strategy will set a framework for policy reforms to guide the development of sustainable long-term care that ensures better and more affordable access to quality services for those in need.</p> <p>This Care Strategy will address both long-term care and early childhood education and care and both with regard to care givers and care receivers.</p> <p>The Commission points out that in order</p>

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<sup>63</sup> [The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan \(europa.eu\)](http://europa.eu)

	<p>to allow for a targeted approach and focus on long-term care, the EPSR Action Plan announces a proposal for a Care Strategy in 2022 to set a framework for policy reforms to guide the development of sustainable long-term care that ensures better access to quality services for those in need as well as the revision of the Barcelona Targets.</p>
2.4.6. The EESC shares with the Commission the view that reforms and investments in health systems are necessary in order to improve, <i>inter alia</i> , access to quality healthcare for all, and reduce social, territorial and economic inequalities in health. However, if the Commission supports Member States only by providing evidence-based information and sharing best practices, that is insufficient and much more should be done, while respecting the division of competences: formulate objectives and targets, support investment in the infrastructure, train the workforce in the health system, devise common quality standards, and finance health research.	<p>The activities of the Commission extend beyond knowledge-sharing and exchange of good practices. The Commission supports Member States in their efforts to build more accessible, effective and resilient healthcare systems through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The European Semester: Country Specific Recommendations addressed to all the Member States in 2020 put a particular emphasis on the resilience of healthcare systems, to make them better respond to crises in the future. Disparities in access to healthcare have been highlighted in the European Semester along other challenges.</li> <li>- Funds: to address countries specific challenges, the Commission in the 2019 European Semester cycle set out a list of priority investment areas within the Cohesion Policy, stressing systematically a need to invest in improvements and modernisation of healthcare delivery models and health workforce. The new Recovery and Resilience Facility will also support transformation of healthcare. In addition, the on-going projects financed under the third Health Programme (3HP) support Member States in addressing problems of medical deserts and health workforce shortages. The new EU4Health programme will</li> </ul>

	<p>intervene to support health systems beyond the exchanges of good practices. Projects planned in the 2021 Work Programme<sup>64</sup> include resilience testing of health systems and improving accessibility through better policies of financial protection.</p>
2.5.2. The EESC stresses the need to align the financing of national policies with the objectives and actions of the Action Plan. This is another reason why there must be no return to the Stability and Growth Pact rules. Moreover, any revised rules must fully facilitate the implementation of the Action Plan.	<p>The Commission presented its review of the effectiveness of the economic surveillance framework and launched a public debate on its future in February 2020<sup>65</sup>. One of the issues established in the review was the appropriate role for the EU surveillance framework in incentivising Member States to undertake key reforms and investments needed to help tackle today and tomorrow's economic, social, and environmental challenges while preserving safeguards against risks to debt sustainability. The Commission relaunched the public debate in October 2021.<sup>66</sup> This will allow a reflection on many issues identified in the review and to draw lessons from the current crisis, taking into account the new instruments introduced. The Commission will provide orientations on possible changes to the economic governance framework with the objective of achieving a broad-based consensus on the way forward well in time for 2023.</p> <p>With the fiscal rules currently in force, financing actions in the national Recovery and Resilience Plans through the grant component of the Recovery and Resilience Facility has no direct impact</p>

<sup>64</sup> [EU4Health 2021 work programme - Info sessions | Public Health \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/com_2020_55_en.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/com\\_2020\\_55\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/com_2020_55_en.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/economic\\_governance\\_review-communication.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/economic_governance_review-communication.pdf)

	on Member States' deficit and debt, thus on compliance with the SGP. <sup>67</sup>
3.4. The EESC notes that the goal of vocational training has a baseline from 2016, as the European statistical system only produces this indicator every five years. The measurement of this indicator should be on a yearly basis in order to be able to properly monitor progress.	<p>The EPSR Action Plan includes an EU headline target on skills, based on the indicator of participation of adults in learning. Eurostat and the national statistical offices collect data on this indicator every year through the EU Labour Force Survey.</p> <p>Until now, this indicator applies to a reference period of four weeks: respondents are asked about participation in learning in the last four weeks. However, it has already been agreed by Member States that the methodology needs to change. As of 2022, respondents will be asked about participation in learning in the last twelve months. The 2030 headline target on skills in the Action Plan and the 2025 target (i.e. 47 % of adults participating in learning every year) agreed by the Council in its Resolution on a strategic framework for cooperation in education and training<sup>68</sup> are based on the new methodology to be applied in the EU Labour Force Survey.</p>
3.6. The EESC calls on the Commission to implement, in relation to social security, the stated principle that "taxation should be transferred from work to other sources more favourable to employment and in line with climate and environmental objectives, while safeguarding revenues for adequate social protection", bearing in mind that the essential challenge is ensuring adequate	<p>The EPSR Action Plan recalls that taxation should be shifted away from labour to other more supportive sources to employment and in line with climate and environmental objectives, while protecting revenue for adequate social protection.</p> <p>This call is also part of the guidelines</p>

<sup>67</sup> The principle of the budget neutrality of the Recovery and Resilient Facility's grant component, in line with other EU flows, has been established in guidance from Eurostat:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/1015035/12618762/GFS-guidance-note-statistical-recording-recovery-resilience-facility.pdf/ae773e09-1537-8c13-c71c-56d2e7d6958a?t=1633595971082>

<sup>68</sup> [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C\\_2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_2021.066.01.0001.01.ENG)

	<p>coverage for all workers in a changing labour market, fully respecting the principle, expressed in point 3.2.9 above, that all forms of employment must have social protection.</p> <p>for the employment policies of the Member States<sup>69</sup>. The Employment Committee and the Social Protection Committee monitor how related policies are implemented, in line with their respective Treaty-based mandates. The Commission follows up on implementation issues in the context of the European Semester with analysis in Semester Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations.</p> <p>The Commission aims at promoting, as part of a comprehensive tax agenda, a rethink of the EU tax mix to support fairness and supporting EU green and digital transitions.<sup>70</sup></p> <p>As for ensuring access to adequate social protection, as also called for under principle 12 of the EPSR, the Commission intends to continue to support the implementation by the Member States of the 2019 Council Recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed.<sup>71</sup></p>
3.8. The EESC calls on the Commission and on Member States to ensure that the results of the announced work of a group of experts on investment in education and training is reflected in the adoption of measures that significantly strengthen education and training systems, in particular in meeting the targets defined in the Action Plan.	The conclusions of the expert group will inform discussions at the EU level and with Member States on measures that will contribute to implementing the EU headline targets set in the EPSR Action Plan by increasing efficiency and effectiveness of spending on education.

<sup>69</sup> Council Decision (EU) 2020/1512 of 13 October 2020 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States

<sup>70</sup> see recently adopted Communication on Business Taxation for the 21st century [https://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/system/files/2021-05/communication\\_on\\_business\\_taxation\\_for\\_the\\_21st\\_century.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/system/files/2021-05/communication_on_business_taxation_for_the_21st_century.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H1115%2801%29>

<p><b>Nº6 EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee</b></p> <p><b>COM(2021) 137 final</b></p> <p><b>COM(2021) 142 final</b></p> <p><b>EESC 2021/1883 - SOC/682</b></p> <p><b>562<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session – July 2021</b></p> <p><b>Rapporteur: Kinga JOÓ (HU-III)</b></p> <p><b>Co-rapporteur: Maria del Carmen BARRERA CHAMORRO (ES-II)</b></p> <p><b>DG EMPL – Commissioner SCHMIT</b></p> <p><b>DG JUST – Vice-President SUICA</b></p>	
<p><b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b></p> <p>1.1. The unacceptable figure of one in four children across the EU growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion requires a coordinated European approach based on strong policy and legal frameworks in order to reverse this trend and break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. There must be an ambitious target aiming to lift all children out of poverty by 2030 and not only five million children.</p>	<p><b>European Commission position</b></p> <p>The Commission adopted the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan in March 2021<sup>72</sup>, which sets three EU-level headline targets for 2030 on employment, skills and poverty reduction. These were welcomed by EU leaders<sup>73</sup> at the Porto Summit and include the target to reduce by 2030 the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, out of whom at least 5 million should be children. This objective is ambitious yet realistic and takes into account not only the income poverty, but also social and material deprivation, as well as labour market exclusion.</p> <p>The Council Recommendation establishing the European Child Guarantee, aims at securing effective and free access to a number of key services for children in need. This is meant to offset the negative impacts that poverty and social exclusion might have on this group of children and break the intergenerational transmission of poverty.</p>

<sup>72</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan COM/2021/102 final

<sup>73</sup> [European Council Conclusions](#), 24-25 June 2021. This follows up on the [Porto Declaration](#) of 8 May 2021.

<p>1.2. Mainstreaming children's rights into policy-making is essential. Practically every policy area affects children, hence a whole-society approach is needed to ensure that different policies (relating to the family, education, the economy, the digital world, the environment, housing) have empowering and long-lasting positive effects on children's health and well-being. An integrated approach and horizontal measures need to be adopted urgently at EU, national, regional and local level, in order to encompass all important areas that can have an impact on children's lives, both today and in the future.</p>	<p>The Commission shares the view of the Committee about the need for an integrated approach to ensure the fulfilment of children's rights. The comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (hereafter the 'Strategy') aims to bring all new and existing EU legislative, policy and funding instruments within one coherent framework. The Strategy contains six thematic areas related to the rights of the child: 1) child participation in political and democratic life; 2) socio-economic inclusion, health and education; 3) combating violence against children and ensuring child protection; 4) child-friendly justice; 5) digital and information society; and 6) the global dimension. It also includes a chapter on embedding a child perspective in all EU actions. All thematic areas on the rights of the child are inter-related. In addition, specific needs of different groups of children are taken into account across the Strategy. The Strategy will also help with mainstreaming and coordination of initiatives at national level and among key stakeholders to ensure better implementation of existing EU and international legal obligations. As part of the Strategy, the Commission has committed to have closer collaboration with national, regional and local authorities.</p>
<p>1.3. The EESC recommends that the national action plans on the Child Guarantee include a set of two- and multi-generation measures to develop supports for both children and their parents as the vulnerability of a child cannot be addressed without addressing that of their</p>	<p>In line with the European Child Guarantee recommendation, the national action plans for its implementation, covering the period until 2030 should take into account national, regional and local circumstances as well as existing policy actions and measures to support</p>

<p>family. Parents and carers must be supported through a mix of actions: adequate income, work-life balance, the take-up of adequately paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, carer's leave, flexible work arrangements and family-friendly workplaces.</p>	<p>children in need, and include, in particular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- targeted categories of children in need to be reached by corresponding integrated measures;</li> <li>- quantitative and qualitative targets to be achieved in terms of children in need to be reached by corresponding measures, taking into account regional and local disparities;</li> <li>- measures planned or taken in implementing this Recommendation, including at regional and local level, and the necessary financial resources and timelines;</li> <li>- other measures planned or taken to address child social exclusion and to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage, based in particular on enabling the policy framework provided for in paragraph 6;</li> <li>- a national framework for data collection, monitoring and evaluation of this Recommendation, also with a view to establishing a common monitoring framework.</li> </ul> <p>See also § 3.9.</p>
<p>1.4. [...] A stronger Europe-wide policy framework on children's rights is needed and has been called for by many stakeholders. Organised civil society, especially social services, children's organisations, family organisations, and formal and non-formal education providers, must be consulted and duly involved in drafting national action plans and in their monitoring mechanisms. Targeted actions can best support the effective implementation of these two EU frameworks to end poverty and promote</p>	<p>The Strategy establishes an EU-wide policy framework for the rights of the child.</p> <p>In preparation of the Strategy, a wide range of stakeholders have been consulted: Member States, child rights organisations, other stakeholders and individuals, including through an open public consultation and the 2020 European Forum on the Rights of the Child. Besides, in preparation of the Strategy and the European Child Guarantee, and thanks to leading child rights organisation, the views</p>

<p>children's health and well-being.</p>	<p>of more than 10.000 children were collected, of which a number were taken on board for both initiatives.</p> <p>The Strategy includes key actions to be taken by the Commission and recommendations for Member States in the different thematic areas of the Strategy.</p>
<p>1.8. The EESC urges the Commission to put the Strategy on the Rights of the Child at a horizontal coordination level with other recently approved European strategies, such as the strategies for gender equality, for LGBTIQ equality, for Roma, and for disability rights.</p>	<p>The Strategy includes several actions aimed at 'embedding a child perspective in all EU actions'. The objective is to ensure that a children's rights perspective is mainstreamed across all relevant internal and external policies, legislation and funding programmes. The role of the Commission coordinator for the rights of the child was created in 2007 in the Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy on the rights of the child'<sup>74</sup>. The Strategy ensures enhanced internal coordination through the team of the Commission's coordinator for the rights of the child.</p> <p>The Commission shares the view of the Committee that the Strategy should be read in conjunction with other strategies. It complements targeted efforts to make EU rights and values more tangible in areas such as the protection of children in migration, equality and inclusion, gender equality, anti-racism and pluralism, EU citizenship rights, victims' rights, the fight against child sexual abuse, social rights and inclusive education and training. It is also in line with the priorities set out in the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy<sup>75</sup>.</p> <p>The Commission is monitoring the implementation of the Strategy at EU and</p>

<sup>74</sup> COM(2006) 367 final

<sup>75</sup> Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2024 JOIN/2020/5 final

	<p>national level, and will report on the progress at the next annual European Forum on the rights of the child.</p>
2.3. [...] in July 2020 the Commission commissioned a feasibility study and in August 2020 it launched public consultations on the European Child Guarantee and on delivering an EU strategy on the rights of the child.	<p>The Commission would like to clarify that as phase I of the preparatory action for the European Child Guarantee, a call for tenders for a study on the feasibility of a child guarantee for vulnerable children was launched in March 2018, with deadline for applications on 30 April 2018. The final report for the study commissioned under Phase I was delivered in March 2020.</p>
3.1. [...] The proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Child Guarantee is legally binding with a clear set of implementation actions, targets and measures to be monitored closely by the EU. The EESC welcomes both proposals, believing that their implementation will support efforts at European and national level to promote children's well-being and reduce child poverty.	<p>The Commission thanks the Committee for its opinion and welcomes its willingness to contribute to the implementation of both initiatives.</p> <p>As regards the legal instrument of the European Child Guarantee, the Commission would like to clarify that in line with the Article 288 TFEU, recommendations and opinions cannot be legally binding.</p>
3.9. The European Child Guarantee proposal provides guidance and resources for Member States to support children in need, given the strong correlation between social exclusion of children and lack of access to key services. Vulnerable children include: (i) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (ii) children with disabilities; (iii) children with a migrant background; (iv) children with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); (v) children in alternative (especially institutional) care; and (vi) children in precarious family situations.	<p>The Commission proposal for the European Child Guarantee was discussed and slightly modified in the Council and subsequently adopted by unanimity on 14 June 2021. The targeted group are children in need, defined as all persons under 18 years of age who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion.</p> <p>Member States are recommended to identify children in need and, within this group, take into account, wherever appropriate in designing their national integrated measures, specific disadvantages experienced, in particular, by: (a) homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation; (b) children with disabilities; (c) children</p>

	<p>with mental health issues; (d) children with a migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma; (e) children in alternative, especially institutional, care; (f) children in precarious family situations.</p> <p>The deadline for preparation of the national action plans was set at nine months from the adoption of recommendation.</p>
4.1. [...] Children are thus voiceless in the policy-making process, and their interests can remain invisible to governments without a conscious and systematic effort to protect and promote them. 4.2. The Conference on the Future of Europe is an excellent opportunity to put child participation into action, and the EESC will explore ways to phase in greater child participation.	<p>The Strategy promotes child participation and has a thematic area on meaningful child participation in EU political and democratic life. The Commission also presented child friendly versions of the Strategy.</p> <p>Among other actions, the Strategy foresees to establish an EU Children's Participation Platform, to connect child participation mechanism and involve children in decision-making processes at EU level. The Commission is also developing child-friendly versions of other key EU instruments. Finally, the Strategy recommends Member States to establish, improve and provide adequate resources for new and existing mechanisms of child participation at local, regional and national level.</p> <p>Children have the right to be active members of democratic societies and contribute to shape political priorities. Adolescents above 16 years old are included in the citizens panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe, and child rights organisations have been invited to also submit input, including from consultations with younger children.</p>
4.3. [...] Policies must prioritise investing in children and their families and ensure that appropriate and high quality support is	The Strategy on the Rights of the Child recognises that all children, including those with disabilities and from

