European Economic and Social Committee
Employers' Group

Newsletter

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Wanted:
A STRATEGY FOR A MORE COMPETITIVE EUROPE

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Sweden is assuming the EU Presidency at a time of historic challenges for Member States and the EU as a whole. Russia's invasion of Ukraine means that the Ukrainian people are fighting for their security and lives, but the implications for European security are also significant. Alongside the humanitarian crisis, the war continues to have far-reaching consequences for EU businesses and citizens. Higher energy costs along with supply chain disruptions, interest rate hikes and rampant transport costs are squeezing businesses.

To face strong economic headwinds, addressing the short-term needs of businesses is imperative. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the longer-term challenges.

The fact of the matter is that Europe has weakened its performance over the past few decades in terms of key economic indicators of competitiveness and productivity growth, and it is dangerously distant from the global frontier of competitiveness. Alongside crisis management, Europe is in dire need of a strategic agenda with a medium-term perspective.

The EU's share of global GDP has dropped from 25 percent in 1990 to 17 percent by 2020. This means that global growth over the past three decades has primarily taken place outside the EU – in Asia and especially in China. Part of the decline is due to the catching-up effect but growth in the EU, and especially in the euro area, has also been weak compared to the US. Furthermore, the EU's relative weight in global trade has decreased and when comparing firms – the backbone of competitiveness – in Europe with firms in the United States, there is a significant gap. Between 2014 and 2019, European firms grew on average 40 percent more slowly than their US peers and spent 40 percent less on research and development.

Importantly, we should not draw the wrong conclusions from current developments and turn Europe inwards. Conflicts and crises must not become a pretext for isolating Europe. Rather, it is vital to draw attention to the importance of open and competitive markets in a healthy economy and society. Our economy, and hence the global competitiveness of our firms, represent EU's global leverage. At a very fundamental level, securing growth is necessary if we are to successfully address the great challenges of our time – geopolitical, security-related, climate-related, demographic, as well as those arising from global competition and migration.

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise takes, as its starting point, the need to strengthen Europe's competitiveness. The development of an entrepreneurial and knowledge-based economy along with businesses' ability to innovate are key issues for the future. While economic competitiveness has been a building block of the European Union since its early days, there is at present an unfortunate lack of more strategic thinking around competitiveness at European level. A course correction may now be on its way. Ursula von der Leyen has promised a "competitiveness check" on new EU policy. Nevertheless, no follow-up act has been developed to step in where previous EU strategies for bolstering competitiveness left off.

The good news is that Europe in many ways is still a leading economy and that there are reasons to be optimistic about Europe's economic prospects provided the right policies are pursued. With a policy framework at EU level to boost competitiveness and productivity growth, the gap between Europe and the global leaders at the frontier of growth and innovation can be closed. The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise therefore welcomes the stated objective of the Swedish Presidency to anchor a concerted approach to European competitiveness at the top of the political agenda.

To become more competitive, the EU needs to pursue new policy initiatives in several areas. A new competitiveness agenda in the EU should guide developments over the next five to ten years and focus on policies at the EU level and where the EU carries significant legal competence. Such an agenda will reflect the Single Market Programme rather than the Lisbon Strategy, and it should aim at policies where there is a strong need for fresh initiatives that can help businesses and economies be better equipped and motivated to compete globally.

We need to learn from the past that the EU can make strong contributions to Europe's economic performance when policies and reform focus on areas of strong EU competence. By clearly stating that "The EU must continue to provide the best possible conditions for a sound and open economy based on free competition, private investment and successful digitalisation", the Swedish Presidency has provided the initial framing, along with the European Council conclusions from 15 December, which invited the Commission to present a strategy at EU level in early 2023 to boost competitiveness and productivity.

Our hope is that the European Council in March will provide a clear path to enable the development of a strategic agenda with a medium-term perspective – a compass to guide policy initiatives in support of productivity and competitiveness. After all, the best way to address the rising tide of challenges is to make our own economies more competitive.

