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Resolution of the European Economic and Social Committee

Contribution to the 2025 European Commission's work programme

(C/2025/760)

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1. Introduction

1.1. The EESC, as the institutional voice of organised civil society within the EU, expresses its opinion on the Work Programme of the European Commission 2025. The political guidelines by the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen for 2024-2029 outline a roadmap for a resilient, sustainable and inclusive Europe. The contribution to this Work Programme is organised along the same seven headlines, reinforcing the role of social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) in shaping EU policies. This contribution draws on some of the recommendations made in the EESC's resolution Charting the EU's democratic progress: a resolution for the next legislative mandate adopted in September 2024.

1.2. As a starting point, it is imperative that the EU urgently take steps to better implement the UN 2030 Agenda, its Sustainable Development Goals and the Pact for the Future. This could be achieved with an overarching EU strategy dedicated to the promotion of peace, as well as economic, social and environmental progress.

1.3. Despite the fact that the EU is at a turning point with wars on our doorstep, challenging climate and digital transformations and fierce competition on global markets, the fundamental values of democracy, solidarity, human rights, equality, social justice, sustainability and the rule of law must be at the forefront of any discussion about the EU's future. Social partners and CSOs play a pivotal role in upholding and fortifying these values and contribute to the design, enforcement and monitoring of policies and tools both at national and European level.

1.4. The EESC plays a pivotal role in fostering a robust civic space and facilitating meaningful civic dialogue. With its extensive expertise and longstanding experience, it serves as a vital bridge between the EU institutions and diverse CSOs, ensuring that their voices are heard in policy-making processes. Its unique position enables the EESC to promote participatory democracy and advocate for the inclusion of various stakeholders in the EU policy-shaping process. By providing a platform for consensus building and dialogue, the EESC supports the development of inclusive policies that reflect the needs and aspirations of employers, workers and civil society organisations thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU governance. The EESC stresses the importance of involving all people, especially those from seldom-heard groups, in EU dialogue, thus deepening civic engagement and transparency across EU institutions.

1.5. The year 2025 will be crucial in setting the legislative tone of the next mandate of the European Commission. The EESC calls for robust measures to ensure that the policies set forth are socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, and lead to an economically prosperous EU.

2. **A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness**

2.1. Faced with new geopolitical and increasingly complex challenges, the EESC calls on the EU institutions to act decisively to ensure the EU's long-term sustainable competitiveness, prosperity for all and leadership on the global stage. Therefore, it is imperative to improve all policies conducive to strengthening the EU's productivity and competitiveness, aligning vital economic investments with common social and environmental objectives while promoting the social market economy and fostering the well-being of future generations.

2.2. New types of investment and reforms and accelerating innovation will be essential to strengthen competitiveness and promote upward convergence across Europe. It is also important to ensure that social inclusion and environmental protection goals are taken into account and aligned with the goal of enhancing EU competitiveness.

2.3. The EU urgently needs a strong Green and Social Deal based on a well-being economy and a new concept of prosperity for people and the planet, ensuring a just transition and a human rights-based approach. In order to prevent this initiative from placing a heavy burden on companies, proper and effective implementation must be ensured by establishing realistic action plans at national level, and by supporting enterprises, particularly SMEs, with a view to maintaining competitiveness and securing full and good quality employment. In order to meet the EU's environmental targets we need investments, R&I, technology, adequate skills, a European industrial policy able to mobilise public and private funds and based on the protection of social standards and good quality jobs.

2.4. In order to achieve this, Europe needs to become more competitive, as illustrated in the Draghi report, while supporting the European social model and cohesion policy at all levels. According to this report, there are three areas to reignite growth: closing the innovation gap with US and China, especially in advanced technologies, a joint plan for decarbonisation and competitiveness, and increasing security and decreasing dependencies. These three areas require massive investment to transform the economy, and therefore an EU finance investment capacity is needed.