<p>provided through a systemic multi-generation approach to supporting families in raising children through positive parenting skills.</p> <p>4.4. The initiative supporting the development and reinforcement of integrated child protection systems put forward by the Strategy should be complemented by measures to prevent all forms of violence against children. Violence suffered or witnessed in childhood can have long-lasting consequences on the physical, emotional and psychological development of children. A plan involving all levels of government from EU to municipal is needed to prevent and address violence against children and must tackle exposure to all forms of violence, abuse and neglect, including physical and psychological violence, sexual violence, online violence, domestic, institutional and school violence. Intersecting vulnerabilities should be addressed, such as the increased risks faced by girls, children (and particularly girls) with disabilities, children living in vulnerable situations and households prone to violence. [...]</p>	<p>disadvantaged groups, have an equal right to live with their families and in a community. As part of the actions, the Commission will put forward an initiative aimed at supporting the development and strengthening of integrated child protection systems, which will encourage all relevant authorities and services to better work together in a system that puts the child at the centre.</p> <p>The Strategy recognises that violence against children, in all its possible forms and in whatever setting, is far too widespread. Specific vulnerabilities of children facing violence should be considered. The promotion of integrated child protection systems is intrinsically linked to the prevention and protection from violence. To this end, an initiative on integrated child protection systems will be put forward.</p> <p>As key actions for Member States, the Commission recommends to raise awareness of, and invest in capacity building and measures for (i) a more effective prevention of violence, (ii) protection of victims and witnesses, including with the necessary safeguards for child suspects or accused. Besides, it calls on Member States to provide adequate support to victims with specific vulnerabilities, as well as to children who suffer from violence in schools.</p>
<p>4.5. Children's rights must also be addressed in key spheres of influence which impact the wellbeing of children and their families. Decision-makers should systematically mainstream children's rights to assess the impact of an initiative that can affect children and their rights. In this respect, when the rights of the child are concerned in relations with third countries,</p>	<p>The Strategy aims to ensure that a children's rights perspective is mainstreamed across all relevant policies, legislation and funding programmes. Among other activities, the Commission will develop a mainstreaming checklist on the rights of the child.</p> <p>In relation to the best practices, the</p>

<p>it is important to act swiftly and effectively when necessary. This is the overarching approach taken by the Strategy and must be at the centre of the implementation and evaluation process. Additionally, in the implementation of the Strategy, Member States should be aided by a pool of best practices that already exist in other countries and have yielded good results.</p>	<p>Commission will establish the EU Network for Children's Rights by the end of 2021, which will be an upgrade of the work performed in the existing informal expert group on the rights of the child. The main objective of the Network will be to reinforce the dialogue and mutual learning between the EU and Member States on children's rights, and support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Strategy.</p>
<p>4.6. Children are the least responsible for climate change, yet they bear the greatest burden of its impact. The Strategy refers to the impact of the environmental and climate crisis on children, but it should go further, ensuring that environmental policies and legislation take children's physical and mental health as a starting point so as to reduce children's exposure to environmental hazards. Children are more sensitive and vulnerable to environmental risks than adults.</p>	<p>The Strategy recognises the call of children and young people to fight climate change. One of the Commission key actions will be to create space for children to become active participants of the European Climate Pact through pledges or by becoming Pact Ambassadors. By involving schools in sustainable climate, energy and environment education, the Education for Climate Coalition will help children to become agents of change in the implementation of the Climate Pact and the European Green Deal.</p> <p>Other policy frameworks such as the Commission Communication on the European Green Deal<sup>76</sup> is part of the policy instruments that relate to the rights of the child.</p>
<p>5.4. For children in older age groups (namely 15-18 years), consistency must be ensured between the European Child Guarantee and Youth Guarantee, acknowledging potential overlaps, ensuring a clear allocation of budgets, and developing age-appropriate and distinctive measures in national action plans to</p>	<p>The policy measures envisioned in the European Child Guarantee, namely securing effective and free access to high quality early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, healthcare, and at least one healthy meal each school day, as well as effective access to healthy nutrition and</p>

<sup>76</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions the European Green Deal COM/2019/640 final

<p>support children and their parents to ensure smooth transitions between education and employment. [...]</p>	<p>adequate housing – are consistent and complementary with the measures set out in the reinforced Youth Guarantee<sup>77</sup>.</p>
<p>5.6. On average, 5.4% of school-aged children (6-16 years) in Europe live in households that cannot afford a computer or an internet connection. Tackling child and family poverty under the European Child Guarantee also means tackling digital deprivation. The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) severe material deprivation indicator should include at least one digital deprivation variable. <a href="#">One in four Europeans</a> is unable to adequately light, heat or cool their homes – contributing to the <a href="#">deaths of 100 000</a> people each year. According to the report of the <a href="#">European Social Policy Network</a> published in autumn 2020, energy poverty affects not only low-income households but also a large proportion of middle-income households in a significant number of Member States. [...]</p>	<p>The Commission would like to underline that having internet access is one of the 13 items used in the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey to assess the incidence and degree of material and social deprivation. In its Communication on ‘2030 Digital Compass<sup>78</sup>: the European way for the Digital Decade’ and the legislative proposal establishing the related 2030 Policy Programme ‘Path to the Digital Decade’, the Commission identified secure and performant sustainable digital infrastructures as one of the four ‘cardinal points’ for mapping the EU’s trajectory to translate the EU’s digital ambitions for 2030 into concrete targets and to ensure that these objectives are met. The Communication and the proposal include the target of having all European households covered by a Gigabit network, with all populated areas covered by 5G by 2030.</p> <p>Also in the Digital Compass Communication, the Commission refers to universal access to internet services and to protecting and empowering children in the online space as principles that could be included in a possible set of digital principles and rights. The Commission will propose to include such a set of principles and rights in an interinstitutional solemn declaration between the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council in early 2022.</p>

<sup>77</sup> Council Recommendation of 30 October 2020 on A Bridge to Jobs – Reinforcing the Youth Guarantee and replacing the Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee 2020/C 372/01 OJ C 372, 4.11.2020, p. 1–9.

<sup>78</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade COM/2021/118 final

	<p>On housing and energy issues, the European Child Guarantee defines ‘adequate housing’ as a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, that is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort and is available and accessible at an affordable cost. The technical standards and thermal comfort criteria respond to the need to tackle energy poverty within the European Child Guarantee.</p>
5.7. Following the swift adoption of the Council recommendation, the national action plans for the European Child Guarantee should be in line with the three-pronged approach of the 2013 Commission recommendation on Investing in Children (access to adequate resources, access to affordable quality services, and children's right to participate). It should be developed in consultation with children and their families and civil society organisations, reinforcing national, regional and local civil dialogue. Organisations providing support services, both public and non-profit, should be included among the stakeholders involved in the European Child Guarantee process, as well as the social partners linked to the service areas, to ensure decent working conditions and access to top quality services for children.	<p>The European Child Guarantee includes clear guidance on the content of the national action plans to implement it (see § 1.3).</p> <p>The 2013 Commission Recommendation ‘Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage’, is covering all children (as opposed to the European Child Guarantee recommendation, which is targeted to children in need), and thus remains in force.</p> <p>Member States are recommended to ensure the participation of regional, local and other relevant authorities, children and relevant stakeholders representing civil society, non-governmental organisations, educational establishments and bodies responsible for promoting social inclusion and integration, children’s rights, inclusive education and non-discrimination, including national equality bodies throughout the preparation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the action plan.</p>
5.8. [...] All relevant indicators should be disaggregated at local level, where possible, to have a clearer picture of territorial differences and to better plan and monitor the implementation of the	Progress in implementing the European Child Guarantee will be regularly monitored, i.a. in the context of the European Semester and through the Social Scoreboard, including through the

recommendation.

development of relevant indicators.

N°7 **Intermodal transport and multimodal logistics – making modes complementary in greening transport (own-initiative opinion)**  
**EESC 2021/2457 - TEN 747**  
**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Thord Stefan BACK (SE-I)**  
**DG MOVE - Commissioner VALEAN**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<b>1. Conclusions and recommendations</b>	
1.1. A long-term viable solution to develop efficient and sustainable multimodal transport and logistics can only be achieved by dealing with the problems that make multimodal transport more expensive, slower and less reliable than, in particular, unimodal road transport. It cannot be built with financial promotion or regulatory support.	The problems that place multimodal transport at a disadvantage with respect to unimodal road transport are multiple and of various nature. They may therefore require the activation of various policy tools. Regulatory intervention might be needed to address interoperability problems, coordination failures and data exchange issues that hamper intermodal and multimodal freight. Financial support may be required to remove infrastructure bottlenecks, as well as to promote more sustainable transport alternatives until all external costs are fully internalized. In this respect, the Commission is conducting a review of its State aid rules including a revision of its railway State aid guidelines. Among other things this review aims at ensuring that rules governing public support are adapted to the sector's needs so it can grow and become more competitive, and that such rules contribute to incentivizing the development of green, efficient and interconnected multimodal transport and a modal shift towards more sustainable transport modes.
1.2. This kind of approach would also be resource-efficient from a regulatory point of view, since no dedicated regulatory	It is indeed the case that no regulatory intervention would be needed in the absence of market failures. However, a number of

framework would be needed.	market failures do persist and therefore justify forms of regulatory or financial support to multimodal transport.
<p>1.3. To improve multimodal traffic, the EESC recommends, in addition to technical innovation and solution of competitiveness problems, full internalisation of external costs for all transport modes to achieve a level playing field. The EESC calls for serious measures to safeguard and/or relaunch a European single wagon load system, link of strategic infrastructure (e.g. ports) to rail solutions, investment in industrial sidings, and involvement of large logistics companies in a modal reorientation of their flows.</p>	<p>In its Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy<sup>79</sup> (SSMS) the Commission calls for internalisation of external costs by implementing the ‘polluter pays’ and ‘user pays’ principles by a range of mutually compatible, complementary and coherent policy measures, including emission trading, infrastructure charges, energy and vehicle taxes. However, developing, negotiating and implementing these measures will take some time. Milestones on internalising the external costs of transport are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- By 2030, rail and waterborne-based intermodal transport will be able to compete on equal footing with road-only transport in the EU<sup>80</sup>.</li> <li>- All external costs of transport within the EU will be covered by the transport users at the latest by 2050.</li> </ul> <p>In June 2021, the co-legislators reached a provisional agreement on new road charging rules (Eurovignette Directive). The revised rules introduce CO2 emission-based tolling for heavy-duty vehicles across the EU, a key pillar of the EU's commitment to reaching climate neutrality by 2050 and of the SSMS. The Fit for 55 package<sup>81</sup>, adopted in July 2021, included further proposals for stronger Emissions Trading System (including aviation, road transport and maritime), updated Energy Taxation Directive and New Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism.</p>

<sup>79</sup>Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions “Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy – putting European transport on track for the future”

<sup>80</sup> In terms of the share of external costs internalized.

<sup>81</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_21\\_3541](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_3541)

Regarding the single wagon freight, the Commission agrees that this issue needs to be urgently addressed. Work on specifications for Digital Automatic Couplers is being carried out in the Shift2Rail Joint Undertaking with a view of incorporating it into the Technical Specifications of Interoperability. However, while overall freight operators still have a way to go to better realise market potentials and to optimise operations and business models, both single wagonload and intermodal transport remain challenging segments with relatively high costs, which in many cases seem to depend on public subsidies.

Regarding the infrastructure investments and strategic multimodal links, the current TEN-T Regulation provides that a multimodal Trans-European Transport Network equipped for sustainable and smart transport with high-speed connectivity should be operational by 2030 for the core network and by 2050 for the comprehensive network. This requires investment of €300 billion over the next 10 years and will continue to be prioritised within EU funding programmes, including the NextGenerationEU recovery instrument.

The Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) is the main instrument to finance infrastructure development with maximum EU-added value. The Commission is expected to propose a revision of the TEN-T Regulation by the end of 2021, with additional measures to shift freight from road to rail and inland waterways. This will include higher requirements as well as a reinforcement of the governance, e.g. by improving the role of the European Coordinators to drive progress.

	<p>The EU Cohesion Policy plays an important role in tackling the persistent challenges in transport, including for multimodality, by mitigating the disparities in transport infrastructure development and in delivering the green and digital transitions in the transport in particular in Member States and regions where the poor quality of the transport system remains a barrier to reducing disparities in economic activity and quality of life.</p> <p>Furthermore, the Commission is considering a proposal for a Union framework for the harmonised accounting of transport and logistics-related greenhouse gas emissions and energy efficiency (as stated earlier, this seems relevant too). A possible labelling system based on this methodology would allow for stronger involvement of both the logistics operators as well as end-users in making better decisions for their choice of mode of transport.</p>
1.4. In order to ensure fair competition between transport modes, the EESC recommends socially exemplary behaviour by all transport modes to ensure high-quality transport services, high-quality jobs and good social conditions with a view to achieving a level playing field for all market players.	<p>Within the frame of the Commission's competences, it remains concerned that working conditions in certain parts of the transport sector are difficult, including long working hours, periods spent away from home and low paid work. This can be exacerbated by a lack of proper enforcement of applicable labour standards.</p> <p>This is why the Commission will consider measures across the different modes of transport to strengthen the legislative framework on conditions for workers and to give more clarity on the applicable social rights in line with the various instruments available to implement the European Pillar of Social Rights.</p> <p>The Commission will seek to promote high social standards, and will work with the</p>

	European Labour Authority to support Member States in enforcing the relevant legislation.
<p>1.5. Current problems relating to multimodal transport are - apart from additional costs due to transhipment and additional transaction costs - disadvantages such as long delivery times, complexity, higher risk and lower reliability, which make it more difficult for multimodality to take off.</p> <p>1.6. Therefore, measures are needed to make multimodal freight transport competitive in its own right and achieve efficient and seamless multimodal freight transport flows at the same cost as unimodal transport.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that there is room for operational improvements. However, it is not possible to entirely remove complexity, higher risk or longer delivery times, because logistics chains for multimodal transport, compared to unimodal solutions, inherently involve transhipment costs and additional transaction costs.</p> <p>Multimodal transport on longer distances can already be competitive with unimodal road transport and with further measures to internalise external costs and to improve operational efficiency the break-even point can be reduced. However, for a medium length operations support measures are more likely to be continuously necessary.</p> <p>Especially targeted infrastructure investment and digitisation of multimodal transport with seamless data exchanges between transport modes, as well as the possible labelling of greenhouse gas and energy efficiency gains that the Commission is considering as an option, might further assist in making multimodal transport more reliable and attractive as a customer choice to transport goods.</p>
<p>1.7. There is also a need for rail to adapt better to an open market context and remedy problems due to lack of punctuality, reliability, predictability and flexibility, which have a negative impact on multimodal solutions involving rail.</p>	<p>In recent years, innovative companies have demonstrated that rail freight can operate reliably and can be attractive to customers. However, overall the Commission agrees that rail freight needs serious boosting through increased capacity, strengthened cross-border coordination and cooperation between rail infrastructure managers, better overall management of the rail network, and the deployment of new technologies such as digital coupling and automation.</p>

	<p>The Commission will consider revising regulations governing Rail Freight Corridors and the TEN-T core network corridors.</p> <p>Integrating these corridors into ‘European transport corridors’, focusing on ‘quick wins’ like train length, loading gauge and improved operational rules, alongside the completion of key missing links and the adaptation of the core network so that it is fully freight capable, will strengthen the infrastructural dimension of our actions to promote intermodal transport.</p> <p>In 2022, the Commission will also consider improving the rules for managing rail capacity and traffic. This will provide a framework that responds to the needs of passenger traffic (early-on availability of capacity to enabling ticket sales well in advance) and of freight traffic (flexible capacity allocation to respond to volatile freight transport demand). In addition, the initiative will propose to improve operational performance by reinforcing cooperation between different stakeholder groups (infrastructure managers, railway operators, logistic services providers) and across borders, by a stronger use of digital tools and by economic incentives. These measures will benefit particularly cross-border freight transport.</p>
1.8. Regarding inland waterway transport, improvements seem to be needed with respect to cross-border transport capacity.	<p>The Commission has put forward the NAIADES III programme<sup>82</sup> to exploit the potential of inland waterways transport by tackling the key challenges such as the use of digital technologies, the need to renew barge fleets consistent with Green Deal objectives, and to improve access to</p>

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<sup>82</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, NAIADES III: Boosting future-proof European inland waterway transport, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12789-Inland-waterway-transport-NAIADES-III-action-plan-2021-2027\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12789-Inland-waterway-transport-NAIADES-III-action-plan-2021-2027_en)