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On the way to the Critical Raw Materials Act

Did you know that a smartphone can contain up to 50 different sorts of metals? Given their daily use in everyday life, we need to make sure we have all sorts of metals in sufficient quantity.

Already in antiquity, certain minerals or metals were geopolitically considered "strategic". Since the Industrial Revolution, the interest in mineral resources has continued to grow. Since the end of the 20th century, some metals have become even more important given the increasing number of everyday products containing high-tech parts integrating them. Yet it is only about 20 years since people began to become aware of the non-renewable nature of certain resources, as well as their strategic interest for the economy and society.

Ensuring access to certain raw materials within the EU has progressively become crucial. This is why in 2011 the European Commission (EC) started drawing up a list of critical raw materials (CRMs) which is regularly reviewed and updated. The Communication on tackling the challenges in commodity markets and on raw materials defines CRMs as those with a "particularly high risk of supply shortage in the next 10 years and which are particularly important for the value chain"; they are characterised by both a high economic importance and a high supply risk.

CRMs are key to almost all industrial ecosystems and therefore crucial for Europe's competitiveness. CRMs are also key to the green transition: without sustainable access to raw materials, Europe's ambition to become the first climate neutral continent by 2050 is at risk.

However, Europe is currently facing an unprecedented low resilience in the raw material supply chain, which may jeopardise major strategic industries. In its 2021 document Strategic dependencies and capacities, the EC identified 137 products that are essential for our industry and society and on which the EU is highly dependent. Over half of these dependencies originate from China, followed by Vietnam and Brazil. And if the EU does not act, the situation will worsen: it is estimated that demand for rare earths could increase tenfold by 2050, and the EU currently imports 98% of these materials from China alone. As for lithium, the EU will need 60 times the amount currently used, and here again we import more than three quarters of our total supply from Chile alone.

The war in Ukraine is complicating the situation: the aerospace and defence industries depend on imports of titanium from Russia, and more generally, Russia and Ukraine represent 12% of the EU imports of raw materials. The sanctions on Russia and Belarus are already having an impact on several sectors in Europe. Who would have thought a few years ago that the aluminium supply could become a source of concern?

As a response, the EU needs to work on an open strategic autonomy while reducing the dependencies on third countries. We need to recover, recycle and reuse CRMs and also allow the start of new extraction activities in Europe, provided that European environmental standards are respected. Without increasing the production of certain CRMs, there will be no Green Deal: we need to find the means to achieve our ambitions.

CRMs have always been the DNA of the EESC's Consultative Committee on Industrial Change. In its opinion on Critical Raw Materials Resilience: Charting a Path towards greater Security and Sustainability, the EESC underlined the need to find support instruments for sustainable primary sourcing in Europe and the need to maintain extraction and processing capacities in the EU. The EESC is fully committed to interacting with all players to contribute to these shortcomings and building an open strategic autonomy.

We need to work together in order to create synergies. The EESC has been cooperating with the EC and the EP in the framework of the above-mentioned opinion and the high level conference it organised in January 2022 on "Critical raw materials: an essential building block for the future of Europe", followed by 200 participants. It is also cooperating closely with the European Raw Materials Alliance (ERMA), in which it has an observer status.

The EESC is now looking forward to the Critical Raw Materials Act which the EC is expected to unveil on 14 March. The CRMs Act should provide a shared understanding of which CRMs can be considered particularly strategic. It should also contribute to creating a true European network of raw materials agencies to enable industry to anticipate risks of disruption. Finally, it should encourage diversification of supply sources and strategic partnerships with third countries. The EESC intends to respond to the CRMs Act with an opinion and a conference that the CCMI will organise together with the REX section in the course of 2023, thus offering a forum for civil society representatives to have their say.

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The EU Strategic Compass

On 24 February 2022, "Hope for the best, be prepared for the worst" acquired a sad timeliness: with Putin's attack on Ukraine and the sustained terror campaign against civilians that followed, Europe is once again living through the worst of times, without even being properly prepared for it. In fact, our military action and defence capabilities had become seriously run down in some areas, which only encouraged Putin and his terror gangs to engage in unscrupulous aggression. Despite the clear warnings of a few, most people had not expected this. "Hope for the best" was an illusion because "prepare for the worst" did not happen.