2.5. The existing single market rules must be reinforced in order to create a new and fairer dynamic for the cross-border mobility of people, goods, services, capital and data as stated in the Letta report.

2.6. The EESC recognises the importance of reducing the administrative burden and compliance costs, but underlines that this needs to be done in a transparent and inclusive way, without harming the underlying legislative objectives, and maintaining current high standards, not least in terms of societal well-being and environmental protection. As a basis, there must be clear criteria and an effective evaluation of the implementation at national level. The Commission should provide clear and transparent information on the planned initiatives on Better Regulation and ensure social dialogue and the full involvement of civil society in the process.

2.7. For SMEs the 'think small first' principle should be made a reality, by providing a stable legislative framework, streamlining and reducing administrative processes, securing a level playing field in the single market, and giving SMEs access to renewable energy at affordable prices.

2.8. Investment in innovation and manufacturing carried out based on open strategic autonomy, building upon the net-zero industry, the circular economy, critical raw materials, the Chips Act and defence and strategic technologies, is urgent and should be sustainably aligned with common social and environmental objectives.

2.9. A robust European Industrial Strategy should complement the 2040 target of a 90 % CO_2 reduction, and maintain and create high quality jobs in Europe. Therefore, a comprehensive action plan, such as the forthcoming *Clean Industrial Deal*, under the umbrella of the EU Green Deal, is urgently needed as a strategic priority to elevate and ensure the EU's sustainable competitiveness. Targeted accompanying measures of the green transition aiming at supporting most affected sectors and regions, enterprises and workers should be identified and adequately promoted in order to facilitate the anticipation and management of change in a fair and equitable process.

2.10. The EESC calls for a technological shift that benefits all, ensuring that digitalisation reduces rather than exacerbates inequalities, for example by investing in robust public digital infrastructures essential for public services. In this context, the EESC requests the EC to assess the level of improvement of digitalisation throughout public administration using the Recovery and Resilience Facility in National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), which will expire in 2026.

2.11. Digitalisation including AI is radically transforming the world of work, while opening up massive potential for increased productivity across all branches of economy. In early 2025, the EESC will deliver a specific opinion together with an opinion requested by the Polish Presidency on the impact of AI on occupational health and safety. The impact of algorithmic management on working conditions and work organisation should be further assessed, while ensuring the human-in-control principle.

2.12. A skills revolution and action at European level are needed since the EU is far below the target of the 60 % of adults in training set by the EPSR Action Plan. The EESC calls for reliable up-to-date data to monitor this participation rate. The EESC strongly supports the proposed STEM Education Strategic Plan with an effective roadmap. Social partners and CSOs should be involved in these processes.

2.13. The EESC notes with interest the proposed initiative on telework and right to disconnect and asks the EC to include this initiative in the 2025 Work Programme.

2.14. AI factories should prioritise collaboration with SMEs and local innovation hubs, ensuring that the benefits of AI are widely accessible. The EESC recommends that AI factories operate under strict ethical standards to ensure transparency, accountability and the protection of fundamental rights. The EESC asks to be involved right from the beginning.

2.15. A stronger transformative and competitive industrial base requires massive investment that should be financed, regulated and implemented in a way that preserves the integrity of the single market and closes growth, productivity and innovation gaps between the EU and international partners and main competitors. Substantial amounts of public funding are needed to trigger private investments in areas where there is not yet a business case for carbon-neutral solutions and in strategic sectors where production would otherwise take place in geoeconomically competing world regions where dependencies could be abused.

2.16. Therefore, the EESC supports the setting up of a new European Competitiveness Fund for a new and reinforced budget in the next Multiannual Financial Framework. It should include stronger public investments and actions to unlock investments in strategic technologies and private investments in common goals, also via the EIB.

2.17. This is a key objective in order to move towards European–financed common projects in strategic sectors with clear EU added value. The Important Projects of Common Interest (IPCEIs) supported by the European Competitiveness Fund should support key partnerships.