	<p>financing and the integration of inland waterways in a seamless multimodal transport system.</p> <p>Within the revision of the TEN-T Regulation, the Commission will consider a dedicated cooperation framework for inland waterway transport, which will enable Member States to better coordinate cross-border actions and projects.</p>
1.9. Adequate terminal infrastructure is key to successful intermodality. As a matter of resource efficiency, it would also be useful for Member States to agree to collaborate on the planning of terminal infrastructure in border regions. Distance between terminals should be adapted to demand, density of the network and other local conditions.	<p>The Commission agrees that scarcity of transhipment infrastructure, and in particular of inland terminals in urban nodes and industrial areas, is pronounced in certain parts of Europe. The adequacy of the terminal network in EU main transport routes will be addressed in the context of the revision of the TEN-T Guidelines. Such terminals are also eligible for Connecting Europe Facility 2 financing.</p>
1.10. With regard to public debt, the EESC recommends that public investment in intermodal infrastructure be exempt from the provisions of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) beyond the COVID-19 crisis.	<p>The issue of public investment, including intermodal infrastructure, is very pertinent to the current juncture as highlighted by the Commission in its February 2020 review of the EU's economic governance framework.<sup>83</sup></p> <p>The EU has faced a widespread and persistent decline of public investment over the last decade. Contrary to widespread perceptions, research undertaken by the Commission indicates that the EU fiscal rules have not had a discernible negative impact on investment.</p> <p>In the Commission's recent proposal for fiscal policy recommendations to Member States, it has explicitly asked Member States to preserve nationally-financed public investment.<sup>84</sup></p>

<sup>83</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/com\\_2020\\_55\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/economy-finance/com_2020_55_en.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/18/council-adopts-recommendations-on-the-updated-stability-and-convergence-programmes/>

	<p>It is important to further examine what role the EU fiscal rules can play in helping to promote a composition of public finances that is conducive to sustainable growth and for Member States to sustain adequate levels of investment, not least to support the necessary digital and green transition, and ensure adequate investment in transport infrastructure. This issue will form part of a public debate on the economic governance framework, which will be launched once the economic recovery has taken hold.</p> <p>It must be stressed that it is necessary to strike a careful balance between the concern for a growth- and environment-friendly composition of national public finances and the respect for subsidiarity</p>
1.11. It is important for well-functioning multimodality that regulations regarding, for instance, the handling of dangerous goods between different modes are consistent and that other regulatory and practical issues that may cause difficulties in the interface between modes or in transport between Member States are resolved.	The Commission considers that deployment of digital technologies will be a driving force to mitigate and gradually overcome interoperability hurdles and regulatory inconsistencies impacting most the multimodal transport. Digital certificates for drivers and vehicles or vessels and freight transport information, including in the form of electronic consignment notes, would all contribute to smoother transport flows. Implementation of Regulation (EU) 2020/1056 on electronic freight transport information is an important first step in this regard.
1.12.. A number of the problems hampering intermodal transport could be resolved by smart digital solutions such as track and tracing possibilities and other digital solutions facilitating the effective management of multimodal transport flows.	Measures to enable and accelerate digital transformation are a major part of the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (SSMS). This includes policies for digital infrastructure and deployment of key digital enablers, such as electronic components for mobility, network infrastructure, cloud-to-edge resources, data technologies and Artificial Intelligence. For the transparency of supply

	<p>chains in freight transport, availability of data and in particular real time data is essential. The Commission will consider different regulatory options to give operators a safe and trustworthy space to share their data within and across sectors, without distorting competition and while respecting privacy and the Union's international obligations and will propose further actions to build a European Common Mobility Data Space.</p> <p>In its SSMS, the Commission commits that by 2030 freight transport will be paperless.</p>
1.14. The EESC calls on the Commission to consider the above suggestions when drafting its upcoming review of the regulatory framework for intermodal transport and to enable multimodal transport to play its full part in the transport system, without dedicated support measures.	<p>The Commission will consider these suggestions when developing proposals under Flagship 4 of the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy (SSMS) on Greening freight transport, including the revision of the Combined Transport Directive. However, the Commission considers that certain extra costs and complexity of multimodal transport chains cannot be fully eliminated and many market obstacles are still present and are likely to remain for years to come. Therefore, policy measures to support multimodal transport, at least temporarily, are needed to ensure that EU reaches its climate goals. Conditions to establish necessity and proportionality of the support will be part of the impact assessment for the revision of the Combined Transport Directive.</p>
<b>2. Background</b>	
2.6. In a 2017 proposal (COM(2017) 648), the Commission proposed amendments to the Directive 92/106 on the establishment of common rules for certain types of combined transport of goods between Member States, highlighting the need for better Member State coordination regarding the	<p>The Commission underlines that the Combined Transport Directive does not contain any dedicated rules for market access, including with respect to road transport leg. The Directive covers only international operations and the Court of Justice of the European Union has in</p>

<p>construction of intermodal terminals and various administrative simplifications, but also maintaining the need for a promotional approach including dedicated rules on market access, in particular with respect to the road transport leg. Considerable changes were made to the proposal during the legislative process and the Commission therefore chose to withdraw it.</p>	<p>multiple instances ruled<sup>85</sup> that the road legs of international combined transport cannot be seen as separate operations, but are an integral part of international operations. In this context Article 4 of the Directive does not create a dedicated regime but reiterates that rules on international road transport apply, where all EU eligible road hauliers can carry out (parts of) international operations.</p>
<p>2.7. However, through Regulation EU 2020/1055, which amended Regulation EC 2009/1072, Member States were given the possibility to deviate from the dedicated rules on market access to the road transport leg and apply ordinary cabotage rules.</p>	<p>The Commission has expressed its reservations<sup>86</sup> regarding these provisions introduced by the co-legislators. The Commission carried out a study<sup>87</sup> on the application of cabotage quotas on international combined transport operations, which found that even the low drop in the transported volumes entailed by the obligation could have negative impact on rail freight connections. Overall, dependent on the scenario at stake, the application of the cabotage quotas could lead to an annual reduction of combined transport volumes by more than 6.1 billion tonne-km and to 14% reduction of transhipments. Similarly, more than 90% of the total volume impacted would be in the rail-road segment, where 8% of operations could shift back to road-only transport.</p> <p>In the Combined Transport Directive, there are no dedicated rules for market access, as explained above.</p>
<h3>3. General comments</h3>	
<p>3.5. The EESC underlines that skilled and motivated workers and good working conditions are an important prerequisite for</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that availability of skilled and motivated transport workers is important.</p>

<sup>85</sup> C-2/84, Commission v Italy. Judgement of the Court of 28.3.1985; C-45/89, Commission v Italy. Judgement of the Court of 7.5.1991

<sup>86</sup> Declaration of 12 December 2020, published together with Mobility Package I

<sup>87</sup> “Data gathering and analysis of the impacts of cabotage restrictions on combined transport road legs”, TRT Trasporti e Territorio, November 2020; [https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/road/studies/road\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/road/studies/road_en)

<p>the successful evolution of multimodal transport. The EESC asks for a review of posting rules to take into account the situation of highly mobile railway staff. Furthermore, the EESC recommends simple, clear and verifiable regulations and an adequate compliance monitoring system to ensure fair working conditions (training, working hours and rest periods, language level, pay, occupational health and safety, modern sanitary facilities, suitable overnight accommodation, etc.) for all transport workers to ensure health and fair competition.</p>	<p>In line with Article 2 of Directive (EU) 2018/957 the Commission shall prepare by 30 July 2023 a report on the application and implementation of this Directive concerning the posting of workers and propose, where appropriate, necessary amendments to this Directive; this might, if appropriate, include provisions for highly mobile railway staff.</p> <p>As regards posting in road transport, the Commission published two sets of questions and answers (Q + As) on the road transport social rules and is currently working on a third set of Q + As.</p> <p>In addition, the Commission underlines that the actions outlined in NAIADES III “Boosting future-proof European inland waterway transport”<sup>88</sup> will contribute to this evolution in addressing these challenges for inland waterway transport. This concerns, in particular, the evaluation of enforcement of the working time rules, the legislation on social security and posting. The Commission will also assess the need for a legislative initiative for on-board digital tools for recording and exchanging information on crews and vessels, with the objective to facilitate the verification of the compliance with the rule.</p>
<p>3.8. The study nevertheless concludes that a financial break-even point may be found on long distances and quotes, not counting support measures - 595 km for rail/road, 266 km for inland waterways/road and 736 km for short sea shipping/road.</p>	<p>Distances quoted in this study refer only to non-road legs of intermodal transport. For total average distance reaching break-even, 100-300 km needs to be added to cover also road legs at the both ends of an intermodal operation.</p>
<p>3.10. An impact assessment of the 2017 legislative proposal concerning the Directive shows an overall additional cost for</p>	<p>According to the impact assessment, combined transport is on average 24% (and not 60%) more expensive than international</p>

<sup>88</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/default/files/com20210324-naiades.pdf>

<p>intermodal transport solutions of almost 60%, mainly due to implementation, delays, transaction costs, etc<sup>89</sup>.</p>	<p>road-only transport.</p>
<p>3.14. Bottlenecks due to a lack of capacity in multimodal terminals and logistics hubs cause further problems. The Commission Staff Working Paper accompanying the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy<sup>90</sup> estimates that distances over 300 km between terminals, such as in Finland, for instance, and in parts of Sweden, are too long, since they limit the possibility of short road legs of about 150 km. While recognising the vital importance of adequate terminal capacity, in particular along the TEN-T Core Network Corridors, it must nevertheless be borne in mind that distance between terminals must also be linked to the transport volumes in a region and to differences in the density of the network in different parts of Europe.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that adequate terminal density cannot be solely defined based on distance between the terminals, but needs to reflect potential transport demand.</p>
<p>3.16. It is worth noting that a recent study<sup>91</sup> analysing the effects of cabotage restrictions on combined transport road legs concluded that use of "combi-cabotage" is fairly frequent, due to problems with driver availability and flexibility and cost level differences, and that restrictions on this kind of cabotage may therefore cause certain immediate negative effects for those concerned, including a reverse shift to unimodal road transport and a reduction in rail freight services, whereas in the long term terminal operators believe that improved terminal productivity and services would compensate for possible transport</p>	<p>The Commission disagrees that use of 'combi-cabotage' is fairly frequent. The study shows that 78% of operators (68% of operations and 66% of road legs) do not use Article 4 of the Combined Transport Directive at all.</p> <p>The Commission carried out a study<sup>92</sup> on the application of cabotage quotas on international combined transport operations, which found that even the low drop in the transported volumes entailed by the obligation could have negative impact on rail freight connections. Overall and dependent on the scenario at stake, the application of the cabotage quotas could</p>

<sup>89</sup> Commission Staff Working Document, Impact assessment SWD(2017) 362.

<sup>90</sup> Commission Staff Working Document SWD(2020) 331 accompanying the SSM Strategy.

<sup>91</sup> Mobility Package 1 – Data gathering an analysis of the impacts of cabotage restrictions on combined transport road legs TRT Trasporti e Territorio SRL.

<sup>92</sup> "Data gathering and analysis of the impacts of cabotage restrictions on combined transport road legs", TRT Trasporti e Territorio, November 2020; [https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/road/studies/road\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/transport/modes/road/studies/road_en)

cost increases.

lead to an annual reduction of combined transport volumes by more than 6.1 billion tonne-km and to 14% reduction of transhipments. Similarly, more than 90% of the total volume impacted would be in the rail-road segment, where 8% of operations could shift back to road-only transport.

**N°8 New EU Strategy on adaptation to climate change**

**COM(2021) 82 final**

**EESC 2021/1138 – NAT/815**

**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**

**Rapporteur: Dimitris DIMITRIADIS (EL-I)**

**Co-rapporteur: Kęstutis KUPŠYS (LT-III)**

**DG CLIMA – Executive Vice-President TIMMERMANS**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
1.2. Adaptation, with equity at its core, is essential to protect European citizens' lives, employment and livelihoods, especially those of the more vulnerable, who are traditionally hit more harshly by climate change.	Just resilience is an important dimension of the new EU Strategy, which will be pursued in view of the challenges faced by groups that are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.
1.4. The EESC calls for 'equal emphasis' on financing mitigation and adaptation. It is crucial for all climate policies at all levels to combine mitigation and adaptation strategies.	The EU supports investments in climate change mitigation and adaptation actions. Both types of investments contribute equally to the overall objective of 30% climate expenditure for the EU budget 2021-2027.
1.6. The EESC sees nature-based solutions, the bio-economy and the transition to a circular economy as essential climate adaptation approaches and as an opportunity to recover in an environmentally and socially sustainable way.	Nature based solutions hold great potential but have so far not been deployed at scale – the new strategy seeks to support this development in view of the multiple co-benefits these types of solutions have. Nature-based solutions are not a panacea, but they are an essential tool to address the planetary emergency we are facing.
1.7. The EESC calls on the Commission to seek better alignment of climate adaptation policies with climate justice in future adaptation policy work.	Achieving resilience in a just and fair way is essential. The Commission will among others support the reskilling and requalification of workers for a just and fair resilience.
1.11. The EESC calls for measures (and	The EU Taxonomy, including the

<p>specifically the EU Taxonomy for sustainable activities and its criteria) that will make channelling investments to the fossil fuel industry the least favourable strategy for financial institutions and create incentive for allocating private financial flows to activities that support climate mitigation and adaptation measures.</p>	<p>principle of do no significant harm, support sustainable activities, investments and financial products, which facilitate private financial flow in support of climate mitigation and adaptation.</p>
<p>1.12. The EESC urges the Commission to clarify how it will unlock barriers to accessing finance for the most vulnerable countries, communities and sectors globally.</p>	<p>The Commission will support, among others, partner countries in accessing climate finance from international sources, such as the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund, and will collaborate with multilateral development banks, financial institutions and the private sector.</p>
<p>3.9. For example, Member States should inform the authorities charged with reviewing the National Energy and Climate Plans that adaptation and mitigation strategies should be given the same emphasis, due to the increased climate ambition of the EU and the impact of COVID-19.</p>	<p>Under the Governance Regulation<sup>93</sup>, Member States shall include adaptation goals in their National energy and climate plans (NECPs), where it is applicable to meet the objectives and targets of the Energy Union and the long-term Union greenhouse gas emission commitments consistent with the Paris Agreement.</p>
<p>3.15. The EESC stresses the importance of integrating the risks and deep uncertainties relating to climatic natural disasters into the models and tools used to design macro-fiscal policies.</p>	<p>Macro-fiscal resilience requires factoring the range of plausible climate scenarios into economic policies and an understanding of disaster risk management.</p>
<p>4.3. It is crucial to establish local vulnerability indexes (VIs) to guide adaptation strategies, which should be developed in three dimensions: geographical or regional vulnerability, sectoral or economic vulnerability, and social vulnerability.</p>	<p>The Commission will update and expand Climate-ADAPT as source of knowledge on climate impacts. It will also develop an EU-wide climate risk assessment and support regions in establishing or improving their own climate risk assessments through the Horizon Europe Mission on Adaptation</p>

<sup>93</sup> OJ L 328, 21.12.2018, p. 1–77

	to Climate Change.
4.8. Digitalisation provides many opportunities for climate adaptation, e.g. in monitoring, modelling, production and communication, and should be fully utilised. Appropriate measures are also needed to ensure the climate resilience of EU-wide critical infrastructure such as energy, transport and digital networks and systems.	The Regulation on risk-preparedness in the electricity sector <sup>94</sup> already requires Member States to consider extreme natural hazards as part of the regional and national electricity crisis scenarios. Similarly, the Gas Security of Supply Regulation <sup>95</sup> requires Member States to consider natural events, including extreme weather conditions, in their mandatory risk assessments for gas, as a basis to develop Preventive Action and Emergency Plans. Additionally, the Commission adopted on 16 December 2020 a proposal for a Directive on the resilience of critical entities (COM(2020) 829 final), which covers energy, among other nine sectors, and which would require critical entities to carry out risk assessments of all relevant risks that could affect the provision of an essential service, including natural disasters, and to take appropriate measures.
4.33. Civil society organisations also play an important role in awareness-raising, including on topics related to consumption habits, energy and transport use, and nature conservation. They play an important role in mobilising society, conveying climate protection messages to people and providing public information to support decisions about what can be done to combat and adapt to climate change.	The Commission fully agrees with the Committee's position of the role of civil society actors. As described in the Commission's contribution to the informal EU27 leaders' meeting in Sibiu (Romania) on 9 May 2019, the European Union is primarily a union of people and values – with a unique system of democracy that complements and interacts with national, regional and local democratic systems of all Member States, as well as working directly with citizens and civil society. All those with a stake in the future of Europe have a

<sup>94</sup> Regulation (EU) 2019/941, OJ L158, 14.6.2019, p.1

<sup>95</sup> Regulation (EU) 2017/1948; OJ L280, 28.10.2017, p.1

	role to play in explaining what it means to be part of this Union and in spelling out the benefits or consequences of its policies and choices.
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**N°9 Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy**  
**COM(2021) 66 final**  
**EESC 2021/2032 – REX/539**  
**562<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Timo Marko Johannes VUORI (FI-I)**  
**Co-Rapporteur: Christophe QUAREZ (FR-II)**  
**DG TRADE – Executive Vice-President DOMBROVSKIS**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.3 The EESC agrees that modernising the World Trade Organization (WTO) is the top priority, given its central role in delivering an effective multilateral matrix for a modern trade agenda with environmental and social issues. The EU must therefore lead ambitious WTO reforms and promote a modern WTO agenda, breaking down taboos (i.e. social aspects of trade) and addressing current and upcoming challenges sustainably. To do so, the EESC calls on the EU and its Member States to form strategic cooperation with key trading partners on priority multilateral issues.</p>	<p>The reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which is covered by a specific Annex to the Trade Policy review Communication<sup>96</sup>, is at the centre of the Commission's trade policy priorities. This is needed to update the multilateral trade rules and to bring them in line with the modern economy and the much-changed global context. A reformed multilateral trading system is by far the best option to bring the stability and predictability that is necessary to avoid trade tensions, fuel economic growth and bring together the contribution of trade policy to the key challenges of our times.</p> <p>The Commission has therefore put forward a series of ideas that would address the institutional problems affecting the three core functions of the WTO: rulemaking, dispute settlement and monitoring/deliberation. The Commission will also take forward initiatives and actions that promote climate and sustainability considerations throughout the various functions of the WTO, including a trade and climate initiative. In that respect, the Commission is engaging with like-minded countries to</p>

<sup>96</sup> COM(2021) 66 final.

