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Charting the EU's democratic progress: a resolution for the next legislative mandate

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1. Charting the EU's democratic progress: a resolution for the next legislative mandate

1.1. The new European Parliament and the European Commission, together with the Council of the European Union, will be responsible for steering the EU over the next five years and beyond. Governments set out their views in the Versailles and Granada Declarations. Citizens contributed with their views during the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE). Following up on its recommendations to the conference (especially proposals 36 and 39, which aimed to give the EESC a clear role in participatory processes), the EESC organised its first ever Civil Society Week, consulting citizens – including young people – social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs). The outcome was a comprehensive set of actionable steps to strengthen and safeguard democratic principles during the next EU mandate.

1.2. In the context of the current multi-crises, the EESC urges the new European Parliament and European Commission, legitimised by the citizens' vote in the June 2024 elections, both to use the vision of the future emerging from the CoFoE and that of Civil Society Week, to make use of the diversity of representation in the EESC in order to reinforce the international position of the EU, fix the EU institutional architecture, provide a solid anchor for our common values, and lead our economy into a sustainable future with an advanced, inclusive social model at its heart – something that is vital for progress, unity and competitiveness.

1.3. ***The EESC asks the institutions of the European Union to establish a 6-fold concept of security, with:***

— ***an EU that protects its citizens against external threats. For this, EU external policies are needed, focused on more solid fundamental rights and made more credible thanks to a common EU defence policy, together with a common foreign policy; the EU also needs its own resources to allow its policies for peace, conflict prevention and resolution to function properly;***

— ***an EU that protects people against internal risks, mainly those relating to health, demographic change and poverty, and that provides accessible, universal social protection and well-being across Europe;***

— ***an EU that guarantees a competitive social market economy built on ecosystems that ensure productivity, innovation, quality jobs and full employment, where competitiveness is rooted in the capacity of the EU to be at the forefront of environmental sustainability and social and technological progress;***

— ***an EU that creates a resilient economy for everyone by: ensuring effective coordination of macro-economic policies in the Member States, while safeguarding the economic well-being of its citizens; ensuring the sustainable competitiveness of European businesses and preserving purchasing power, while effectively combating inflation; guaranteeing financial inclusion and fostering financial education; designing fair taxation systems; fighting money laundering; and establishing a European budget that endows the EU with sufficient financial means to fulfil its political goals without leaving anyone behind;***

— ***an EU that ensures dialogue and the participation of the social partners, organised civil society and the public in order to cope with the challenging and transformative times of today and the near future. The benefits of peace should reach all elements and groups of our society;***

— ***an EU that protects against the current and future risks of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss. The climate crisis threatens lives and livelihoods. 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.***

2. The EU: a legacy of success resolutely tackling future challenges

2.1. The European Union has its foundations on universal values, rights and the rule of law. This, as well as 80 years of peace, is the main element of this story of European success. Europeans have lived through difficult moments - the EU is the child of two World Wars - but the evidence shows that they have done better than any of their competitors or neighbouring countries. There is no doubt that since its creation, the EU has enjoyed a prolonged period of peace, economic prosperity and social progress.

2.2. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU secured free access to vaccines for all, as well as guaranteed food availability. It has responded to children and young people campaigning for climate change to be tackled by adopting a most ambitious programme for a sustainable environment: the European Green Deal, which aims to make Europe climate-neutral by 2050. The EU has taken steps to counter all types of discrimination. Irrespective of whether their base is in a large or a small Member State, businesses, social economy players and the self-employed have access to a market of 450 million consumers with equal opportunities, where all economic players can operate in a stable environment.

2.3. The EU is the economy that best protects people and aims to harness talents. It also strives to protect patents and regional products, and is a frontrunner in regulating digital economies. All the countries that have joined the EU over the years have improved their standard of living and working conditions more - and more quickly - than any other country in the region has. A rights-based approach to the free movement of people is key to ensuring progress, fairness and deeper integration. The EESC expects the same to happen for those countries that will soon be joining the EU family.