2.18. The EESC welcomes the revision of State aid rules in connection to housing. A wider discussion needs to take place in relation to State aid rules, and competition and industrial policy, according to political and economic developments focusing on the strategic objectives of green and digital transitions.

2.19. In order to reduce Europe's dependence from foreign energy sources, and promote Europe's strategic autonomy, the EU's regulatory framework should create the conditions for an environmentally-friendly, affordable, accessible and reliable supply of energy as stated in the Energy Union. The EESC stresses that energy supply is classified as a service of general interest.

2.20. The EU should take urgent action to deliver a fully-fledged European Health Union and to invest heavily in collaborative medical research projects, as was done in response to COVID-19; urges the EU to introduce an Action Plan on Rare Diseases and to recognise that citizens have a right to good quality, affordable and accessible healthcare, to be laid down in a European Health Guarantee. This commitment is essential to safeguarding public health as a pillar of quality of life and resilience within the EU.

2.21. The EESC calls for the adoption of a European Care Guarantee, to ensure access to affordable and high-quality care, whilst also supporting caregivers. It is imperative to attract new workers to the healthcare sector with good working conditions and invest in an educated, skilled, gender-balanced and motivated workforce, which is held in high social esteem and adequately remunerated.

2.22. The EESC emphasises the need to strengthen the cybersecurity framework for the healthcare sector, highlighting the increasing reliance on digital technologies in medical care. The European Action Plan on Cybersecurity should focus on three main areas: enhanced cybersecurity infrastructure in hospitals and healthcare providers; support for smaller healthcare providers; and public-private partnerships for cyber resilience.

2.23. Additionally, a focus on AI in healthcare should enhance cybersecurity, streamline diagnostics, aligning with the European Action Plan on Cybersecurity for a safer and more inclusive digital transition, while maintaining human-centred care.

3. **A new era for European Defence and Security**

3.1. A secure Europe is one that also respects social and economic justice. The EESC advocates promoting peace, security and defence, global justice and global progress by engaging actively for peace; supporting the multilateral system; ensuring fair competition; addressing poverty; fostering social and civil dialogue; promoting democracy, human rights, and a humane migration management system.

3.2. The EU should empower and provide security for its citizens in several domains, protecting them from: external enemies; health risks and future pandemics; hybrid threats as well as the misuse or abuse of advanced digital technologies; the risk of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, all while securing economic and labour opportunities for everyone; the risk of climate and biodiversity emergencies; and finally, from threats to participatory democracy, with the active participation of citizens in civic, political and democratic life.

3.3. The focus on defence industry and on STEP (Strategic Technologies for Europe Platforms), should not be to the detriment of public expenditure in other industrial sectors, and essential services like health systems, education and justice, impacting their sustainability, quality and inclusiveness. The financing of war-oriented industries will undoubtedly be a topic of heated public debate. Investment in security and defence are ineffective if society is divided. The main objective of the European Defence policy should be coordinating spending and infrastructure, mapping technological needs and addressing fragmentation between Member States.

3.4. An EU common defence policy also requires a genuine, fully-fledged common foreign policy that goes beyond the current enhanced cooperation (i.e. the Common Foreign and Security Policy). To this end, the EU should be given adequate material and non-material means, including its own resources.

3.5. The EESC advocates strengthening the EU Common Security and Defence Policy and building a true European Defence Union, including boosting common EU strategic and critical technologies and defence capabilities, and reinforced cooperation with like-minded partners;

3.6. The EESC advocates making sure, under the *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, that the EU strikes the right balance between effective and realistic migration management that is humane and sustainable, promoting legal pathways to enter the EU, while ensuring security and control of its external borders, a rights-based approach to asylum, and labour market inclusion of migrants and refugees. The EU should stress the opportunities with migration, the need for effective integration policies, and the need to work for and promote legal pathways. Therefore, the EESC supports the European Commission's partnerships with secure countries. Absolute respect for human rights and solidarity between Member States need to be guaranteed at all times. Migration must not be considered only from the security point of view.