If there is something positive to take away from the reality check we suddenly faced in early 2022, then it is the realisation of the need to quickly, permanently and decisively prepare for the worst in order to prevent this very scenario, namely a brutal war. This is the apparent paradox of deterrence: preventing war through the military capability to successfully retaliate.

This is why the "Strategic Compass", adopted by EU heads of state and government in March 2022, came at the right time and sets out the right measures. It is clearly action-oriented, not a general policy concept. It includes a range of very specific political activities and military steps, with target dates and milestones to be regularly reviewed. David McAllister, Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, rightly stressed that herein lies its current and future-oriented political impact. Opinion REX 562 on the EU Strategic Compass, which will be adopted at the January plenary session, also acknowledges all this.

The opinion highlights the role of civil society in ensuring security and resilience – by no means separate from the Strategic Compass, but a consistent addition to and extension of it. In democracies, military capability without societal commitment is ineffective. Deterrence works only with a commitment, embedded across all social groups, to deploy military capabilities in the event of an emergency. Only by combining military capability and societal commitment can brutal wars of conquest be prevented or countered.

"Security in freedom" requires more, namely preventive policies with a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. Diplomatic and civilian means are the primary tool here, with the use of military power a last resort. Only through the active involvement of civil society can Europe properly withstand military interventions, disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic blackmail, theft of know-how, etc. Such hybrid attacks by dictatorships including Russia, China or Iran – to name the most active – all serve to systematically undermine cohesion and solidarity, with the aim of rendering us defenceless.

The EU is the antithesis of violence and war and this must remain so: through democratic forms of government that guarantee the rule of law and individual human rights. All of this must be underpinned and experienced through civil society. This is at the heart of the EESC's concerns. The rules-based international order can be restored and strengthened in a global alliance with all states credibly committed to universal human rights, first and foremost with the US. Maintaining equidistance from the world powers is not compatible with this.

The EU must become the strong European pillar of NATO. "Strategic autonomy" – which can be easily misinterpreted – must be properly defined in this context. It does not mean acting alone on security policy, but becoming an even better partner with the capacity to act autonomously, if necessary, should support not be available through the Alliance.

Increasingly, aggressive and revisionist powers are trying to make their presence felt across the world. All liberal democracies must stand up to them by upholding their principles and equipping themselves with diplomatic, civilian and military capabilities in equal measure. Not one inch should be given in response to pressure and threats from authoritarian rulers or dictators.

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Thirty years of the single market: MORE WISHFUL THINKING THAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL REALITY?

We are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the single market. But what are we marking? What do we have to celebrate? Thirty years of mutual recognition of our neighbours' ability to do as well as us? Thirty years of coming together for more growth and prosperity for every European citizen?

Thirty years ago, the European market consisted of a multitude of regulatory frameworks with a shared desire to further harmonise our systems and better coordinate oversight. Since then, this framework has greatly improved. We now have a clearer outline of the role and responsibility of each economic operator involved in making a product available on the EU market. All responsibilities correspond to a role in the supply chain, based on the principle of proportionality that Europe holds dear.

The New Legal Framework, established in the 2000s, and its follow-up have enabled us to set up a clear hierarchy of the role of operators and their responsibilities, a hierarchy to be replicated across the European legislations. The buzzword was the completion of the single market.

Since then, how many reports have been adopted by the Parliament on the matter, how many Commission directorates are constantly working on it, how many billions of euros have been voted on at the Council? All these initiatives had the same goal: strengthening, relaunching, reviving ... We pledged EUR 4.2 billion as part of an action plan adopted in the Council for the 2021-2027 period. In other words, our countries have put EUR 4.2 billion on the table to create new authorities, standards or other things, with the aim of obliging those same countries to comply with the rules that they themselves have adopted to complete of the single market.