	<p>pursue a strong climate and environmental agenda at the WTO, both bilaterally with key partners as well as through the dedicated forum created to this end, the so-called Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions.</p> <p>The Commission further agrees that, as outlined in its Trade Policy Review Communication, the green transition needs to go hand in hand with social equity. A serious decent work deficit persists in global supply chains in many parts of the world, from serious violations of freedom of association to poor working conditions. Depriving workers of their fundamental rights puts downward pressure on social conditions globally.</p> <p>EU trade policy should use all the tools at its disposal to support social fairness and environmental sustainability. Leading efforts to reform the World Trade Organization and improving the effectiveness of the multilateral framework for trade governance should be the key priority for the EU to achieve this objective.</p>
1.6 The EESC calls for an ambitious strengthening of trade and sustainable development chapters (TSD) and their effective enforceability in EU bilateral trade and investment agreements. The upcoming TSD Review is an integral part of the EU trade strategy.	<p>Sustainability is at the core of EU trade policy. Recent trade agreements already contain trade and sustainable development (TSD) chapters that are ambitious, broad in scope, legally binding and enforceable through a dedicated TSD dispute settlement mechanism. Substantial efforts to improve the implementation and the enforcement of TSD chapters have been made over the past years, guided by the framework of the 15-Point TSD Action Plan.</p>

	<p>The Commission has decided to start a review process of TSD chapters taking into account the evolution of trade policy and the global challenges in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The Commission has asked consultants to do a comparative study on how trade partners implement and enforce TSD commitments in their trade agreements.</p> <p>Transparency and inclusiveness will be ensured throughout the review process and there will be sufficient opportunities for consultation and expressing views.</p> <p>In the TSD review, the Commission will have a critical look at all relevant aspects of TSD implementation and enforcement, including assessing how useful and effective the 15-Point Action Plan has been, and identifying where there is a need or scope for taking additional action.</p> <p>The Review will look at issues such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the scope of the commitments in EU bilateral agreements;</li> <li>- the institutional set-up, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms;</li> <li>- the essential elements clause and the possibility to introduce for sanctions for non-compliance;</li> <li>- the resources required.</li> </ul> <p>The review will also take into account the results of the recent Trade Policy Review and its Communication, most importantly supporting the green transition and promoting responsible and sustainable value chains.</p>
1.8 The EESC regrets the lack of reference to the crucial role of civil society in trade, and stresses the need to boost cooperation with civil society from shaping to	The Commission recalls that the preparation of the Trade Policy Review Communication was preceded by a very comprehensive and inclusive process,

monitoring trade tools and agreements.	<p>which notably featured two dedicated civil society dialogues, 22 stakeholders events organised in Member States and a public consultation, which attracted more than 400 contributions.</p> <p>In conducting the EU's trade and investment policy, the Commission aims to keep a high level of transparency and of involvement of civil society. This is why before launching a negotiation the Commission publishes the draft negotiating directives and its negotiating proposals. In addition, the Commission has made significant efforts over the past years also to provide civil society with more information about what the Commission does and how, in particular as regards the implementation phase of trade agreements.</p> <p>In order to further improve DG Trade's Civil Society Dialogue (CSD), the Commission launched in 2020 a study to review the CSD and to help improving its outreach to civil society in Member States. The conclusions of the study have recently been published and the proposed follow-up was also presented to the European Parliament. The study confirms that, overall, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are satisfied with the CSD. At the same time, it proposed areas for improvement, which the Commission is now taking forward as appropriate to improve in particular the preparation of CSD meetings through, for example, more advance notices and more targeted input from CSOs. At the same time, the Commission is increasing its efforts to reach out to civil society in Member States.</p>
1.9 The EESC notes that the EU must have a better understanding of the importance of	The Commission is analysing trade data to get a better understanding of the

<p>global value chains and their impact on companies and people. Diversifying sources of supply may be a stronger resilience tool than restricting them. Setting up monitoring mechanisms to avoid concentration of supply sources at company level and in public procurement would also help.</p>	<p>functioning of global value chains, including identifying and addressing EU strategic dependencies in the context of the update of the industrial strategy presented in May 2021<sup>97</sup>.</p> <p>The Commission agrees that trade policy usefully supports supply chain resilience by providing a stable rules-based trading framework and opening up diversified sources of supply.</p> <p>In line with the Communication on Trade Policy Review, the Commission published on 19 July 2021 a guidance to help companies to combat forced labour in supply chains<sup>98</sup>. It also plans to adopt a proposal on sustainable corporate governance legislation, including mandatory environmental, human and labour rights due diligence.</p>
<p>1.11 The EESC stresses the importance of benefitting from a wide range of EU Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that reflect EU values and international standards. Where the WTO cannot act or fully deliver on EU interests, the EU should count on these agreements with leading and emerging economies in international trade. Despite having a wide network, over 60% of EU external trade still takes part outside of preferential agreements, based on general WTO rules.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that improving access to third markets sharing EU values and international standards should remain at the core of the EU's trade policy missions and that Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) have a key role to play in this regard. This is why the Trade Policy Review Communication identified as one of its headline actions the need to consolidate the EU's partnerships with key growth regions by creating the conditions to conclude negotiations and ratify outstanding bilateral agreements.</p> <p>This notably applies to the ongoing negotiations with Chile, Australia, and New Zealand, which are well on track, and to the already concluded agreements with Mexico and Mercosur.</p>

<sup>97</sup> COM(2021) 350 final.

<sup>98</sup> [https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2021/july/tradoc\\_159709.pdf](https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2021/july/tradoc_159709.pdf)

<p>1.14 The EESC welcomes concrete actions to implement, advance and ensure effective implementation of existing EU FTAs.</p>	<p>The Chief Trade Enforcement Officer (CTEO) is now in place with structures set up and processes running. A single entry point and complaints mechanism are operational to enable any EU-based stakeholder to lodge complaints about possible non-compliance by third countries of their international trade commitments, and steps have been taken to better prioritize dispute settlement actions and use the institutional structures established by EU trade agreements (notably the web of committees and sub-committees under EU preferential agreements). Work continues on new online tools to facilitate EU business operating abroad, and on closing the gap in our toolbox to deal with new challenges.</p>
<p>1.17 The EESC stresses the need to guarantee a level playing field for the EU's agricultural sector. European agricultural products should have better market access to third countries and mutually imported products from third countries must meet the European standards on sustainability and food safety. The EU FTAs must respect EU sanitary and phyto-sanitary (SPS) provisions and adhere to the precautionary principle.</p>	<p>The EU's trade policy aims at improving market access to third countries by pursuing the conclusion and implementation of ambitious FTAs, by removing tariff and non-tariff barriers to EU's exports, and by supporting multilateralism and rules-based trade.</p> <p>The EU is the biggest world exporter of agri-food and third importer after China and the United States of America. EU agri-food exports display a wide range of products from all parts of the supply-chain proving the competitiveness of its sector in a variety of product classes reaching from commodities to highly processed food industry products. EU imports, on the other hand, are clearly dominated by agricultural food and feed products, which represent about 75% of all imports.</p> <p>All agri-food imports into the EU must</p>

	<p>comply with relevant EU regulations and standards. FTAs negotiated by the EU do not affect or undermine EU food safety and animal and plant health legislation, as these standards are not negotiable, under any circumstances. Trade agreements, together with other international organisations, offer platforms for the EU to cooperate on improving sustainability standards worldwide, e.g. on antimicrobial resistance, on animal welfare, and more. These efforts will be stepped up in the future, in line with the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy, for instance by introducing a Sustainable Food Systems chapter in trade agreements to foster dialogue and cooperation.</p> <p>The precautionary principle, used as a way to manage risks, is recognised by the WTO (Article 5.7 of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement) and WTO rules continue to apply in full between parties to an FTA. In addition, the FTAs must be in line with existing EU food safety regulations in which the precautionary principle is also enshrined, such as the General Food Law Regulation (Article 7)<sup>99</sup>.</p>
3.9 The EU trade policy should be in line with the EU Green Deal policy, include new requirements on the digital, green and just transition. Therefore, it is important to prepare for new instruments like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which must be compatible with the WTO rules, effective in the fight against climate change and useful for the	<p>The Trade Policy Review has put sustainability at the core of the EU Trade Policy. From trade ‘and sustainable development’ the EU has now moved to a sustainable trade policy. Trade and environmental policies need to be mutually supportive. A proposal for a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism<sup>100</sup></p>

<sup>99</sup> Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety; OJ L 31, 1.2.2002, p. 1–24.

<sup>100</sup> COM(2021) 564 final.

	<p>competitiveness of EU industry. The EESC supports opening up dialogue with non-EU countries and major trading partners like the USA and China.</p>
	<p>(CBAM), adopted on 14 July 2021 as part of a set of ambitious proposals of the ‘Fit for 55 package’, aimed at increasing the EU climate ambitions. The CBAM is an environmental policy tool to support the integrity and effectiveness of the EU climate framework. It has been designed to be WTO compatible. The CBAM is non-discriminatory and even handed towards imports compared to EU production and it is an alternative to existing carbon leakage protection mechanisms under the Emissions Trading System (ETS).</p> <p>The EU intends to remain open to dialogue and cooperation with third countries, in particular like-minded countries, and to support less developed countries towards decarbonisation and to adapt to the new obligations under the CBAM.</p>
3.12 The EU trade policy should complement actions taken in other international regulatory organisations, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) work on economic and tax regimes. It should support the establishment of effective cooperation systems between tax, law enforcement and judicial authorities in partner countries.	<p>The Commission fully agrees that actions of different international organisations should complement each other. The Commission has for instance been very supportive of the agreement reached within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and endorsed by the G20 on 11 June 2021, on corporate tax reform, which is supported by 132 jurisdictions.</p>
3.15 New EU FTA partner countries should demonstrate that they fully comply with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) core conventions as a precondition for	<p>The Commission takes note of the proposal that trade policy should support the establishment of effective cooperation systems between tax, law enforcement and judicial authorities.</p>

<p>concluding a trade agreement. These conventions must be an essential element of any FTA. If a partner country has not ratified or properly implemented these conventions, or has not demonstrated an equivalent level of protection, the EESC calls for the set-up of a binding and enforceable roadmap for ratification with ILO technical assistance. The roadmap should also form part of TSD chapters to ensure these obligations are met in a timely manner.</p>	<p>Organization (ILO). The Commission has enforced such provisions in a recent TSD dispute with South Korea over certain Korean labour laws and practices. The panel ruling confirms that EU TSD commitments are legally binding and enforceable.</p> <p>To the extent that core labour rights as reflected in the fundamental conventions of the ILO qualify as human rights, they constitute part of essential elements clauses on the respect of human rights, as they are included in most political agreements accompanying the conclusion of recent EU FTAs. The Commission is currently reviewing its Action Plan on the implementation and enforcement of TSD chapters in trade agreements, covering all relevant aspects.</p>
<p>3.16 In addition, each EU FTA must be based on a more effective EU evaluation policy, improving its economic and sustainability impacts assessments and ex-post evaluation after five years. It must provide for countervailing measures to mitigate potential negative effects. Finally, the EU must strengthen and better use its instruments to ensure the conditions for fair competition with non-EU countries.</p>	<p>The Commission intends to continue carrying out its comprehensive evaluation policy in the field of trade. It already employs a wide set of evidence-based tools covering the full policy cycle. In particular, the Commission evaluates the impact of major trade initiatives at the initial design stage through its impact assessments (IAs), during the negotiations through its sustainability impact assessments (SIAs), which suggest mitigation measures, after the conclusion of the negotiations and before the signature of the agreement through its economic assessments of the negotiated outcome and after implementation through its ex post evaluations.</p> <p>These tools are complementary and instrumental in the formulation of</p>

	<p>sound, evidence-based trade policies and are important instruments for mainstreaming sustainable development issues into trade policy. All these evaluations look into four dimensions of sustainability: economic, social, Human Rights and environmental issues.</p> <p>To strengthen the EU's toolbox to counter harmful practices from third countries, such as the use of subsidies, which distort fair competition in the EU, on 5 May 2021 the Commission has also adopted a proposal for a Regulation on foreign subsidies distorting the internal market COM(2021) 223 final.</p>
3.17 EU public procurements should only be open to companies from countries complying with ILO core conventions and the Paris Climate Agreement. The EU has opened its public procurement to non-EU countries, many of which have not yet reciprocated. This is damaging for European companies. It is essential to finalise the Regulation on an International Public Procurement Instrument to strengthen the EU's position. EU FTAs must promote best practices on how to include environmental and social criteria in public procurement.	<p>EU public procurement directives allow for use of social and environmental criteria in the award of public contracts in the EU. Art 18 of the public procurement directive 2014/24/EU<sup>101</sup> includes a provision that requires economic operators to comply with the ILO conventions and environmental agreements in the performance of procurement contracts in the EU. It is the competence of Member States to ensure that all bidders, including foreign ones, comply with these obligations. This however applies to the bidders and not to the entire country they bid from.</p> <p>In line with EU single market rules, EU FTAs do promote best practices on including environmental and social criteria in public procurement. Recent agreements (like the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), EU-Mexico Association Agreement) ensure that procuring entities may take into account environmental, labour and</p>

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<sup>101</sup> Directive 2014/24/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 February 2014 on public procurement and repealing Directive 2004/18/EC; OJ L 94, 28.3.2014, p. 65–242.