3.7. The EESC highlights the critical role of civil society organisations, social partners, and volunteers-active citizens in fostering social justice and resilience within the EU's security framework. These actors contribute significantly to social cohesion by reducing polarisation, promoting equality, and reinforcing democratic values. Their work builds societal resilience against challenges such as climate change, economic instability and social divides. The EU must actively support and engage these organisations as essential partners in maintaining a secure, just, and inclusive Europe.

4. **Supporting people, strengthening our societies and our social model**

4.1. The European Pillar of Social Rights has been fully recognised as one of the cornerstones of the EU, as well-functioning welfare states and inclusive social investments are vital to create a socially and economically resilient society.

4.2. The EESC points out that the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) should continue to be 'the Compass' to steer the work on improving social cohesion and working conditions. The EESC welcomes the proposal to deliver the *new Action Plan on the Implementation of the EPSR* and the 2030 targets on employment, education, skills and poverty. A plural approach is needed in order to

(a) Implement, enforce and monitor existing initiatives in the employment and social field, together with the financial support (EU funds) designed to support policies and programmes that directly contribute to the realisation of the EPSR's objectives;

(b) address the employment and social challenges facing Europe with legislative and/or non legislative measures;

(c) recognise and strengthen the connection between the EPSR and the European Semester process, as a key component of the EU's socio-economic governance framework. The new social convergence framework is a tool to track progress and ensure that social policies are adequately implemented and funded.

The social partners and the CSOs should be fully involved in the whole Semester cycle.

4.3. Social dialogue at all levels can play a key role in enhancing growth, productivity, employment and competitiveness of European companies in global markets. It is key to promote and reinforce collective bargaining, together with workers' right to information and consultation and stronger participation in line with national laws and practices. Such instruments are necessary to manage the workplace impact of new technologies, digitalisation and artificial intelligence improving working conditions and workers' rights. Both the Letta and Draghi reports stress the need to reinforce social dialogue as a key component to ensure EU sustainable competitiveness and a well-functioning internal market. The EESC supports the initiative of *creating a new Pact for European Social Dialogue* in early 2025 and further calls on the European Commission to promote the outcomes of European social dialogue, encourage effective implementation of autonomous agreements and support the enforcement of social dialogue at the national level; and stresses that the European Semester's Social Convergence Framework would be a valuable tool in this regard.

4.4. Consulting workers to support the transformative dimension of the EU strategy for security and sustainability, while also anticipating the impact of breakthrough technologies such as artificial intelligence, is of the utmost importance.

4.5. The EESC supports the Commission's *Quality Jobs Roadmap*, focusing on implementation and monitoring of all existing initiatives in the social field, ensuring good working conditions, training and fair job transitions for workers (notably by increasing collective bargaining coverage) and for self-employed people. This requires specific initiatives and investments. It is important to foster a socially inclusive and fair labour market, with targeted actions addressing women, young people and persons with disabilities.

4.6. The EESC calls for action on the SDGs and stresses that a comprehensive first-ever *EU Anti-Poverty Strategy*, addressing both immediate needs and deep-rooted causes, must include coordinated efforts across the Member States to reduce poverty. This strategy should be closely aligned with the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and involve coordinated efforts across Member States, incorporating best practices to ensure sustainable and measurable poverty reduction. The EESC highlights the importance of a holistic approach that strengthens social safety nets and fosters

inclusive economic growth, leaving no one behind. The EESC calls for the development of a strong social economy by implementing the Social Economy Council Recommendation to bolster socially responsible business practices and public benefit.