2.4. These collective achievements can no longer be taken for granted. The EU is now facing new risks, as well as old and new challenges. The association of Russia and China with emerging economies (e.g. the BRICS and Gulf countries) is redesigning the global geopolitical landscape and economic partnerships. It should be stressed that, unlike the EU, countries that are not democracies pursue aggressive, unscrupulous foreign policies, disengaged from human rights and sustainable development. The latter's financial investments have definitively overhauled the global financial architecture, imposing a search for a new equilibrium. The United States themselves risk losing the features of a reliable partner if populist forces come to power again this year.

2.5. Thus, the EU is confronted with uncertainty, facing risky situations caused by wars such as those in Ukraine and Gaza, and it has to look for allies in the world who are also founded on the rule of law and respect fundamental rights: these are the values that bind the Member States of the EU together.

2.6. Having lived through a series of deep economic, health and geopolitical crises, citizens feels this uncertainty and are looking to their institutions - be they European, national, regional or local - for protection from the adverse circumstances in life that may arise from external or economic risks, attacks on our fundamental values, threats to health, or the loss of a decent income.

3. **The EU as a global player for peace, security, trade and progress**

3.1. In the past few years, the EU has managed to overcome crises with the help of its founding principles, and by its Member States standing firmly together. It has also achieved this thanks to its fiscal capacity, strongly supported by its Member States, which has ensured speedy responses and an ability to take action.

3.2. Member States on their own are not able to face today's challenges but, united, they can influence the future. Climate change and the phasing out of fossil fuels will require a new policy of EU strategic autonomy, but they will also change the global balance of power and risk exacerbating global conflicts. Instead of national responses which weaken the EU, Europe must have a clear vision and a stronger, joint political role in this new geopolitical context so as to be in a position to respond more effectively and swiftly.

3.3. 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 the 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.

3.4. The EU is and must remain a peace-maker. Its diplomatic capacity has to be improved so that the EU Common Security and Defence Policy is matched by a real capacity to resolve and prevent conflicts. This policy should protect against external interference aimed at destabilising societies and democratic institutions, and it should engage in a new multilateralism, in compliance with international laws. 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:

— 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;

— working for greater political integration; an enhanced strategic autonomy; and a common, genuine, fully-fledged foreign policy. To this end, the EU should speak with a single voice in multilateral institutions and leverage the international role of the Euro as a strategic asset. The EESC recommends introducing qualified majority voting in EU foreign policy;

— strengthening the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, including boosting common EU strategic and critical technologies and defence capabilities, and reinforced cooperation with like-minded partners;

— implementing the UN 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals as an overarching EU strategy, devoted to peace, economic, social and environmental progress. This will only happen through structured and meaningful engagement of civil society;

— 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;

— recognising the crucial role and asking for the effective implementation of the recently adopted directive for due diligence, fostering human rights and environmental considerations as an integral part of certain supply chains and company operations.

4. **Secure our values, respect for fundamental rights and diversity**

4.1. A Europe that cherishes diversity and champions the rule of law and fundamental rights forms the bedrock of a cohesive, tolerant society. The EU should take a stand on the rule of law as a foundational principle and lead by example in the fight against disinformation and discrimination. In all countries that are departing from the rule of law, there is a backlash against women, the LGBTQIA+ community and/or vulnerable groups. The fight for the rule of law is a fight for equality, for unbiased education for our children, for letting young people take to the streets for a sustainable future, and for independent journalists and human rights defenders to enjoy the freedom of expression. Compliance with the rule of law also has an economic dimension which has an impact on trade and investment decisions, since the rule of law also underpins a stable, predictable environment for companies and consumers. The EESC urges the EU to act on respecting the rule of law across the EU and beyond.

4.2. Putting the fundamental values of democracy, solidarity, human rights, equality, sustainability and the rule of law at the forefront of any discussion about the EU's success is crucial. Social partners and CSOs play a pivotal role in upholding and fortifying these values. Their tireless efforts to promote citizen engagement and active citizenship, foster civil and social dialogue, advocate human rights, and promote democratic practices, are invaluable assets that contribute to the EU's strength, resilience and representativity.

4.3. Acknowledging and highlighting the indispensable role of CSOs in safeguarding these principles is a priority, as it gives profound depth to the comprehensive vision for the Europe we aspire to.