That may sound somewhat absurd. And thus, anyone working on this single market project today, however has a rather bleak view on it: Our single market is hampered in every one of its fundamental freedoms – free movement of goods, persons, services and capital.

In addition, the twin digital and sustainable transitions and the multiple crises of recent years have strengthened the role of a national, sovereignty-based approach.

In the trade sector, clear barriers to freedom of establishment have been under discussion at Commission level for more than a decade. There are multiple overriding reasons in the public interest which justify barriers to the free movement of goods. In some countries, the digital sector is regulated nationally, with measures on the circular economy also expected at national level, even though these are areas of European convergence.

So, let's show some common sense by applying our Acquis Communautaire.

Why are we reinventing definitions, rules and responsibilities in each of the major ongoing reviews? The latest blatant examples are the debates on regulations regarding the fight against deforestation and general product safety. The challenges are increasing, as are rules on compliance, so why are we complicating or diverging from a system that has proved its worth?

Strict application of the acquis would enable companies subject to a rule to understand and apply it and the authorities to enforce it. In short, the best way to achieve a true level playing field across countries in Europe.

The single market has paved the way for EU-led big projects, major innovations, work on international gatekeepers, disruptive technology industries and joint procurement in a global market. But sadly, it lacks focus on the backbone of our economy, our everyday businesses.

So on this anniversary, we should be asking ourselves what we can and should expect from the single market and how to make it happen. It is time to stop the hypocrisy of our European frameworks as they will not be enforced at national level. Increasing the burden in Brussels does not mean that rules will be applied better at national level! On the contrary, all of this puts us at a disadvantage, as businesses, as consumers and simply as citizens.

The single market is not a leap of faith but an economic and social reality.

It is therefore only fair to ask how the Swedish Presidency will approach this issue. What is in the pipeline? On the face of it, 11 measures to "reboot" the single market. Removing barriers, building trust, creating a green and digital market, etc. are on the agenda. Déjà-vu or a real solution? The coming months will tell.

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Corporate Sustainability Reporting: THE DILEMMA OF MAKING IT WORK FOR COMPANIES OF ALL SIZES

On 5 January 2023, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) entered into force. This new directive significantly expands the social and environmental reporting obligations of companies. It extends the reporting requirements and makes them compulsory for large to small and medium-sized enterprises, based on a harmonised reporting standard. The extended scope will mean that from 2024 large European companies and from 2025 SMEs will have to disclose detailed ESG (Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance) information.

EU employers are concerned about the costs of implementation of this new directive and the ambitious timeline, but they also point to the necessity of finding the right level playing field across different countries.

These were the issues discussed during a conference organised by Employers of Poland, the oldest and largest employers' organisation in Poland, in cooperation with the EESC Employers' Group on 20 December 2022 with the title: *Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive: How to make it work?*

Opening the meeting, EESC president Christa Schweng stressed the need for greater transparency in all areas of economic life. She said that new forms of reporting could help to achieve this and that constructive dialogue and exchange of experiences were necessary.

Stefano Mallia, president of the EESC Employers' group, added that the business community was fully committed to global sustainability and to driving investment more towards sustainable activities. He insisted that more and more companies were taking an active role in this by integrating sustainability into business strategies and practices. However, he underlined the need to create adequate reporting standards, so that companies from different countries and industries would use clearly comparable tools.

According to Rafał Baniak, president of Employers of Poland, ESG reports are an opportunity to change the DNA of how everyday European businesses behave and the environment in which they operate. ESG reports cannot be another document required by regulators, he recommended. "Today, non-financial reports are prepared in Poland by about 1 000 companies as a voluntary commitment. From 2026, this number will increase to over 67 000 companies. Large entities have the ability to prepare reports, but smaller ones will encounter difficulties in accessing a limited pool of experts," Baniak insisted, noting that social reporting would likely be the biggest challenge.