4.7. The EESC supports the appointment of a European Commissioner for Housing, as well as the European Affordable Housing Plan. The latter is a key initiative to provide affordable, accessible, decent and sustainable housing for all EU citizens. Robust funding should be mobilised under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with a special focus on vulnerable groups such as older people, people with disabilities, and low-income families. The EESC advocates for an EU investment platform to facilitate national, regional, and local partnerships, aiming to end housing exclusion and ensure that housing policies are inclusive and equitable.

4.8. Youth engagement is critical for Europe's future. The EESC welcomes the fact that all Commissioners will organise their first annual *Youth Policy Dialogues within the first 100 days* of the mandate. Spaces for the structured participation of young people must be provided and emphasis placed on how their innovation, engagement and dedication can shape the EU's future while fully respecting social dialogue and the prerogatives of social partners. The Committee calls on the EC to take concrete steps to improve the Youth Guarantee and the ALMA initiative, as well as assessing the European Child Guarantee.

4.9. The EESC advocates taking urgent steps to establish a 'Union of Equality' for all people, built on the principles of intergenerational fairness, and calls on the EC to establish a dedicated DG for Equality. This must include immediate remedies to address systemic discrimination, promoting equal opportunities, and safeguarding rights for all, regardless of background or identity. The existing legal frameworks for anti-discrimination will need to be strengthened and full implementation and enforcement ensured. This needs to be the basis of the assessment of previous strategies and the development of the *new Gender Equality strategy for post-2025*, the *Roadmap for Women's Rights*, the *new Anti-racism strategy for post-2025*, the *updated strategy on LGBTQI equality*, the *European Strategy for Older Persons* and the post-2025 part of the European Disability Rights Strategy. Marginalised communities and seldom-heard groups must be at the heart of shaping a more inclusive EU. The EESC calls for reaching an agreement on the EU Horizontal Non-Discrimination Directive, which has been blocked in the Council for over 16 years.

4.10. The EESC recommends promoting the European social market economy model by: supporting entrepreneurship and innovation; ensuring quality jobs, including in new forms of work and improving working conditions; investing in quality education, training and skills; ensuring the right to training and lifelong learning, including reskilling and upskilling-quality professional qualifications; fostering collaboration between education and training institutions; and ensuring effective access to quality training for all. Additionally, inclusivity in education should be prioritised, with measures to enhance equitable access, especially within the European Education Area. Strengthening Erasmus+ mobility across all education levels can foster a shared European identity and values among young people.

5. **Sustaining our quality of life: food security, water and nature**

5.1. Climate change poses a serious threat to economic and social development, demanding a comprehensive long-term strategy and coordinated action at all levels.

5.2. The Commission should take steps to move forward with the sustainable finance strategy, in order to redirect investment flows towards sustainable activities. A social taxonomy for sustainable investment should be considered in this context.

5.3. The EESC calls for an EU that protects against the current and future risks of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. The EU must take steps to achieve a 90 % reduction in emissions by 2040, build up resilience to climate change and restore nature and biodiversity, so as to ensure that provisions for basic needs (food, water, energy, public heath, etc.) in the EU and globally are not at risk.

5.4. The EU Blue Deal is also one of the key priority areas. Given the essential nature of water and the current and future challenges facing the world and our continent, water should be considered a priority and an EU Blue Deal should be adopted as a stand-alone strategic policy, since water policy cannot be limited to just climate policy. Europe can transform water-related challenges into new opportunities for technological development, societal progress, new jobs, skills and business growth, all the while respecting the environment and safeguarding water resources for the benefit of everyone.

5.5. The EESC recommends taking steps to reinvigorate the EU's farming sector and foster rural development by making it more attractive to young people, women, family-run, small and medium-sized farmers and enterprises, thus avoiding a rural exodus. These farmers should be supported by a properly funded post-2027 Common Agricultural Policy, which will protect European food production and ensure its resilience. Farming and vibrant rural communities will only be sustainable when economic, social and environmental needs are met in a balanced way. This should be reflected in the *Vision for Agriculture and Food,* which must integrate economic, social, and environmental goals to create a resilient and sustainable agricultural landscape. It should include measures to incentivise innovation in sustainable and water-resilient farming practices, and support local food systems, which are essential for food security and the well-being of rural communities.