4.4. The EESC therefore advocates:

— 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 done through 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;

— the establishment of a European Democracy Shield to protect against foreign interference and disinformation and to uphold the integrity of democratic processes across the EU;

— 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. Absolute respect for human rights and solidarity between Member States need to be guaranteed at all times;

— taking urgent steps to establish a 'Union of Equality' for all people of all ages. This means that the existing legal frameworks for anti-discrimination will need to be strengthened and full implementation and enforcement ensured. This also requires reinforcing the post of the Commissioner for Equality in the new College of Commissioners, and ensuring it has a dedicated portfolio and a proper Directorate-General.

5. **Preparing for enlargement and reforms**

5.1. 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, we need to welcome new members into the 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 next European Commission. Working closely with the European Parliament, the next 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.

5.2. It also requires an adjustment to the EU budget, and to the EU's own resources, to implement European policies for investment. The experience gained from Next Generation EU could be useful in this respect.

5.3. 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.

5.4. Cohesion policy remains one of the fundamental pillars for bringing the EU closer to its citizens and for reducing disparities among EU regions and inequalities among people. Cohesion policy adapted to future needs must remain a solid investment policy to support economic, social and territorial cohesion throughout the EU while aiming at providing equal opportunities and the improvement of living and working conditions for all. Its fundamental principle, according to which 'no one should be left behind', remains sound and valid. CSOs stand ready to continue working towards the cohesion objectives through the partnership principle, multi-level governance and shared management. In particular, special attention should be paid to regions with specific characteristics, such as the outermost regions, mountain areas and islands. The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) should be able to meet the challenges that enlargement will bring, as well as the risks of disparities between regions that the security agenda may engender in the absence of sound, properly-financed regional and local cohesion policies.

5.5. In this context, the EESC requests to keep the portfolio of a specific Commissioner in charge of this important policy and is opposed to the transformation of cohesion policy into a simple instrument for economic recovery or a tool for tackling emergency crises.

5.6. The EESC has already taken an important step towards enlargement by giving CSO representatives from candidate countries ad hoc participation at some EESC meetings. We encourage other EU institutions to follow our example and allow representatives from candidate countries access to ordinary EU meetings. This will be a visible sign of the EU's resolve to go ahead with enlargement while providing people from these countries with an opportunity to learn how the EESC and the EU in general functions.

5.7. The EESC calls for:

— the European Parliament to follow the example of the EESC and include candidate countries, at least partially, in the daily work of the EU through stronger partnerships;

— the EU's cohesion policy to correspond to future needs with balanced, fair redistributive measures among regions and citizens both in the candidate countries and in the regions of the current Member States that are more exposed to change as a result of enlargement;

— 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.

6. **Secure the EU's sustainable and inclusive growth, competitiveness and investment**

6.1. Faced with a new geopolitical reality and increasingly complex challenges, we call on the EU institutions to act decisively to ensure the EU's long-term competitiveness, prosperity and leadership on the global stage. The EU's share of the world economy is predicted to decrease steadily from nearly 15 % to only 9 % by 2050 ([1]). Therefore, it is imperative to improve all policies conducive to strengthening the EU's productivity and sustainable competitiveness. Investment in innovation and manufacturing, framed in open strategic autonomy - such as the net-zero industry, the circular economy, critical raw materials, the Chips Act and defence and strategic technologies - is urgent and should be aligned with common social and environmental objectives, fostering the well-being of future generations.

6.2. The climate change, pollution and biodiversity changes witnessed in recent years have led Europe to commit to its Green Deal. 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 setting realistic action plans at national level, and by supporting enterprises, particularly SMEs, with a view to maintaining competitiveness and securing full and quality employment.

6.3. 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. The Blue Deal and the Green Deal partially overlap, but retain different fields of action and different approaches. 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.

6.4. Europe has huge potential for innovation, enabling our economy to compete globally. However, demographic changes, insufficient investment in future-oriented education systems and new skills, poor working conditions in some sectors and limited mobility opportunities, leading to labour shortages, are becoming obstacles to fair and sustained economic growth both at the national and the regional level. In the global race for talent, Europe needs to be at the forefront by offering an attractive place to live and work without overlooking the risks of brain drain within the EU and those from third-countries. A successful policy initiative in this area will require a holistic approach, which addresses all the different dimensions of these challenges. To accompany these rapid changes in the world of work, social dialogue is an important asset.