	<p>social considerations in their procurement procedure.</p> <p>With regard to the International Procurement Instrument (IPI), the Commission welcomes the agreement reached by the co-legislators to hold the first trilogue on 16 December 2021, and looks forward to a successful conclusion of this file. At the same time the Commission notes that the primary purpose of the IPI is to open third country procurement markets and it would offer a last resort a possibility to partially limit access to the EU market for bidders from a given third country in case of confirmed restrictions to EU operators in that third country. The IPI is not supposed to address issues related to eventual lack of compliance with ILO core conventions and the Paris Climate Agreement.</p>
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**N°10 A new Agenda for the Mediterranean**

**JOIN(2021) 2 final**

**EESC 2021/1801 - REX/540**

**562<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session – July 2021**

**Rapporteur: Helena DE FELIPE LEHTONEN (ES-I)**

**DG NEAR – Commissioner VARHELYI**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
1.1. The EESC welcomes the new social objectives of the Porto Summit, which must have an impact in the implementation of the Joint Communication.	The Commission agrees with the Committee that the new Agenda for the Mediterranean should set in motion a strong, fair and job-rich recovery. Existing development cooperation programmes both at the regional and the bilateral levels support inclusive economic development and decent job creation. Programming during the period 2021-2027 will focus on employment, skills and social inclusion, in support of reforms, private sector development, and skills development. The Commission is also collaborating with Member States in developing Team Europe Initiatives that will allow for decent job creation through trade and investment in the Southern Neighbourhood.
1.4. The EESC calls for action based on synergies between the instruments provided by the UN Charter and the EU Security Union Strategy and believes that a significant increase in the EU's efforts in the region is needed.	The Commission encourages efforts to intensify political dialogue across the Mediterranean to build trust, reduce tensions and help solve conflicts. For example, it works closely with the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process and foresees initiatives that will build upon the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and a number of Arab countries. In Libya, depending on progress in political processes, the Commission stands ready to support the

	country's development.
1.6. The EESC stresses that the focus must be on tackling the root causes of migration in the respective partner countries.	Cooperation on migration and mobility is an essential element of EU relations with partner countries in the Southern Neighbourhood. While their migration profiles vary, most countries in the Southern Neighbourhood are at the same time origin, transit and destination of mixed migration, sharing de facto some specific challenges and interests with the EU. Activities related to the second pillar of the New Pact on Asylum and Migration on building economic opportunity and addressing the root causes of irregular migration will mainly be implemented under the bilateral funding envelopes with partner countries.
1.7. The EESC calls on the EU to ensure that the green transition is not perceived as a model imposed from the outside. Investment in awareness-raising campaigns is recommended, as is involving civil society in this effort.	The green transition could create opportunities for the countries in the Southern Neighbourhood. In addition to existing programmes that support awareness raising on the issue, including SwitchMED <sup>102</sup> , awareness raising and education activities to prevent unregulated waste disposal, promote sustainable consumption and production will be developed and implemented under the 2021-2027 programming.
3.2. It is essential to involve civil society organisations and the social partners in the programming process.	The Commission confirms that civil society organisations and social partners have been engaged in the programming preparation process through structured consultations both in Headquarters and in EU Delegations.
4.2. Reducing bureaucracy is essential to improve cooperation between the EU and partner countries.	The Commission is committed to continue supporting Public Administration Reform in the Southern Neighbourhood. For example, it continues to promote good governance

<sup>102</sup> <https://switchmed.eu/>

	<p>and administration at local level with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) as an implementing partner.</p>
4.4. The EESC encourages cooperation with the southern partners, to promote the establishment of healthy information environments and media freedom as measures to tackle disinformation and misinformation.	<p>The EU has renewed its support to media freedom in 2020 allocating a regional envelope of EUR 14 million dedicated to independent media serving public interest.</p> <p>In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the demand for credible information from independent media in restrictive and repressive environments has increased, the European Endowment for Democracy has provided quick and flexible support to media that are playing a leading role in increasing transparency and accountability in their countries. Via its regional programmes, the EU supports the capacity strengthening for media outlets. The Open Media Hub programme continued to provide trainings to media professionals on debunking fake news, investigative journalism and innovative content production. Emergency support was quickly set up for independent journalists in Lebanon following the Beirut blast. The EU also supports better integration of youth voices within the local media landscape through the Shabab and Youthroom projects.</p>
5.2. The dismantling of non-tariff trade barriers (a major obstacle to trade integration in the region) should be promoted accordingly, taking into account existing economic asymmetries. For example, the EU's negotiations with Tunisia, Morocco and DCFTA-have stalled because existing	<p>The Commission confirms that one of its priorities for support to trade and investment in the Southern Neighborhood in order to increase competitiveness is the reduction of non-tariff barriers in the context of support to broader reforms of the business</p>

<p>asymmetries are not sufficiently taken into account.</p>	<p>environment and the investment climate. It is also worth noting that according to the Trade Policy Review, adopted in February 2021, the Commission proposes the modernisation of trade and investment relations with partners in the region. Nevertheless, priority should be given to the implementation of existing bilateral and multilateral agreements and the prevention of protectionist measures. The Commission would also like to recall that according to the ex-post evaluation of 6 Euro-Mediterranean Free Trade Agreements, existing Agreements have demonstrated added value for Southern Partners.</p>
<p>7.2. The Communication proposes to promote "Talent Partnerships", put forward in the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum. It seems that the new instrument aims to foster cooperation with third countries. This could be a potential area for linking vocational training, business networking, inter-regional value chains and circular migration to benefit people and economies on both sides of the Mediterranean. In any event, these plans must be reconciled with the need to retain sufficient skilled labour in the partner countries, which is essential for their sustainable economic development</p>	<p>The Commission will work to support partner countries in building an enabling environment for the promotion of legal migration and mobility, without prejudice and in respect of Member States competences. Through its programming for 2021-2027 the Commission will also support partner countries in matching their talents with the needs of their internal and EU labour markets promoting a win-win approach.</p>
<p>8.2. The Blue Economy represents a powerful tool to manage the Mediterranean's common assets, and the EESC highlights the need to take stock of the Union for Mediterranean Ministerial declaration on a sustainable blue economy in the Western Mediterranean.</p>	<p>The Commission confirms that supporting a transition towards low-carbon circular economies remains a priority for programming, in line with the ambitions of the European Green Deal, the Paris agreement targets, and the objectives under the Communication on a New Approach for a Sustainable Blue Economy in the EU. Where relevant, dedicated actions will be developed in order to account for the blue economy's</p>

	<p>potential to protect biodiversity and contribute to a sustainable recovery.</p>
9.4. The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation. Firstly, illiberal and autocratic governments have taken the opportunity to continue their attacks on women's and LGBTIQ+ rights. Secondly, various government measures enacted in response to the pandemic have effectively worsened the living conditions for women, LGBTIQ+ persons and persons with disabilities, which makes it essential to promote initiatives to protect the rights of these groups and their socio-economic, civic and political participation.	The Commission aims to ensure that gender equality is adequately reflected in the Joint Documents (Partnership Priorities and equivalent documents) with its Southern Partners. Plurality and equality are EU fundamental values and the EU will continue to raise these in its political and policy dialogue on human rights when relevant.
9.5. Although many partner countries have signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is still a great need for improvement in their living situations. Therefore, the EU should make a special commitment to the implementation of the rights of persons with disabilities as laid down in the UN Convention.	The Commission confirms that in line with UN Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), programmes under Annual Actions Programmes will propose actions in countries of the Southern Neighbourhood to support people with disabilities in fully enjoying their rights and allowing them to become active actors in their societies, from education to employment and public participation.

**Nº 11 2030 Digital Targets**  
**COM(2021) 118 final**  
**EESC 2021/1530 – INT/933**  
**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Gonçalo LOBO XAVIER (PT-I)**  
**DG CNECT – Commissioner BRETON**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.1. The Commission's plan for the 2030 Digital Compass arrives at a critical moment for the Union and for the entire world. The EESC welcomes the initiative and the aim to use digital technologies to improve citizens' lives, create more jobs and facilitate progress and enhance European competitiveness. The pandemic has emphasised the importance and the possibilities of digital developments, has stressed the need for adjustments and has changed the way we socialise and work. The EU needs to address those challenges in a proper way. Having a strategy, a plan with specific goals and a way to measure progress is essential to turn intentions into results.</p> <p>3.3. The EESC welcomes the regular monitoring of the targets and the governance system put forward in the Communication and multi-country projects are essential to achieve the vision it sets out.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the Committee's support for the Commission's 2030 Digital Decade Communication<sup>103</sup>. The Communication presents a vision, targets and avenues for a successful digital transformation of the EU by 2030, in line with the EU's values, reinforcing EU's digital leadership and promoting human-centred and sustainable digital policies empowering citizens and businesses. Further to the Digital Decade Communication, the Commission presented a proposal for a Digital Policy Programme<sup>104</sup>.</p> <p>The proposal aims at ensuring that the EU achieves a number of objectives and targets by establishing a clear, structured and collaborative process between the Union's institutions and the Member States. This would entail the monitoring and reporting on progress based on an annual report submitted to the Council and the Parliament, followed by joint commitments undertaken between the Commission and each Member State to translate the EU's digital ambition into concrete actions. The proposed Policy Programme is also meant to support the deployment of multi-country projects,</p>

<sup>103</sup> COM/2021/118 final.

<sup>104</sup> COM(2021) 574 final.

	<p>including via a new implementation mechanism in the form of European Digital Infrastructure Consortia (EDICs).</p>
<p>1.2. The EESC believes that digital innovation must always safeguard fundamental rights, ensuring everyone's health, safety and privacy (protection of personal data). It is crucial that citizens perceive the developments and growth as having a positive impact on the quality of their lives. The effects of new technologies that support our daily life must be good and fairly distributed in order to truly benefit society and the right to health must always prevail and be recognised on the list of fundamental rights of Digital Citizenship.</p> <p>2.2. European laws relating to the digital economy are evolving fast. Citizens and companies must be made aware of their rights and duties in the digital realm. There should be a continuous effort to consolidate legislative initiatives and make the law easier to understand and apply for citizens and companies.</p> <p>6.1. The need for safety, predictability and both physical and mental health must be also a priority in this agenda. It is important to raise people's awareness of security, along with technology to improve the quality of life and jobs. Under this principle, the EESC believes that the Commission should take the opportunity offered by the planned annual monitoring exercise sounding out European citizens' views on compliance with their rights and values to assure that the right to health is properly safeguarded.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the Committee's focus on digital citizenship. In the Digital Decade Communication, the Commission proposed setting up a comprehensive set of digital principles reflecting the 'European way to digital'. Its objective is to inform people that engage in the digital environment, and to provide a reference for policy makers and digital operators so that Europeans fully benefit from their citizenship also in the digital environment. As a follow-up to that, the Commission will issue a proposal for a joint (Commission, Parliament, Council) interinstitutional solemn declaration on digital principles. The annual report on EU's progress towards the Digital Policy Programme's objectives and targets would also update on the digital principles, as endorsed in such solemn declaration.</p>
<p>1.3. The EESC calls for the need to restore public confidence and to improve cybersecurity and cyber-resilience with 'security by design' along the whole digital</p>	<p>The Commission agrees on the importance of the issues raised by the Committee. In this regard, it has undertaken various legislative and non-</p>

<p>value chain, to provide people with better choice and control over their data ('Data Ethics'), and to establish the responsibility of intermediaries to fight illegal and harmful content.</p> <p>1.8. Digital developments include risks such as fraud, breaches of privacy and a lack of transparency, which could undermine the goals set out in the document. The EESC believes that the conditions must be created to prevent such risks and to regulate responsibilities at EU level.</p>	<p>legislative initiatives as part of its efforts to make Europe fit for the digital age – one of the six headline priorities of the Commission.</p> <p>Among these, in December 2020, the new EU Cybersecurity Strategy<sup>105</sup> was proposed to bolster Europe's collective resilience against cyber threats and ensure that all citizens and businesses can fully benefit from trustworthy services and digital tools, including the ever-increasing number of connected objects. Improving cybersecurity is essential for people to trust, use, and benefit from innovation, connectivity and automation, and for safeguarding fundamental rights and freedoms, including the rights to privacy and to the protection of personal data, and the freedom of expression and information. A first implementation report of the Strategy was issued on 23 June 2021<sup>106</sup>. The Commission also announced a legislative proposal for a European Cyber Resilience Act, expected in the third quarter of 2022.</p> <p>Likewise, the Commission has also taken action in the area of data (proposal for a Data Governance Act<sup>107</sup> and upcoming proposal for a Data Act), and also proposed a comprehensive package on digital services (the proposals for a Digital Services Act and a Digital Markets Act<sup>108</sup>) which, <i>inter alia</i>, lay down new rules for online intermediary services.</p>
<p>1.5. The EESC points out the enormous risk of learning disadvantages that can result</p>	<p>The acquisition of digital skills, basic and advanced, is a key pillar of the</p>

<sup>105</sup> JOIN(2020) 18 final.

<sup>106</sup> JOIN(2021) 14 final.

<sup>107</sup> COM(2020) 767 final.

<sup>108</sup> COM(2020) 825 final and COM(2020) 842 final.

from unbalanced investment. From children to older people, the effects of digital poverty must be kept in mind and close attention to the real risks is therefore a priority. Investment in infrastructure must be made at the same time as investment in training to reduce gaps.

1.6. The EESC stresses the need to help people upskill and reskill. This should be achieved by creating equality of opportunities by boosting public-private partnerships for upskilling and reskilling (both the current workforce and adult learners), and by promoting a life-long learning attitude for all.

1.7. The EESC considers the need to modernise education for a digital society. It is essential to drive the digitalisation of education systems by updating educational content to the digital era and to create public-private ecosystems to implement new methodologies of education that are open and accessible to provide the same opportunities to all.

2.3. The EESC stresses the notion that no citizen should be left behind. Digital illiteracy is still high in Europe - 35% according to the Commission - and the lack of access to digital resources must be mitigated. However, access to human presence in economic and administrative relationships must be guaranteed. It is also important to ensure that the benefits of digitalisation are not reaped only by a few. The Digital Decade must be for the benefit of everyone.

4.3. The EESC stresses the increasing need to upskill and reskill people, promoting a

Digital Decade vision proposed by the Commission in its Digital Decade Communication and the proposed Digital Policy Programme. In particular, with these two documents the Commission proposes targets of 80% of those aged 16-74 having at least basic digital skills to in 2030 (also a target in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan<sup>109</sup>).

The Commission believes that having at least 80% of citizens with at least basic digital skills is a precondition for the digital transformation of businesses and the public sector. As such, the Commission recognises the importance of teaching digital skills and of making sure that nobody is left behind.

The EU also supports Member States with initiatives such as the Digital Education Action Plan<sup>110</sup>, which aims to improve the offer of digital education across the EU, building on the lessons learned during the pandemic and boosting the use of digital technologies for education. Furthermore, the European Skills Agenda<sup>111</sup> is a five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills to succeed in the green and digital transition. In line with the target mentioned above, the European Pillar of Social Rights also includes actions to support basic digital skills.

As announced by President von der Leyen in her State of the Union speech 2021, the Commission proposed a Structured Dialogue on digital education and skills. It will also propose two

<sup>109</sup> COM(2021) 102 final.

<sup>110</sup> COM(2020) 624 final

<sup>111</sup> COM(2020) 274 final.

life-long learning attitude for all.

4.4. The pandemic has boosted distance learning. At the same time, it has become clear that this entails a high risk of learning delay for children from lower social classes. In realising the Digital Targets 2030 Action Plan, digital poverty must receive specific attention.

Council recommendations in the area of digital education and skills, one on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training, and one on enabling factors for digital education.

Under the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the national Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) are expected to include significant investment to boost digital skills.

According to a preliminary analysis of the RRPs assessed positively as of 15 October 2021<sup>112</sup>, the amount dedicated to digital skills development accounts for 17% of the total amount for measures contributing to the digital transition. In addition, a number of Member States plan investments and reforms to introduce compulsory digital skills classes in primary and secondary curricula, revise textbooks and train teachers on digital technologies. Reforms to improve adult learning and increase digital training, also for the most vulnerable, are equally considered.

Moreover, the Digital Europe programme has funds available to support training opportunities for future experts in key capacity areas like data and artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, quantum and high-performance computing. The programme could also be used to invest in upskilling existing workforce through short trainings, building on the works on the EU Digital Platform for skills and jobs, launched under the Connecting Europe Facility. The

<sup>112</sup> Commission services' calculations based on information contained in the concerned National Recovery and Resilience Plans available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en) - on the basis on the methodology for digital tagging set out in Annex VI of the Recovery and Resilience Facility<sup>112</sup> (RRF), which includes specific Intervention fields for Digital Skills – corresponding to DESI Field 2 Human Capital.

	<p>programme could also contribute to the digital transformation of the education sector in line with the strategic priority of the Digital Education Action Plan.</p>
<p>2.13. To achieve these goals, 20 million technology experts will need to be employed in the relevant areas of work by 2030 - compared to 7.8 million today. In 2019, only 18% of the 7.8 million ICT workers were women. Diversity in the digital sectors is essential and will help shape the vision of the world and its challenges, namely to reduce risks of bias. The target of achieving a more balanced gender composition must be closely monitored and women's access to STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) must be encouraged. Social dialogue should be promoted at all levels (company, industry and national) as it can contribute to this aim. Powerful campaigns should be promoted in the Member States, starting in primary schools, to encourage young girls to choose scientific and technological disciplines. The digital divide is a major challenge. In many rural areas, not even 3G is available yet. The EU and its Member States should provide incentives to encourage investment in rural areas to ensure that no citizen is left behind.</p> <p>4.1. The EESC supports the objective of having 20 million employed ICT specialists, with convergence between women and men (2019 baseline: 7.8 million). This will, of course, require investment in proper education systems that can support this objective.</p> <p>4.2. The digitalisation of liberal professional services that are closely related to public interests such as health, safety, law and</p>	<p>The Commission believes that more information and communications technology (ICT) specialists, with a better gender balance, are essential to recover successfully and achieve digital sovereignty, in conformity with European values. In this respect, and in line with the position of the Committee, the Digital Decade Communication and the proposed Digital Policy Programme set the target for the EU to have, by 2030, at least 20 million employed ICT specialists, with convergence between women and men.</p> <p>Various instruments are deployed to contribute to the attainment of that target. In particular, the Digital Europe Programme makes available significant funding for the development of advanced digital skills in cutting-edge domains. Universities, training providers, research and excellence centres will join forces to deliver high-quality training in areas like cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, cloud or data.</p> <p>The Joint Undertaking on High-Performance Computing (HPC) will support actions for advanced digital skills development in HPC to train specialists that can develop, deploy and use the fastest super computers in the world. The Artificial Intelligence Coordinated Plan 2021 Review<sup>113</sup> includes actions to boost artificial intelligence specialists in the EU,</p>

<sup>113</sup> COM(2021) 205 final.