6. **Protecting our democracy, upholding our values**

6.1. The tireless efforts of civil society to promote citizen engagement and active citizenship, strengthen social dialogue, foster civil dialogue, advocate human rights, and promote democratic practices, are invaluable assets that contribute to the EU's strength, resilience and legitimacy.

6.2. The EESC calls on the EU institutions to recognise the value of civil society as key actors in designing and delivering EU policies for sustainable growth, the defence of democracy and social justice, including the just transitions benefitting citizens, workers and businesses alike. Through their interactions with public authorities at all levels, and their capacity to take the topic out of the policy arena and right to the community, they help support the most vulnerable and those who are less able to adapt to change. Moreover, the EESC considers that volunteering must be recognised and celebrated as a crucial expression of active citizenship. Steps must be taken to appreciate and support volunteering as a form of civic action that bolsters civic participation and participatory democracy.

6.3. The EESC advocates for the EU taking action in eventual future Treaty revisions to ensure respect for the rule of law, fundamental rights and diversity by exploring changes in the decision-making mechanisms. Safeguarding democracy against internal and external threats needs to be achieved by developing an enabling civic space within and beyond the EU's borders and amending the Defence of Democracy Package to close loopholes that undermine democratic institutions, ensuring all Member States adhere to shared European values and principles.

6.4. The EESC welcomes the fact that the Commission will start developing a chapter addressing the Single Market dimension in its annual Rule of Law report.

6.5. The EESC welcomes the establishment of a new European Democracy Shield, which should protect against foreign interference and disinformation and uphold the integrity of democratic processes across the EU. Early implementation of the European Democracy Action Plan should protect civil rights, combat discrimination and foster inclusivity, reinforcing the role of civil society in building sustainable and equitable societies.

6.6. The EESC calls for structural support for independent and robust CSOs at European and national levels, recognising their role, alongside philanthropy, together with social partners, in fostering resilient societies and democracy through civil and social dialogues. To create a truly enabling environment, the EU must prioritise those dialogues and establish a European Cross-border Association Statute Directive. The EESC advocates for the active involvement of CSOs and social partners in policy design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, to enhance the democratic, social, and economic vitality of the EU. To implement Article 11 TEU effectively, dialogue with representative associations must be open, transparent and regular. The EESC urges values-based criteria for EU funding programmes such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and cohesion funds to ensure supported projects align with democratic principles.

6.7. Noting the commitment by the European Commission to *step up its engagement with civil society organisations*, the EESC calls for the EU institutions to take the lead and develop a strategy for civil society, with a clear action plan. Moreover, the EESC calls for an annual civil dialogue or civic space scoreboard, which will review whether the contributions of CSOs during consultations have been taken on board. This scoreboard could be used to produce a biennial Civil Dialogue Report, evaluating civil dialogue and the effectiveness of CSOs. The EESC intends to work closely with the European Commission and other key stakeholders, on the creation, governance and regular operation of a civil society platform, as announced in the mission letter to EC-Commissioner-designate McGrath.

6.8. The EESC is deeply concerned by the developments in some Member States that have led to a shrinking space for CSOs. These organisations have a key role in defending fundamental rights and freedoms, and countering the rising tide of populism. The EU needs to continue countering these developments by means of Article 7 procedures, and by freezing European funds earmarked for Member States that do not respect the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary system or fundamental rights such as freedom of association or the right of expression, or that restrict press and media freedom in order to manipulate public discourse.

7. **A global Europe: Leveraging our power and partnerships**

7.1. To achieve stronger political integration and promote global peace, enhanced strategic autonomy, protection of our economy from technological leakage, and a common, genuine, fully-fledged foreign policy are essential. To this end, the EU should speak with a single voice in multilateral institutions, play a leading role in reforming them and leverage the international role of the Euro as a strategic asset. The EESC recommends introducing qualified majority voting in EU foreign policy.