Beata Mońka, plenipotentiary of Employers of Poland for ESG, presented the results of the work of 150 experts from various sectors. Experts expected the creation of a uniform European matrix of standards enabling full comparability between individual countries and different industries, in all ESG areas.

These experts expected the creation of a European ranking of the importance of individual criteria within the ESG modules, and they noted the need to involve all members of company bodies in the implementation of reporting, and also shareholders.

To facilitate the uptake of the reporting they insisted on showcasing "best practices" and making them available to smaller entities. It would be necessary to build awareness of the benefits of ESG reporting among business partners, and this would make it easier for them to fit into the system.

Barbara Misterska-Dragan, president of the Polish Chamber of Statutory Auditors pointed out that entrepreneurs faced a big challenge related to ensuring access to high-quality data from all ESG areas. Today, she said, most of the data were dispersed within the organisation, and their collection and verification was hampered by the lack of consistent business definitions. It would be necessary to tag data in XBRL language, which would enable automatic reading of reports, she stressed.

Stanisław Barański, director of the Sustainable Development and Energy Transformation Office at PKN Orlen, emphasized that for the success of the mass-scale implementation of ESG reporting, especially among small and medium-sized companies that could not afford expensive advisors, effective IT tools must be created, and the possibility of using already developed industry indicators must be maintained.

The heads and representatives of the INT, NAT, SOC, ECO and REX sections and the three EESC Observatories, who were present at the meeting, stressed that the directive must be implemented in a balanced way. Extensive education on the benefits is needed, addressed also to key decision-makers responsible for the supervision and control of companies, members of the government and parliamentarians. In the debate the joined participation of employers' organisations, trade unions and other organized civil society is crucial.

Organisers are planning a new conference in the spring of 2023 to exchange experiences in the implementation of the CSRD. Janusz Pietkiewicz, representing Employers in EESC Group I, is responsible for the project.

The way forward for the EU economy

In this time of high pressure on the EU economy, reforms are necessary and urgent, but highly sensitive. The EESC Section for Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion held a public debate on 21 December to discuss proposals on economic governance and recommendations for the euro area. Chaired by ECO section president Stefano Palmieri, the conference focused on the Commission's communication on orientations for a reform of the EU economic governance framework as well as on the annual cycle of economic policy coordination.

Professor Thygesen, chairman of the Fiscal Board, emphasised that the Commission's proposal of 9 November takes us back to the original concept by rolling back parts of the rule book that have not worked, mainly the "preventive arm" of the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). The emphasis is on expenditure paths and medium-term (4-year) national budget plans. How to reinforce national ownership and adherence to the rules is now at the forefront. The 3% reference value for public deficits is still a backstop for all national budgets. It is in the Treaties. The 60% debt target is still a marker but countries are divided up depending on their existing debt levels and on how to reduce debt levels. The aim is debt sustainability for all Member States while at the same time allowing for increased public investments and structural reforms.

Some horse-trading between Member States and the Commission is to be expected when it comes to assessing whether a given spending item enhances growth potential and whether spending was necessary to combat increased unemployment levels in a recession and therefore should be acknowledged as essential in the analysis of debt sustainability. Many of the details of the framework are not yet known, but the Commission aims to integrate the SGP emphasis on macroeconomic aggregates such as deficits and debt with structural recommendations in country-specific recommendations. The notion of "golden rules" are absent from the Commission's communication since, according to the Commission, neither the Commission nor the Member States want them.

Several speakers mentioned the need for a central fiscal capacity (CFC). This is however a very sensitive issue, resulting in yet another layer of taxation in Europe on top of national, regional and local taxation levels. Furthermore, it is not raised at all in the Commission communication. It is important to get the large national budgets (often in excess of 40% of GDP) sustainable before addressing any tentative need for a CFC (the EU budget is some 1% of EU GDP). The task of reforming the SGP is challenging enough and there is no excess fiscal capacity present in any Member State which could easily be used for a CFC. Almost all national public budgets are showing substantial deficits and governments are unlikely to transfer taxation rights.