<p>living standards has a major impact on society and requires new professional and ethical approaches. Its success depends both on highly skilled professionals and on the digital skills and understanding of users, patients, clients and consumers.</p>	<p>introduce artificial intelligence and computational thinking in education and also train professionals in non-ICT fields to use and understand artificial intelligence applications. In the field of microelectronics, a number of CEOs have already committed to investing in training, upskilling and reskilling workforce to reduce shortages in this domain and they have joined the Pact for Skills<sup>114</sup>, launched by the Commission.</p>
<p>1.4. The online accessibility of all key European and national public services is a justified objective. Nevertheless, the EESC warns that no one should be left behind and that it is essential to support those who cannot benefit immediately from the digitalisation process. There is still a significant group of citizens that lack the knowledge and skills and even the necessary hardware and software to benefit from these facilities. The EESC calls on the Commission to support those who are in a transition process.</p> <p>2.18. The EESC fully supports the aim of making all key European public services available online and European citizens' medical records will also need to be fully digital, as it is expected that 80% of citizens will use a digital identity. This will also, however, require coordinated efforts and political will from all Member States. The EESC calls for the involvement of civil society organisations to achieve this goal. Basic digital facilities for public services should, in principle, be free. In any event, the digitalisation of public services must not</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the emphasis of the Committee on an inclusive development of digital public services. In this respect, it recalls that the 2030 targets of the Digital Decade Communication and of the proposed Digital Policy Programme include the attainment of 100% online accessible provision of key public services, 100% of Union citizens having access to their medical records (electronic health records (EHR)), and at least 80% of Union citizens using a digital identification (ID) solution.</p> <p>To assist and guide those in need of making greater leaps to reach the target, accompanying digital government and digital innovation procurement policies at all level of government as well as a strengthened EU Interoperability Strategy are needed. This would provide Member States with guidelines for the design, development and continuous enhancement of digital public services and facilitate the exchange of good</p>

<sup>114</sup> [Pact for Skills - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/pact-for-skills)

	<p>lead to higher financial barriers for users.</p> <p>practices between Member States.</p> <p>The Commission proposed a framework for a European Digital Identity<sup>115</sup> on 3 June 2021, in order to deliver the possibility for trusted and secure digital identification in the form of a mobile app to all Europeans.</p> <p>Under the RRF, according to initial analysis (based on the plans for which the assessment has been completed on 15 October 2021)<sup>116</sup>, Member States will contribute on average about 36% of the RRP's allocation to digital measures for the digitalisation of their public administrations. They will aim to ensure that their digital public services are interoperable, available across borders and user-friendly, and that their public administrations (re-)use data and novel technologies.</p> <p>Moreover, the Digital Europe Programme will provide support to help accelerate the digital transformation of public administrations by reducing digital administrative barriers, supporting seamless and secure data flows and the digitalisation of the economy and society.</p>
<p>2.2. The COVID-19 crisis has shown a high degree of external dependency regarding technology and data processes, which must be tackled with efficiency and swiftness. Europe's assets in these areas must be better harnessed and European citizens more closely involved.</p> <p>2.4. European companies, especially SMEs,</p>	<p>As outlined in the Digital Decade Communication, the EU's ambition is to be digitally sovereign in an open and interconnected world, and to pursue digital policies that empower people and businesses to seize a human centred, sustainable and more prosperous digital future. This includes addressing vulnerabilities and</p>

<sup>115</sup> COM (2021) 281.

<sup>116</sup> Commission services' calculations based on information contained in the concerned National Recovery and Resilience Plans available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en)

must be supported in their digitalisation efforts and empowered to compete on a global scale. Where the EU owns or funds computing resources, such as quantum acceleration computers, access to them must be fairly distributed, on the basis of objective criteria.

2.11. The Digital Decade roadmap sets out plans to develop European "own cloud infrastructure and capacities" to prevent data produced in Europe from moving abroad, which is where more than 90% of European data currently goes. Europe must not be naïve and must continue in its fight to become more independent and to keep the data of its citizens, especially sensitive data, within its borders. In that regard, the aim pursued in the Digital Decade plan to have 10 000 highly secure climate-neutral data-edge and cloud nodes, is a step in the right direction. The GAIA X project must be speeded up and become rapidly operational.

2.12. The EESC supports the idea of promoting a European Tech sector to reduce dependency on American and Chinese tech giants and to catch up in areas such as 5G deployment, chip-making and data handling, but cautions against the approach of a protectionist data economy in Europe. International partnerships and cooperation should be promoted.

dependencies as well as accelerating investment. In conjunction with other Commission's initiatives such as the Observatory for Critical Technologies, the proposed Digital Policy Programme creates a framework that helps identify the Union's current and possible future digital strategic dependencies, and contributes to the strengthening of its digital sovereignty. In particular, the Programme includes a mechanism to incentivise Member States to work together in multi-country projects to build Europe's digital capabilities in critical areas.

The RRF, together with other EU programmes including the Digital Europe Programme and the Connecting Europe Facility, can also contribute with funding to multi-country projects focused on building a common and multi-purpose pan-European interconnected cloud and data processing infrastructure and developing and acquiring supercomputers and quantum computers. Part of the EU funding is provided also with a view to ensuring that the benefits of such projects can be reaped throughout the entire European territory.

In order to support European companies, and especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in their digitalisation efforts, a network of around 200 European Digital Innovation Hubs will be set up as part of the Digital Europe Programme, co-funded by the Member States. These hubs will provide the means to companies to test and experiment with digital technologies, and will also provide access to digital capacities that

	<p>are deployed through Digital Europe Programme, such as high performance computing, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. Through the wide geographical spread of the network of hubs and active outreach activities of the hubs, all companies in Europe should be able to benefit from their support.</p>
<p>2.5. Nevertheless, ambitions and public money alone will not deliver the outcomes we seek. We also need a coordinated policy that effectively addresses Europe's starting point and matches both the technological and societal shifts that we have seen over the last few years and which have speeded up as a result of the pandemic: an industrial strategy – including competition policy and sector-specific regulation, namely for secure connectivity, is paramount.</p> <p>2.10. Ambitious connectivity targets should go hand in hand with a commitment towards a more favourable regulatory framework supporting private investment in network infrastructure. It will be of key importance to align the EU's industrial strategy and the vision for European leadership in digital connectivity with competition policy and the regulatory practice for the telecoms sector.</p> <p>6.4. The EESC recommends that, in view of the risks presented by data processing, measures must be taken to ensure that no more data is retained than is actually needed by a business, and that data is retained for no longer than is necessary. At the same time, data-driven innovation is a key factor to be competitive in the digital environment and authorities should push for a cross-sector data-sharing regulatory framework to allow user-centric data-sharing. The applicable framework must promote access</p>	<p>The Commission shares the view expressed by the Committee that both investment and regulatory efforts are needed to deliver on the Digital Decade targets and objectives. The governance mechanism laid down in the Digital Policy Programme includes joint commitments for the implementation of relevant regulatory proposals undertaken between the Commission and the Member States to achieve the EU's digital ambition.</p> <p>It is to be noted that under the RRF, supported investments are to be accompanied by reforms. The Member States' RRP shall be consistent with the relevant country-specific challenges and priorities identified in the context of the European Semester.</p> <p>Moreover, as mentioned above, a number of large-scale multi-country projects will be supported under the RRF, contributing to joint strategic initiatives agreed by Member States in key technological areas such as microelectronics or cloud.</p> <p>As regards the connectivity targets in particular, the EU has adopted a series of initiatives designed to establish the right conditions for these investments to take place. This includes a major reform of the regulatory framework for</p>

<p>to data and focus on interoperability</p> <p>The digital technologies should be at the service of the European citizens, who should never be treated as objects or mere sources of data. The existing ethical and technical guidelines, such as the Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (AI) by the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, should be taken into account.</p>	<p>electronic communications, a European Commission Connectivity Recommendation<sup>117</sup>, followed by the publication of a Connectivity Toolbox<sup>118</sup>, agreed by Member States in close cooperation with the Commission.</p> <p>Under the RRF, Member States have dedicated, according to initial analyses (assessed RRPs as of 15 October 2020)<sup>119</sup>, 12 % of the digital budgets to connectivity, and in several cases the investments are accompanied by the relevant reforms.</p>
<p>2.16. There are major environmental challenges to tackle in the next decade and all actions taken in this context should also take the environmental aspect into account. Moreover, the Digital Compass should be used as a further tool to help meet the European Green Deal objectives and reduce environmental impacts.</p> <p>6.6. The EESC considers that the digital transition must be aligned with the transition to a greener economy and take into account the environmental impact. The use of resources (including scarce resources) and their energy consumption must be reasonable. Transparency on the carbon footprint of cloud services should be required at European level to enable any organisation to calculate its digital carbon footprint and to develop plans to reduce it.</p>	<p>The Commission fully shares the view that the green and digital transitions are mutually dependent and should reinforce each other. The importance of digital technologies and infrastructures as enabling factor for achieving the Green Deal is well established. At the same time, one of the objectives of the proposed Digital Policy Programme is to ensure that digital infrastructures and technologies become more sustainable and energy and resource efficient, and contribute to a sustainable circular and climate-neutral economy and society in line with the European Green Deal.</p>
<p>6.5. 20% of The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is earmarked for digital</p>	<p>The RRPs that were already assessed positively by the Commission by 15</p>

<sup>117</sup> (EU) 2020/1307.

<sup>118</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc\\_id=75185](https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=75185)

<sup>119</sup> Commission services' calculations based on information contained in the concerned National Recovery and Resilience Plans available here : [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en)

<p>connectivity and 37% for green transition. This requires an ambitious and coherent vision for the European telecoms industry and a commitment to a more favourable regulatory framework that supports private investment in network infrastructure, as well as the development of sovereign integrated telecom services with cloud, edge, data and AI technologies.</p>	<p>October 2021 reach – and sometimes largely exceed<sup>120</sup> – the 20% digital allocation target. According to initial analyses<sup>121</sup>, Member States focus on average about 36% of the digital investment under the RRF in digital public services, followed by about 21% in the digitalisation of businesses and about 17% for human capital. Other priority areas include connectivity (about 12%), digital R&amp;D and digital capacities (about 15%).</p> <p>Reforms relevant for the digital area are also included in the national RRPs, such as strategies to support digital skills development or modernise teaching methods, and initiatives to simplify administrative procedures and boost the use of digital public services among citizens and businesses.</p>
<p>5.3. All companies, whether SMEs, start-ups or scale-ups, need capital. The goals set out in the document highlight the urgency of achieving a Capital Markets Union, which considers market solutions and decreases reliance on bank financing and advance support, which favours the transfer of savings between different Member States seeking the best return, and the need to eliminate tax bias in favour of debt. Innovative companies need equity and a tax scheme that does not overly penalise entrepreneurs with marginal tax rates on their capital gains.</p>	<p>Market-based financing is essential to sustain the recovery and the return to long-term growth and to finance the green and digital transitions of our economy. It is particularly important for the financing of SMEs.</p> <p>Integrated capital markets are also crucial for the EU's global competitiveness and its autonomy. Additionally, the EU is developing several targeted financial instruments with other institutional actors such as the EIB/EIF and the EBRD to increase the capital available for EU start-ups. Such instruments, currently developed under the InvestEU programme, build</p>

<sup>120</sup> Commission services' calculations based on information contained in the concerned National Recovery and Resilience Plans available here : [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en)

<sup>121</sup> Commission services' calculations based on information contained in the concerned National Recovery and Resilience Plans available here : [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/recovery-coronavirus/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en)

on examples such as the Artificial Intelligence and Blockchain Fund<sup>122</sup> with a total investment volume of €1.2 billion launched under InnovFin and of other programmes supporting start-ups and innovative SMEs. The Commission is working on a legislative proposal that would help address the debt-equity bias, with a view to supporting re-equitisation of firms and allowing for a more diversified access to financing.

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<sup>122</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-artificial-intelligence-and-blockchain-investment-fund-invest-100-million-euros-startups>

**N°12      Economic and social opportunities of digitalisation  
(exploratory opinion requested by the presidency of the Council of the EU)**

**EESC 2021/2564 - INT/942**  
**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Antje GERSTEIN (DE-I)**  
**DG CNECT – Commissioner BRETON**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.1. While we have learned in the current pandemic that remote working, home office and flexible working schemes will – at least to a certain degree – remain the "New Normal" we also need to understand that digital business models will increasingly shape our world of work. These models need to be designed in a people- and values-oriented way. In a broader societal sense, the challenge is to guarantee the digital inclusion of particularly vulnerable groups.</p>	<p>During the current pandemic, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have allowed thousands of businesses to stay afloat by simply switching their operations to online mode. Their digital preparedness has saved millions of jobs. At the same time, we have seen new challenges being posed to our European social model, including to teleworkers' work-life balance (especially women's) and occupational safety and health. The Commission is currently collecting relevant evidence and data in the context of the follow-up to the European Parliament legislative own-initiative report on the right to disconnect and fair telework, based on Article 225 on the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union.</p> <p>The pandemic has also led to an expansion of some digital labour platforms. While platform work creates opportunities for additional income, including for vulnerable workers, and has contributed to accessibility of services in the course of lockdowns, it is also associated with challenges regarding working conditions and</p>

access to social protection. On 9 December 2021<sup>123</sup>, the Commission adopted a package to improve the working conditions in platform work and to support the sustainable growth of digital labour platforms in the EU. The Commission's package includes: a proposal for a Directive on improving working conditions in platform work; a Communication outlining the interplays between the proposal for a Directive and existing and forthcoming EU initiatives (notably the GDPR, P2B Regulation and AI Act) and calling on stakeholders to complement EU action with concrete actions on platform work; draft guidelines clarifying the application of EU competition law to collective agreements of solo self-employed people in a weak position, including those working through digital labour platforms.

Particular attention should be addressed to the technical accessibility of working tools and online material to include senior citizens and people with disabilities, persons experiencing poverty and social exclusion and in particular for vulnerable groups in rural and remote areas. Digitalisation is also place (territory) sensitive, and if implemented properly, has the potential to reduce disparities across regions and between Member States including with the support of the Cohesion policy funds.