7.2. The EESC advocates fostering an open, rules-based European trade policy, complementing and underpinning other key EU policies on fundamental rights and the rule of law, as well as climate, digital, innovation, social and industrial policy. Trade agreements should increase resilience through the diversification of imports, creating market opportunities for European companies, improving security and mitigating geopolitical risks, while promoting the enforcement of social and environmental standards and ensuring a global level playing field for fair competition. The additional access they offer to critical raw materials and other inputs - including energy - can help secure resilient, sustainable and responsible EU supply chains;

7.3. The EESC advocates a strategic approach to EU enlargement, with a clear focus on maintaining European peace and stability and fostering shared prosperity. The dedicated Commissioner for Enlargement must work to ensure that the European project keeps moving in the direction of peace, prosperity and democracy, and to create long-term stability on our continent, and as new members are welcomed into the EU family from the Western Balkans and countries neighbouring Russia, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. The EU's decision-making processes might not be adequate for a Union of 30-35 countries. Preparing and - if necessary - adapting institutions while, at the same time, carefully monitoring the progress of candidate countries towards the EU's founding values and its acquis will be an important task for the new European Commission. Working closely with the European Parliament, the European Commission must ensure that any future enlargement benefits both EU citizens and citizens of candidate countries, and that the EU's high sustainability standards are maintained.

7.4. This process should boost the participation of organised civil society, with a specific role for the social partners, and all political parties should undertake to defend their right of association, the right of expression and a free press and media, and to fight against any monopoly of information or manipulation of public discourse. The EESC has already taken an important step towards enlargement by giving CSO representatives from candidate countries ad hoc participation at some EESC meetings and encourages other EU institutions to follow its example.

7.5. The EESC calls for the EU to consider the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting in the EU accession process at least for all intermediary stages, and for decisions to be open, transparent and accessible to the larger public. Stronger enforcement measures of fundamental rights should be adopted.

7.6. The EESC supports the development of a New Pact for the Mediterranean that promotes stability, economic and social development, and sustainable growth across the region. This pact should prioritise regional cooperation in areas such as renewable energy, maritime security, and inclusive economic and job opportunities, ensuring that Mediterranean countries are active partners in addressing shared challenges.

7.7. The EESC advocates for a Comprehensive EU-Middle East Strategy that addresses the region's peace, security and socio-economic challenges, through targeted cooperation. This strategy should focus first and foremost on immediate and peaceful resolution of conflicts, fostering democratic governance, enhancing trade partnerships, and promoting sustainable development, while ensuring respect for all nations' human rights, and delivering peaceful stability and prosperity in the region.

7.8. The EESC sees the 2025 EU-African Union Summit as a crucial opportunity to deepen ties between the EU and Africa, focusing on mutual economic development, digital transformation and climate resilience. The EESC emphasises the importance of equitable partnerships that address shared challenges, such as youth unemployment and sustainable agriculture, fostering long-term prosperity for both continents.

7.9. The EESC calls on the European Commission to put in motion preparations for close collaboration with the United Nations and its 2026 International Year of Volunteers for Sustainable Development. The EESC urges the Commission to engage with UN Member States, civil society and the private sector to ensure that the 2026 celebration effectively raises awareness of the value of volunteerism and integrates it into EU and national development policies.

8. **Delivering together and preparing our Union for the future**

8.1. The Commission should without delay by mid-2025 present the proposal for the post-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, giving the EU the necessary financial means to fulfil its political priorities.

8.2. New own resources are necessary to guarantee a solid and sustainable EU budget; and the EU should progressively increase the ratio of EU own resources to Member States' GNI-based revenue.