6.5. A smoothly-functioning, modernised single market must be at the core of the EU's economy, in which more opportunities are available equally to companies, workers and to the public in general. Investment in new technologies must be encouraged by a forward-looking, stable regulatory framework based on predictable policies both at EU and national level. Member States and the EU should ensure that no distortions of competition are created when developing financing mechanisms in support of such investment.

([1]) PwC (2017), The long view: how will the global economic order change by 2050?.

6.6. To support these objectives, the EU regulatory framework should ensure legal certainty and predictability, be better integrated and consistent across policy areas, be open to innovative approaches and be digital by default, while preventing overregulation and aiming to reduce unnecessary red tape without harming the underlying legislative objectives. National governments' increased tendency to put alleged national interests first renders the single market less efficient and leaves it fragmented. The EU institutions have an obligation to ensure effective implementation of EU rules and act swiftly and effectively against non-compliant Member States. A regulatory framework is needed that strikes the right balance between stimulating innovation and investment on the one hand and managing security concerns of all kinds on the other, in order to fully reap the benefits of Europe's innovation potential in new clean technologies, and secure the advantage of the first-mover for greening industries being independent from fossil fuels, as well as become a more integrated ecosystem where manufacturing industry and services are mutually supportive.

6.7. 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 its international partners and main competitors. An effective industrial policy should be implemented that decarbonises our industry in a competitive way, develops the EU's competitive edge in digital and clean technologies, and diversifies and secures strategic supply chains, as well as strengthening Europe's technological and industrial base. This policy requires supportive fair transition measures, investing in modern public administration and services, infrastructure and quality services of general interest.

6.8. Public and private investment in Member States should be geared to updating their infrastructure. Coordination at all levels is needed to ensure the effectiveness of public investment, which is financed either by the EU or by individual Member States. The EU economic governance framework could create fiscal space for investment, which may in turn lead to innovative financing mechanisms with the private sector in order to fully utilise the EU-level potential of financial support for such investment. For that to happen, a more ambitious sustainable finance framework may more effectively guarantee that private investment aligns with common EU objectives. Making alternative forms of finance, like lending platforms, crowd investment, venture capital and bond markets, more attractive and easily accessible for all company sizes and individuals would help to finance ambitious innovation and investment projects. The efficient operation of financial markets is essential for the transition to a climate-neutral and increasingly digital economy that is hallmarked by sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

6.9. The completion of the Capital Markets Union (CMU) is key to mobilising the resources necessary to invest in the green and digital transformations, as well as for the strategic autonomy of the EU. The Banking Union is essential for a genuine Economic and Monetary Union, and its completion would increase the financial stability and resilience of the EU economy.

6.10. Additionally, we are seeing an immense leap forward in the use of artificial intelligence, which can contribute to increased productivity and improve work organisation models, if duly managed with a human-centred approach.

6.11. The EESC:

— calls on the new European Parliament and the European Commission to make the most of the mandate received and implement their plans to protect the planet, to invest for sustainable economic growth and competitiveness, and to boost EU sovereignty in strategic areas, for the well-being of future generations and aligned with intergenerational fairness. They should continue on the path towards socially just, green, blue and digital transitions and innovation, thus ensuring quality jobs and resilience in the European project;

— advocates learning from the Next Generation EU and adopting current proposals and commitments on new own resources for the EU budget, with an EU investment tool that could enable certain critical and strategic technologies, where applicable, to fall under public governance, while protecting all investors, both public and private;

— recommends promoting the European social market economy model by: supporting entrepreneurship and innovation; investing in quality education, training and skills; ensuring the right to lifelong learning, including reskilling and upskilling; nurturing high quality professional qualifications; creating sustainable and quality jobs, including in new forms of work; fostering collaboration between education and training institutions; and ensuring effective access to quality training for all;

— recommends that the existing single market rules must be reinforced in order to create a new dynamic for the removal of barriers to cross-border mobility of people, goods, services, capital and data. This is particularly important as during the last years the level playing field in the single market has been weakened by crisis-related exemptions and a slowdown in the removal of obstacles to free movement;