The Commission welcomes the Committee's position to ensure that digital business models and digital platforms are inclusive and accessible

<sup>123</sup> [Commission proposals to improve the working conditions of people working through digital labour platforms - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

	<p>for all, thus confirming the approach of the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. The Commission included, in 2021, accessibility and inclusiveness in the reinforced EU digital government strategy.</p>
<p>3.2. The benefits of a completed Digital Single Market in the EU are forecast to contribute EUR 415 billion a year to the EU's economic output. Predictive maintenance, digital platforms and quantum computing are just three examples of how digital technologies will have a significant impact on the digitalisation of the European economy. While the digital transformation entails significant opportunities for companies across the EU, many enterprises not only face a huge degree of legal uncertainty in their cross-border activities, but are also at significant risk of falling behind. This is due to lack of access or investment resources, as well as to a lack of skills, which applies generally to many SMEs and affects microenterprises in particular.</p>	<p>The Commission proposed ambitious measures to provide legal certainty in the cross-border provision of digital services, in particular for the Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SMEs), start-ups and scale-ups, through the proposal for a Digital Services Act (DSA)<sup>124</sup>. The DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.</p> <p>In the update to the Industrial Strategy, the Commission announced that it would co-create green and digital transition pathways of industrial ecosystems. The objective is in particular to accelerate their digital transformation and ensure an inclusive transition, with appropriate strategies and support schemes.</p> <p>In addition to the target on basic digital skills established in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Communication "Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade" (Digital Decade Communication)<sup>125</sup> sets a target of having 20 million employed Information Communication Technology specialists in the EU with convergence between women and men. Furthermore, the Communication emphasizes the central role of SMEs in the digital transition, not only because they represent the bulk of the EU</p>

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<sup>124</sup> COM/2020/825 final

<sup>125</sup> COM/2021/118 final

	companies, but also because they are a critical source of innovation.
3.3. While we have learned in the current pandemic that remote working, home office and flexible working schemes will – at least to a certain degree – remain the "New Normal", we also need to understand that digital business models will increasingly shape our world of work. These models need to be designed in a people- and values-oriented way.	The Commission laid out its vision for Europe's digital transformation by 2030 in its Digital Decade Communication, and proposed to compile a set of digital principles. These principles to be adopted as a declaration, will aim to promote and uphold EU values in the digital space and ensure that digitalisation delivers benefits for all citizens. They will complement existing rights that already protect and empower Europeans online.
3.4. In a post-pandemic economy the EU needs to ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises in certain particularly hard hit sectors (service sectors, such as retail and tourism), do not lose ground because investment needs are too high (and savings are exhausted after more than a year in a pandemic situation). These companies need special support for the digital transformation and the further development of business models, which needs to be reflected in the national recovery programmes linked to the EU Recovery Fund. The Commission needs to take a coordinating role in order to avoid fragmentation between different European funds and make sure that activities and projects in this particular field (digital transformation for SMEs) are streamlined.	<p>The Commission has taken several actions to provide advice and support for the digital transformation of SMEs. These actions include for example the advisory services and digital skills training actions through Digital Innovation Hubs under the Digital Europe Programme, for instance by offering Digital Crash Courses for SME employees to become proficient in areas such as Artificial Intelligence, cybersecurity or blockchain. In addition, a digital volunteer pilot (digital experts helping SMEs to solve challenges related to digitalisation) will be put in place.</p> <p>The national recovery and resilience plans (NRRPs) and the Cohesion Policy funds have also a key role in addressing SMEs' needs in this area. Many NRRPs contain measures supporting in particular SMEs digital transformation. The complementarities and synergies between the funds are addressed in the programming phase in the respective Partnerships agreements and Programmes and throughout their</p>

	<p>implementation.</p> <p>The green and digital transition pathways of the industrial ecosystems, announced in the update of the Industrial Strategy and to be co-created with all stakeholders, aim at promoting further consistent investment strategies at EU and national level.</p>
3.5. The political framework must be appropriate, to ensure that SMEs can take advantage of the opportunities presented by digitalisation. Regulation should only be considered in cases where an undesirable development can clearly be foreseen. Innovation and new business models need a certain space to develop. Overly hasty or strict European regulations put European companies, particularly SMEs, at a disadvantage compared to internationally active corporations in the rest of the world.	<p>The Commission fully supports the proportionality and necessity principle for regulatory interventions.</p> <p>With the proposal for the DSA, the Commission aims at replacing a fragmented landscape of 27 different regimes with one set of proportionate rules applicable throughout the single market. The proposal rests on a set of technology-neutral and asymmetric rules, with an adaptive framework for assessing and addressing societal risks and appropriate protections for SMEs. This rests on 20 years of careful monitoring of the digital transformation online and the pervasive societal opportunities and concerns emerging around online platforms and digital services. The proposal for a DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.</p>
3.7. The advancing technical development and digital transformation of the economy also entails certain risks that must be kept in mind in order to fully exploit their potential. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that, along with technological progress and digitalisation, mechanisms are ensured to counteract the digital exclusion of particularly vulnerable groups.	<p>The Commission proposed important rules through the proposed DSA to ensure non-discrimination of users, in particular of vulnerable groups, through platforms' content moderation processes. The proposal for a DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.</p>
4.3.3. Cooperatives and other structures based on cooperation would seem	<p>The Commission agrees with the Committee on the potential of data</p>

<p>particularly well suited for managing intermediary activities and data exchange or sharing between citizens (workers, consumers, entrepreneurs) and companies. Cooperatives in particular would enable the data management interests of the data subjects and the cooperative data holder – which in this case would be owned by the same data subjects – to coincide, and thus such structures would allow for participatory governance shared between citizens, companies and entrepreneurs, which both provide and use the data. This mechanism could support the climate of trust and openness that is a prerequisite for good data governance in the EU's single digital market.</p>	<p>cooperatives. The need to support these kinds of structures was mentioned in the European strategy for data and, as the next step to foster this idea, the use of data cooperatives in data sharing was brought to the proposal for a regulation on European data governance (Data Governance Act)<sup>126</sup>.</p>
<p>4.4.1. The EESC welcomes the proposal to lay down a regulation for organisations dealing with "altruistic data" management. It supports the proposal's stipulation that these organisations should be legal entities operating on a not-for-profit basis and in the general interest, and above all that they should be autonomous and independent, particularly from other organisations pursuing commercial or for-profit data management objectives.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees with the Committee on the importance of regulating data altruism organisations. The proposal for a Data Governance Act requires the recognised data altruism organisations to be independent from other organisations pursuing any commercial or for-profit objectives, not just those related to data management.</p>
<p>4.5.1. The EESC welcomes the Commission's clear message in its recent legislative proposal for AI, at the core of which there are fundamental rights and European values. Many of the EESC's recommendations over the past couple of years found their way into this proposal.</p> <p>4.5.2. The EESC is currently working on a separate opinion in response to the proposal, in which it will address in particular the definition of AI as set out in the proposal, as it is an important element of the AI Act</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the Committee's support to this initiative and looks forward to the separate opinion on the Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act.</p> <p>The Commission believes that the definition of AI in the AI Act should be as neutral as possible so it can be applied over time to innovation and market developments. However, it should not cover any form of automated decision making or</p>

<sup>126</sup> COM (2020) 767 final

<p>proposal.</p> <p>4.5.3. As an initial remark, the EESC stresses that AI remains an essentially contested concept, as there is no universally accepted definition. One complicating factor is that legal definitions differ from purely scientific definitions, in that they should meet a number of requirements including inclusiveness, precision, comprehensiveness, practicability and permanence, some of which are legally binding and some of which are considered good regulatory practice.</p> <p>4.5.4. On the one hand the AI Act proposal looks not only at the technology itself, but also at what is used for and how it is used. On the other hand, it contains a specific definition of AI including a list of AI techniques that fall within the scope of the regulation. As such, the AI Act proposal appears to hinge on two thoughts. Whether this slightly ambivalent approach will be adequate to appropriately address the specific challenges of AI and foster its opportunities will be discussed in more detail in the upcoming EESC opinion on the AI Act proposal.</p>	<p>software, which does not feature certain challenging characteristics of AI, such as opacity, unpredictability, autonomy, data dependency.</p> <p>The definition in the AI Act builds on the internationally recognised definition of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and complements it with a list of techniques and approaches to provide legal certainty. With a view to avoiding a regulation of the technology as such, a given system is subject to the Act only if it meets the AI definition and falls within the scope of the specific use cases identified in the proposal in terms of prohibited AI practices, high-risk AI systems or AI systems requiring transparency obligations.</p>
<p>4.6.1. The EESC welcomes the proposal for a single market for Digital Services at a time when new and innovative information society digital services have emerged, changing the daily lives of EU citizens and shaping and transforming how they communicate, connect, consume and do business.</p> <p>4.6.2. The EESC supports the Commission's efforts to prevent the internal market being fragmented by a proliferation of national rules and regulations and calls for a clear statement regarding the exhaustive nature of the Digital Services Act. This is an</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of the Committee for the proposed DSA proposal and the strong alignment of objectives in promoting an innovative environment for information society services throughout the single market, and empowering citizens and businesses to navigate and strive in the digital transformation.</p> <p>The Commission encourages the continuous dialogue with social partners and has drawn on in-depth consultations both ahead of and after the publication of the legal proposal.</p>

<p>opportunity to establish global standards for the digital markets that can lead Europe into this new era, ensuring a high level of consumer safety and protection online.</p> <p>4.6.3. The EESC calls on the Commission and the Member States to define a reasonable schedule for setting up the discussion and inclusive public consultation and implementing the regulation and strategy. It is fundamental for social partners and civil society organisations to play a role in this process in order to achieve a level playing field for all players.</p>	<p>The Commission is committed to continue the wide engagement on these matters.</p> <p>In line with the Committee's position, the Commission commits itself in its Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030 to examine by 2023 the functioning of the internal market for relevant assistive technologies to identify need for further action given that diverse national rules may harm the competitiveness of prices.</p>
<p>4.6.4. The EESC welcomes the greater transparency for recommender systems and advertising, ensuring that consumers get only the advertising they want.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of the Committee for the measures in the proposed DSA as regards recommender systems and advertising systems on online platforms. The proposed rules go far-beyond transparency requirements and contain a comprehensive risk management approach for such amplification systems. Once adopted, the rules both empower users to interact with algorithmic systems and have agency over their own choices online, and enable a robust public and regulatory scrutiny. The proposal for a DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.</p>
<p>4.6.5. The EESC notes that there are many shortcomings with regard to the country of origin principle and calls for the careful consideration of alternative methods, such as the country of destination principle, especially in tax, labour and consumer issues unless there is a stronger regulation on the EU level in order to ensure fair competition and the highest possible level of consumer protection.</p>	<p>The Commission conducted a detailed assessment of the governance systems for supervising digital services through both the evaluation of the E-Commerce Directive and the impact assessment supporting the proposed Digital Services Act. This also builds on the overwhelming convergence of views from all stakeholders participating in the wide public consultation organised</p>

over 2020, who supported a strong ‘country of origin’ principle, in line with the widely shared objective of preserving and enforcing the single market for digital services and ensuring the most effective enforcement system.

Through the proposed Digital Services Act, the Commission aims to tackle the observed shortcomings of the regulatory system by providing a fully harmonised framework for the responsibilities of online intermediaries, and establish a strong European governance for the supervision of digital services.

The proposed DSA aims to harmonise procedural obligations for how intermediaries must address illegal content and answer to orders from authorities irrespective of where they are established in the Union. The proposal further aims to enable the effective enforcement online of the content rules of each Member State, and, once adopted, consumers and users of online platforms will find fast redress to their grievances, regardless of where they are established.

At the same time, the EU governance framework in the proposal sets very clear responsibilities for the country best placed to supervise and sanction digital services: the Member State where the service provider is established. This aims to ensure coherence in all decisions and predictability for innovative service providers who wish to scale cross-border, but also the fastest and most effective sanctioning and enforcement mechanism to protect users’ safety and fundamental rights online.

	<p>Once adopted, the DSA will provide for a robust cooperation and information exchange across Member States, to ensure mutual support and consolidate a performant enforcement system that is far beyond ‘the sum of parts’. Finally, the system will provide for an escalation mechanism for the Commission to intervene where EU-wide concerns emerge most prominently, in relation to very large online platforms.</p> <p>This approach brings a robust and effective supervision of digital services, and nurtures responsible innovation across the single market. The proposal for a DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.</p>
4.6.6. The EESC calls for an adequate framework to be developed to allow companies to assert the fairness, reliability and security of their artificial intelligence systems, taking into account the highest possible level of consumer and worker protection.	<p>The proposed DSA provides for a risk assessment and mitigation framework for very large online platforms and the way their systems are designed or manipulated to the detriment of certain societal and safety concerns and negative effects on fundamental rights. This acknowledges the fact that artificial intelligence systems are socio-technical developments: it is technology-neutral and includes but is not limited to an assessment of algorithmic systems.</p> <p>Under the proposed rules, platforms will need to have appropriate risk management systems in place, they will be subject to independent auditing, will have to provide data to vetted researchers investigating the evolution of societal risks, and will report publicly on all such measures. This will be closely supervised by the regulators, and will follow an adaptive framework, fuelled by iterative guidance and Codes</p>

of conduct. The proposal for a DSA is currently being examined by the co-legislators.

**N°13 Digitalisation for all (exploratory opinion requested by the presidency of the Council of the EU)**  
**EESC 2021/2647 – INT/943**  
**562nd Plenary Session – July 2021**  
**Rapporteur: Philip VON BROCKDORFF (MT-II)**  
**Corapporteur: Violeta JELIĆ (HR-I)**  
**DG GROW – Commissioner BRETON**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
The follow-up given by the Commission to this opinion will be included in a subsequent report.	

**N°14      Review of the Roaming Regulation**

**COM(2021) 85 final**

**EESC 2021/1368 - INT/934**

**562<sup>nd</sup> Plenary Session 7–8 July 2021**

**Rapporteur: Christophe LEFEVRE (FR-II)**

**DG CNECT – Commissioner BRETON**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
<p>1.4. The lower caps on prices that visited networks can charge visiting operators are welcome, but the scale of the reduction is insufficient given the difference between the prices re-charged and the actual costs of roaming in the visited network. This increases the cost of basic subscriptions for consumers and undermines the competitiveness of mobile virtual network operators (MVNOs), who have to buy roaming services from the main mobile operators. Data consumption in particular is increasing at high rates. To avoid negative scaling effects for MVNOs and small mobile network operators (MNOs), wholesale caps need to decrease at the same rate as consumption increases.</p> <p>1.5. The EESC expresses its support for the preferred option in the proposal "Option 3 – Sustainable and genuine RLAH" (preferred option) and ensure even lower price caps than indicated in the proposal.</p> <p>4.7. The lower caps on prices that visited networks can charge visiting operators are also welcome, but the scale of the reduction is insufficient given the difference between the prices re-charged and the actual costs of roaming in the visited network. This increases the cost of basic subscriptions for consumers and weakens the competitiveness of MVNOs,</p>	<p>The Commission notes the overall support for the proposed preferred policy option aiming at a sustainable and genuine "Roam like at home" and related proposal to lower wholesale price caps. The European Parliament and the Council reached a provisional political agreement on the proposal on 8 December. The political agreement is subject to formal first reading approval.</p> <p>With its proposal (for data: 2 EUR/GB in 2022 to 1.5 EUR/GB in 2025), the Commission aimed at striking a balance between the need to ensure cost recovery for those operators providing wholesale traffic, maintaining investments incentives, while also increasing sustainability for the purchasing side at wholesale level.</p> <p>The provisional political agreement further lowers the wholesale caps for data starting from 2 EUR/GB in 2022 to 1 EUR/GB in 2027.</p> <p>The wholesale caps as provisionally agreed by the European Parliament and the Council will increase the sustainability of players with small bargaining power, ensuring that caps are as close to the underlying costs as possible, while respecting the cost recovery principle as one of the key</p>

<p>who have to buy roaming services from the main mobile operators.</p> <p>4.8. The EESC expresses its support for the preferred option in the proposal "Option 3 — Sustainable and genuine RLAH" (preferred option) and ensure even lower price caps than indicated in the proposal.</p>	<p>pillars of the roaming rules.</p> <p>Maximum wholesale caps should act as a safeguard level and should ensure that operators can recover their cost, including joint and common cost.</p> <p>The Commission proposal was based on the cost model developed specifically for this legislative proposal itself. The proposed caps were defined considering the estimates of the costs for a hypothetical efficient operator in the highest cost Member States, using a variety of evidence sources. These include the cost model developed for the Commission by Axon Partners, roaming data collected by the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) (including costs and volumes per Member State), the costs of providing termination and transit services and information provided through the frequent interactions with the full roaming market.</p> <p>The Axon Partners cost model was developed in close collaboration with National Regulatory Authorities and operators of the European Economic Area. The model consists of 28 country-specific models, each taking into account (and estimating on this basis) the unique information collected in the respective Member State including usage, equipment constructed, demography and forecasts. The cost model then estimates for each Member State the cost of providing roaming wholesale services by a so-called "efficient operator" under different scenarios.</p>
<p>1.6. While the proposed regulation improves the transparency of value-added rates through the creation of value added service numbering ranges, with a</p>	<p>This interruption of fraudulent services is not roaming-specific and national solutions can be imposed through the European Electronic Communications</p>

<p>centralised EU database accessible to operators for these numbering ranges, the EESC recommends that it includes the possibility of interrupting a service when it is put in place fraudulently (ping call) following an alert from the judicial or police authorities, providing for a means of redress for operators of these services.</p> <p>4.10. The EESC recommends that the proposal include the possibility of interrupting a service when it is put in place fraudulently (ping call) following an alert from the judicial or police authorities, providing for a means of redress for operators of these services.</p>	<p>Code (Article 97), which also allows the operators to withhold relevant interconnection or other service revenues in case of fraud or misuse.</p>
<p>1.7. and 4.13. While the regulation refers to "fair use" to describe roaming usage, the EESC regrets that it completely fails to define its limits, nor does it address fair use policy rules for unlimited tariff plans, or the pricing of international calls, irrespective of whether the customer is roaming or not. The EESC proposes deleting the term "subject to fair use" unless its scope is specified, as this argument is currently used by operators to severely restrict the use of roaming packages.</p>	<p>The Roaming Regulation abolished retail roaming surcharges in the Union and ensured that the same tariff conditions apply for the use of mobile services while roaming abroad in the Union and at home (i.e. in the country of the mobile subscription of the customer). The Roaming Regulation aims at eliminating divergences between domestic prices and those applied to roaming when periodically travelling within the Union, leading to the realisation of 'roaming like at home'.</p> <p>The Commission would like to clarify, that its rules are not meant to enable permanent roaming across the Union - i.e. the situation where a customer in a Member State where domestic mobile prices are higher buys services from operators established in Member States where domestic mobile prices are lower - with a view to roaming permanently in the former Member State.</p> <p>The principle of fair use is therefore an essential element to ensure sustainability of the roam like at home principle and prevent abusive or anomalous usage by</p>

	<p>roaming customers of regulated retail roaming services at the applicable domestic price, such as the use of such services for purposes other than periodic travel, for instance the use of such services on a permanent basis.</p> <p>This principle has been in place since 15 June 2017 and the fair use mechanism has been functioning adequately and hence it should continue to be in place since it has contributed to the continued availability of the most competitive data bundles on domestic markets. Rules of this mechanism and detailed limits of fair use policy, including for open data bundles, are laid down in the Implementing Regulation 2016/2286, as mandated through the current Roaming Regulation Article 6d. Article 6d has not been subject to substantial changes and is included in the Recast Commission proposal as Article 8<sup>127</sup>.</p> <p>The Commission Implementing Regulation defines in detail the scope of the fair use policies and it will continue to apply.</p> <p>The Implementing Regulation is subject to regular review. The Commission will assess, in line with the requirements of the Regulation, whether and to what extent market conditions such as consumption and travelling patterns, evolution and convergence of pricing and observable risk of distortion of competition, would allow for a sustainable provision of ‘roam-like-at-home’ conditions while modifying the application and effects of the fair use policies measures.</p>
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<sup>127</sup> Art. 8 of the proposal has not been subject to substantive amendments, but only subject to simple formal adaptation in this Recast, as confirmed by the Consultative Working Party consisting of the respective legal services. See also Consultative Working Party Opinion.