8.3. Preparing for enlargement and reforms requires an adjustment to the **EU budget**, and to the EU's own resources, to implement European policies for investment. The EESC advocates developing an efficient, integrated CMU and a fully-fledged Banking union, including all Member States to further harmonisation and the removal of cross-border obstacles, while safeguarding sound regulations and surveillance, with a view to preserving financial stability and the sustainability of the European social model, protecting consumers, investors and savers and achieving a solid Single Market.

8.4. The EESC proposes that an EU investment fund be established as part of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). It should aim to provide financial resources for investment projects that are of strategic European interest and directly administered at EU level in particular in areas that are of cross-border relevance.

8.5. The EESC proposes a set of criteria to guide the prioritisation and selection of investments under the future EU investment capacity. This fund should be financed by a mix of resources, including Member State contributions, new own resources and joint EU debt issuance. The EU-financed investments and State aid should set conditionalities to respect the rule of law and fundamental rights and social dialogue.

8.6. Fiscal decentralisation and autonomy are essential to fostering competitiveness. We should get the best out of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and cohesion funds, with a result-oriented approach. The EC should accelerate the assessment and monitoring of implementation of the RRF which will expire in 2026, with the active involvement of social partners and CSOs, and strengthen technical support to ensure full absorption of funds, maximising their impact on sustainable growth. The European Semester can serve as the framework for guiding EU funding and it can also strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU growth strategies.

8.7. The impact of the new economic governance rules on the new European Semester cycle 2025 will not increase the fiscal space for investments enough to plug the investment gap at Member State level, including to meet the targets of the EPSR Action Plan. Strengthening the connection between the Pillar and the European Semester process will be crucial for tracking progress and ensuring that social policies are adequately funded and implemented. The EESC asks that the objectives and criteria set in the new Social Convergence Framework are regularly monitored with the involvement of social partners and CSOs in order to identify the proper policies and measures to protect a quality social model in our countries. This requires investments in just transition measures, inclusive and adequate social protection, health, and education systems, as well as addressing the loss of purchasing power and rising inequalities among regions and groups of people, in order to avoid imbalances between industrial and social policy priorities.

8.8. The tight timeline of the European Semester process leaves limited opportunity for a proper consultation with organised civil society but it is crucial to strengthen its role. It is recommended to improve the consultation process by simplifying access to information, improving the communication channels between civil society and the relevant decision makers, integrating regular feedback mechanisms and establishing a structured dialogue process.

8.9. The EESC asks the EC to include in the 2025 Work Programme: the proposed revision of the Public Procurement Directive, which should enable '*preference to be given to European products in public procurement for certain strategic sectors*' and technologies, and '*modernise and simplify our public procurement rules, in particular with EU start-ups and innovators in mind*' ([1]), while taking into account the need for transparency in the process, respecting fundamental rights and social dialogue. Abuses that may occur in subcontracting chains need to be tackled.

8.10. Cohesion policy is and must remain the most important long-term investment policy in the EU, with its essential role of strengthening social, economic and territorial cohesion in Europe. This can be accomplished by safeguarding the main principles of cohesion policy such as multilevel governance, the partnership principle and shared management.

8.11. **Cohesion Funds** remain vital for upward economic and social convergence. Cohesion policies should be supported through a dedicated Directorate-General for Cohesion and preserve their multi-level governance identity, thus facilitating the better use of its programmes, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), scaled up with nationally financed and private co-funding policy initiatives. A holistic, coordinated and integrated policy approach at EU level is crucial. This could include an EU budget that better responds to social requirements and be carried out through the reformed European Semester and its Social Convergence Framework, in keeping with sound economic, social and finance policy. Moreover, the EU institutions should evaluate the need for a permanent financial instrument building on the experience of the SURE programme, with a view to stabilising the Member States' social expenditure in the event of external economic shocks and to support workers and enterprises in those industrial sectors and regions most affected by digital and green transition processes.

Brussels, 4 December 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([1]) Ursula von der Leyen, Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029, p. 11-12.