A major problem with the existing framework has been poor fiscal consolidation during years with good growth. Debt levels have therefore reached very uncomfortable or even unsustainable levels in some Member States. The risk of having to enact austerity measures, even if the economic outlook is poor, is therefore evident. Such measures typically hurt the weakest in society the most.

James Watson, chief economist of BusinessEurope, spoke about the fiscal framework and the economic outlook. He thought that inflation is likely to subside gradually but it may take several years to achieve price stability once again. The interaction between fiscal and monetary policies is therefore key for a prosperous outcome, while economic policies must promote job creation, competitiveness and growth of the European economy. He also called for a Fiscal Board more independent of the Commission, but did not give any details.

The conclusions of the conference fed into two forthcoming EESC opinions: Euro area economic policy 2023 (ECO/598) and Communication on orientations for a reform of the EU economic governance framework (ECO/597) and the rapporteurs concluded the conference. I myself as rapporteur for ECO/597 and the co-rapporteur Dominika Biegon agreed on the importance of ownership and transparency of the new rules. Petru Dandea, rapporteur for ECO/598, concluded that the ECB had to be cautious in the conduct of monetary policy.

A reform of the EU economic governance framework, ensuring debt sustainability, is urgent and can hopefully be agreed during the Swedish Presidency.

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European Year of Skills

PROVIDING THE SKILLS FOR A COMPETITIVE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Year of Skills 2023 will have to switch into a high gear to enable the EU to reach its breathtakingly bold 2030 human resource goals: these include creating 15 million new jobs, qualifying five million entrepreneurs and closing the skills gap for more than 100 million people.


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The transition towards a digital, green and inclusive economy is driven by technological innovation. To succeed, millions of Europeans must be ready and prepared for the jobs of the future, otherwise the gap between tax revenue and public spending will widen dramatically, curtailing the ability of the government to deliver public services. People, their talents and labour are our economy's greatest strategic asset and therefore deserve the same or greater attention compared to technical innovation.

The main challenge facing the European economy in accomplishing its skills goals is the need for more efficient and affordable solutions. Existing solutions are fragmented, expensive and often not accessible to MSMEs, which generate two out of every three jobs in Europe. These enterprises typically have no access to HR tech, making it difficult for them to support their employees in closing their skills gaps. However, MSMEs are a crucial engine of economic growth, vital for achieving our strategic goals.

Another challenge is creating new enterprises and jobs that will transform the economy. We need to develop a true European entrepreneurial mindset that is capable of executing projects that fit European objectives. The human factor will be a bottleneck for economic growth and prosperity unless a large-scale, high-speed solution is implemented now.

Personal and regional economic development need to be synchronised and include every level, spanning from regions to employers and individuals, and take all public and private education and training facilities into account.

Social architecture recognises the importance of collaboration and cooperation among all stakeholders in driving economic development and seeks to create a supportive and inclusive economy that allows everyone to contribute and benefit, regardless of gender, sexual preference, or racial and religious background. This approach is based on the belief that a strong and trusted community is essential for creating economic opportunities. Technology is a way to empower all stakeholders to take action themselves and drive economic growth.

An example for a social architecture platform was developed by SMRT.bio, which highlights the journey of each job seeker and employer in the regional economy. It shows how these journeys are interconnected and how AI, powered by five tested algorithms, is used to make meaningful connections at scale. When we understand the customer journey of each stakeholder and their relationships, opportunities are automatically identified for collaboration and growth.

Through the platform, education and training tailored to every person's desires and abilities close the skills gap and identify and nurture entrepreneurs. MSMEs finally have an equal playing field in talent recruitment and retainment with multinationals. Regions improve their competitive position to mobilise all their talents and assets.

What is clear is that we need a pan-European approach to close the skills gap and create new jobs, including by offering an AI/machine learning-driven platform. By implementing a European platform on a regional basis on a large-scale and at high speed, the transition towards digitisation, becoming greener and inclusion can be pushed into a higher gear. The bold ambition for new enterprises and jobs can be realised.

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