	<p>The Commission would further like to clarify that pricing of international calls is outside the scope of the Roaming Regulation and it is regulated in a separate legislative instrument (Article 5a of Regulation (EU) 2015/2120 as amended). The provisional political agreement on the proposal requires the Commission, however, to evaluate the measures on intra-EU communications (calls and SMS from the home country to another Member State) and verify whether and to what extent there is an ongoing need to reduce caps to protect consumers.</p>
<p>1.8. With regard to consumer alerts when approaching a limit defined either by the consumer or by the operator, the EESC recommends requiring the operator to alert the consumer again whenever the volume set for the first alert has been consumed again, particularly during the same call or data use session.</p> <p>4.18. [...] If these alerts fail or are not implemented, mechanisms for reimbursing unfair charges should be provided for.</p>	<p>The Roaming Regulation ensures that the roaming provider can offer and the end-user can choose one or more financial limits. Once the financial limit is reached further roaming usage is blocked until the end-user has made an active choice to continue using roaming services. Moreover, the Commission has not found evidence that the current rules in place are problematic, nor assessed the impact of changing them. Therefore, the Commission did not modify them in the recast proposal. The provisional political agreement on the proposal introduces an additional cut-off limit whenever the volume set for the first alert has been consumed again. It further amends the cut-off option to apply by default, instead of by opting-in.</p>
<p>1.9. In particular, the EESC feels that special attention should be paid to situations where mobile devices are used in cross-border areas with non-EU countries, and recommends that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- a specific link be requested from operators operating in the EU's areas for EU RLAH roaming charges to be extended</li> </ul>	<p>The Roaming Regulation price regulates roaming services in the EU. The Roaming Regulation itself is an internal market measure based on Art. 114 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and as such roaming rules cannot be extended beyond the EU/EEA.</p> <p>As regards commercial agreements with</p>

<p>to those countries or to the bordering geographical area;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- international agreements be concluded with those countries bordering EU countries for extending EU RLAH roaming.</li> </ul>	<p>operators outside the EU, operators are free to conclude commercial agreements on a voluntary basis. The Roaming Regulation does not impose any obligation on operators outside the EU. The provisional political agreement on the proposal includes a recital encouraging initiatives to lowering roaming charges with third countries.</p>
<p>1.13. The EESC recommends that the EU regulation be implemented with the ultimate aim of making the EU a single tariff zone, in a single market, offering calls and data consumption at "local" rates to all mobile phones and landlines of customers who have a telephone subscription in Europe, with the same speed and access to infrastructure, to or from whichever country the call is being made.</p> <p>1.3. Where the problem is poor local infrastructure, the EESC recommends increasing investment in this infrastructure, particularly to improve coverage of "white spots", but also introducing minimum requirements to be progressively met by operators in order to enable consumers to make full use of these services.</p> <p>4.20. The EESC recommends that the EU regulation be implemented with the ultimate aim of the European Union creating a genuine single market, offering calls and data consumption at "local" prices to all mobile phones and landline customers who have a telephone subscription in Europe, and with the same speed and access to infrastructure whichever country is making or receiving the call.</p>	<p>The Commission recognises the importance of high quality mobile communication services throughout the single market and the importance of increased investment in infrastructure in particular to improve coverage of white spots. However, a single tariff zone falls outside the scope of the review of the Roaming Regulation. While the Roaming Regulation enables seamless cross-border connectivity, infrastructure is national and the offers and services available in a Member State depend on the operators present in the national market. Furthermore, the objective of the Roaming Regulation is not infrastructure deployment.</p> <p>Regarding price regulation of international calls, these are not roaming calls and are regulated in a separate legislative instrument (Article 5a of Regulation (EU) 2015/2120 as amended) and are outside the scope of the Roaming Regulation. The consumers however encounter some difficulties to distinguish between these two types of services. As mentioned above, the provisional political agreement on the proposal requires the Commission, to evaluate the measures on intra-EU communications (calls and SMS from the home country to another Member State) and verify whether and to what extent there is an</p>

	<p>ongoing need to reduce caps to protect consumers.</p>
<p>1.14. The EESC is concerned that the proposal changes the way of revising maximum wholesale charges by means of a delegated act and recommends a comprehensive legislative review with regard to the societal aspects of the development of roaming.</p> <p>4.21. The EESC is concerned that the proposal changes the way of revising maximum wholesale charges by means of a delegated act. A comprehensive legislative review should adopted as the way forward, so that all societal aspects of roaming development are taken into account. The views of the European Parliament and civil society organisations are important here.</p>	<p>The Commission proposed the possibility to revise maximum wholesale charges by means of a delegated act, to rely on a lighter procedure to be able to adapt the level of the wholesale caps in a timely manner and on the basis of a methodology pre-defined by the co-legislators in the provisions of the basic act, with a view to ensuring regulatory efficiency by reducing procedural burdens for the co-legislators and allowing the market situation and updated cost data to be taken into account in a timely manner based on criteria decided by the co-legislators.</p> <p>The Commission's power to propose new legislation or amend existing one is laid down in the Treaty. The draft political agreement mentioned above establishes that wholesale caps will continue to be revised through ordinary legislative procedure.</p> <p>The Commission, in line with its general right of initiative, and based on the findings of the review reports submitted to the Parliament and to the Council (as defined in Article 21) can propose a comprehensive legislative revision of different aspects of the Regulation.</p>

**N°15 Towards circular public procurement**

**(Own-initiative opinion)**

**EESC 2021/87 – INT/902**

**561st Plenary Session – June 2021**

**Rapporteur: Ferdinand WYCKMANS (BE-II)**

**Co-rapporteur: Andris GOBINS (LV-III)**

**Co-rapporteur: Gonçalo LOBO XAVIER (PT-I)**

**DG GROW – Commissioner BRETON**

<b>Points of the European Economic and Social Committee opinion considered essential</b>	<b>European Commission position</b>
3.5. The Commission can facilitate the adoption of socially responsible criteria in public procurement and promote their use across the EU. It could, for example, organise a series of workshops to raise awareness of the new Buying Social Guide (expected in 2021) and the use of social criteria and clauses by public buyers in order to support social economy organisations, and maximise opportunities for social responsibility in the manufacture of goods and provision of services. It could also update the #WeBuySocialEU campaign which has collected and disseminated 71 good practices and a series of videos to inspire and encourage public buyers to use public procurement as a way of achieving a positive social and ethical impact.	<p>The Commission will continue to promote the use of social considerations in public procurement. Further promotional actions following the publication of “Buying Social – a guide to taking account of social considerations in public procurement” in May 2021, in order to disseminate the content of the guide are notably being considered.</p> <p>Furthermore, the forthcoming EU Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) Helpdesk, modelled on the current EU Green Public Procurement Helpdesk, will also help address social issues in procurement. Besides replying to queries of public buyers on practical aspects of SPP, the new Helpdesk activities will include collecting good practices and organising workshops on topics of green and social procurement.</p>
3.7. CPP will allow administrations to move beyond the lowest price criterion at the time of purchase and to evaluate the quality and circularity aspects of tenders, the Life-Cycle Cost (LCC) of a product or service, and to use criteria that go beyond price, such as quality, sustainability or social impact. The Commission, which has already developed	Supporting contracting authorities in considering the life-cycle costs of their purchases is particularly important. The current initiatives of the Commission in the area of life-cycle assessment and environmental footprint will also facilitate a harmonised approach to the assessment of the carbon footprint and

standardised free-to-access LCC measuring tools, is well placed to provide such transparent and reliable tools, which procurers can use with confidence. These tools should also provide the option to calculate and include the carbon costs of products. The EESC calls for public buyers to be encouraged to make use of existing tools in public procurement to help develop innovative solutions, for example, through innovation partnerships or competitive dialogues.

circularity aspects, laying the foundations for a stronger consideration in public procurement as well. These initiatives touch upon and go beyond the concept of circular public procurement as a practice to ensure that public purchases contribute to limiting the use of resources and the production of waste throughout the life-cycle of a product.

In particular, the Sustainable Products Initiative (SPI)<sup>128</sup> and the Green Claims Initiative (GCI)<sup>129</sup> will aim at ensuring that information on sustainability along value chains of the products placed on the EU market is reliable. This will also benefit public buyers. In some cases, the SPI initiative may lay the basis for establishing mandatory sustainable procurement criteria. SPI and GCI proposed rules would probably be based on the product environmental footprint methodology (PEF)<sup>130</sup>.

PEF is essentially the EU recommended life-cycle assessment (LCA)<sup>131</sup>. It consists in determining the environmental performance of a good or service throughout its life-cycle. PEF takes into account multiple elements affecting the environment. These include not only flows of materials and waste, but also emissions and other relevant factors related to any stage of the production and delivery process, such as health effects, resource-related threats and burdens to

<sup>128</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12567-Sustainable-products-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12567-Sustainable-products-initiative_en)

<sup>129</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12511-Environmental-performance-of-products-&-businesses-substantiating-claims\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12511-Environmental-performance-of-products-&-businesses-substantiating-claims_en)

<sup>130</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/smnp/PEFCR\\_OEFSR\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/smnp/PEFCR_OEFSR_en.htm)

<sup>131</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013H0179>

	society.
<p>3.10. The directives do not include any specific mandatory rules on emissions or circular economy, but they enable public authorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- to use strategic procurement, which is a relevant and powerful way to respond to societal, environmental and economic challenges to shape the way in which both the public and private sector behave in the market; - to address common societal goals in the procurement process based on social considerations in the awarding of contracts with a focus on promoting gender equality, employment opportunities and combating discrimination.</li> </ul> <p>One possibility is to consider replacing the present system, which leaves the decision to use strategic procurement largely to Member States, with EU minimum criteria in some areas such as sustainability and the Life-cycle Cost. Such a policy may at the same time encourage an R&amp;D framework to create circular solutions.</p>	<p>Under the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Commission committed to propose minimum mandatory green public procurement (GPP) criteria and targets in sectoral legislation. To this end, a number of initiatives have been adopted (namely, the proposal for the new Batteries Regulation<sup>132</sup>), or are being prepared.</p> <p>The Commission committed to determine the best way of setting minimum mandatory criteria for sustainable food procurement under the Farm to Fork Strategy<sup>133</sup>. Furthermore, the Commission is reflecting on introducing mandatory sustainable procurement criteria in its upcoming Sustainable Products Initiative<sup>134</sup>. Finally, the recently adopted proposal for a revised Energy Efficient Directive<sup>135</sup> includes requirements aiming to ensure that public purchases are carried out in compliance with energy efficiency principles.</p>
<p>4.2.1. The obligation to apply the minimum EU GPP criteria to tenders of any amount (i.e. for 100% of the value based on the bid instead of a percentage of the bid) will facilitate the transition and ensure that procurement is both "green" and "sustainable".</p>	<p>While the EU GPP criteria are not mandatory, as stated above, the Commission will introduce mandatory GPP criteria for specific sectors or products, which will have a similar effect. For instance, the proposal for the revised Batteries Regulation includes provisions on establishing such criteria through delegated acts.</p>

<sup>132</sup> Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council concerning batteries and waste batteries, repealing Directive 2006/66/EC and amending Regulation (EU) No 2019/1020, COM/2020/798 final.

<sup>133</sup> Communication from the Commission to European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system, COM(2020) 381 final.

<sup>134</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12567-Sustainable-products-initiative\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12567-Sustainable-products-initiative_en)

<sup>135</sup> Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on energy efficiency (recast), COM(2021) 558 final.

<p>4.2.2. Making it obligatory to include social clauses in calls for tender for the award of concession contracts and contracts for works and services and supplies, among other things, especially – but not only – those relating to labour-intensive work (such as cleaning and catering services and others), will ensure that evaluation of the social aspect – which, alongside the economic and environmental aspects, represents the third pillar of sustainable development – becomes a permanent part of tendering procedures.</p>	<p>The public procurement Directives already require Member States to ensure that in the performance of public contracts and concessions labour and social obligations established by the relevant EU, national or international law are complied with. With initiatives such as the aforementioned “Buying Social” guide, the Commission actively promotes the use of social clauses in public procurement, including those requiring compliance with decent labour standards. To encourage responsible labour practices the guide also provides useful clarifications on the use of labour requirements in public procurement.</p>
<p>4.3.1. It is essential to train public buyers in the legal and technical aspects of CPP and the concept of Life-Cycle Cost (LCC), and to train those buyers that are end-users in the sustainable use of products. ICLEI, together with other organisations, updated the EC's GPP Training toolkit. A Commission training programme for relevant staff to become CPP-specialists in different areas would be an investment that can ultimately lead to lower expenditure and thus to savings. Soft skills such as market dialogue capabilities are also important. Collaboration and dialogue between buyers and suppliers help buyers understand what is available on the market and help suppliers prepare to meet buyers' future needs. Training the relevant staff to become circular procurement specialists in different areas is an investment that can ultimately lead to lower expenditure and thus to savings. In addition, it is necessary to</p>	<p>In 2021, the Commission completed a first series of GPP training actions in 11 selected EU Member States<sup>136</sup>. The training sessions were directed to central and local public buyers. The project will be renewed in the coming months, in order to build and improve on the coverage provided by the first iteration of sessions.</p>

<sup>136</sup> Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania and Malta. The nationally adapted materials can be consulted here: <https://sustainable-procurement.org/trainingservices/>. The GPP training toolkit is available here: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/toolkit\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/toolkit_en.htm).

support potential suppliers – especially SMEs and social enterprises – to bid for circular public contracts.	
4.4.2. Since 2010, the Commission has gathered 189 inspiring GPP examples. A further 12 will be prepared in 2021. Many of these also showcase CPP. It could step up efforts to promote good practices that have been disseminated across all Member States.	The new SPP helpdesk, foreseen to be launched in 2022, will help the Commission gather additional examples and good practices on the use of green and social considerations in public procurement, and disseminate them through several workshops.
4.4.5. EU institutions should also lead by example, by conducting CPP and showcasing this through case studies to emphasise the opportunities and benefits available to all public buyers. In general, all tenders must include GPP criteria.	<p>The EU Institutions have set up an Interinstitutional GPP Helpdesk to assist colleagues who procure on behalf of the Institutions with their queries on how to introduce and manage green criteria in their tenders. The Commission uses GPP to tender out many of its larger contracts and framework agreements. Some projects also include circular practices. For instance, since 2016 the Office for Infrastructures and Buildings has experience with recovering components of office furniture so as to reuse them to recreate new pieces of furniture.</p> <p>The Commission also promotes solid waste management practices by reducing, reusing, recycling waste on its building sites. For example, the refurbishment of the L-41 building in Brussels was organised around the principles of effective management of building related waste. The aim was to ensure reuse, to recycle and to optimise waste disposal.</p>