— supports the creation and development of SMEs by making the 'think small first' principle a reality, providing a stable legislative framework, streamlining administrative processes to support SMEs, securing a level playing field in the single market, and giving SMEs access to renewable energy at affordable prices;

— calls for a robust European Industrial Strategy to complement the 2040 target of a 90 % CO_2 reduction and maintain high quality jobs in Europe. Therefore, a comprehensive action plan, such as the proposed 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;

— recommends taking steps to reinvigorate the EU's farming sector and foster rural development by making it more attractive to young people and to people with small, medium-sized or family- run farms 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;

— is in favour of developing a strong social economy by implementing the Social Economy Council recommendation to bolster socially responsible business practices and public benefit. See the Liège Roadmap for Social Economy in the EU;

— acknowledges the climate crisis as a paradigm shift: it is necessary to ensure implementation of the green, social and blue deals and related EU programmes as interconnected policy areas. Steps need to be taken at EU and national level to forecast the consequences – and measure the costs of – climate change (from flooding, poor crop production, droughts, etc.). Recognising citizens as active participants and their role as energy prosumers facilitated in the climate transition;

— advocates guaranteeing a just and fair transition for everyone: advancing a European Just Transition Policy Framework (JTPF) to enable a shift to a sustainable and decarbonised economy; and ensuring these transformations benefit the broader population, leave no-one behind and are based on intergenerational cohesion and solidarity. The EESC emphasises that a JTPF should be accompanied by EU policies that enable enterprises to become competitive in a fair way, sustainable, stronger and more resilient, and to play – through social dialogue – their part in ensuring a just transition that is people-centred, responsive to local conditions, protects nature and the environment and seizes opportunities;

— welcomes the decision to allocate €86 billion to the EU Social Climate Fund for the 2026-2032 period. Additional financing through the EU Climate Adjustment Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the Recovery and Resilience Facility should also be earmarked for mitigating the negative impact of the climate crisis, particularly the impact on the most vulnerable;

— stresses the importance of consulting workers to support the transformative dimension of the EU strategy for security and sustainability, also anticipating the impact of breakthrough technologies such as artificial intelligence. To achieve a just transition in the world of work, effective consultation mechanisms and an adequate framework should be available for social partners at all levels, including social dialogue and collective agreements, accompanied by effective civil dialogue with relevant stakeholders;

— believes it is imperative to take further steps to develop 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 regulation and surveillance, with a view to preserving financial stability, protecting consumers, investors and savers, and to achieving a sound single market.

7. **The social dimension of security: employment, skills and a just transition**

7.1. The La Hulpe Declaration, of 16 April 2024, adopted during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU emphasises that in times of multiple challenges, the European Union must, now more than ever, stick to its core values of equality and social progress, an opinion strongly echoed by the EESC ([2]).

7.2. When facing climate and demographic change, the digital and green transitions, and global economic and security challenges, the social dimension of the EU should anchor the security agenda to a highly competitive social market economy, sustainable growth and full employment, aiming at upward convergence of living and working conditions.

7.3. Investment in security and defence are ineffective if society is divided. The social dimension of investment and reforms should be an integral part of the security agenda. Remaining anchored to the UN 2030 Agenda as an overarching policy framework, the EU economic and social model should ensure that the advantages of the single market, anchored to a single currency, benefit everyone in a fair and balanced way.

7.4. As a new legislative period begins, the EU is called upon to address urgent challenges in the social area. The EESC considers it a priority to address those that risk harming the different facets of the security agenda, and those that concern everyone at the same time.

7.5. Poverty and social exclusion vary significantly across age groups, with children and elderly people being the most affected. Energy poverty has increased because of the cost of living crisis, which also leads to a loss of affordable housing. In-work poverty increased in the countries where wages have not caught up with inflation, due to loss of purchasing power. This aggravates inequalities among people and adds to the division of society.

7.6. The green and digital transformations create new jobs and require new skills but create uncertainties for workers, who need to meet these new demands. Social dialogue, which could help to support workers and enterprises to anticipate change, is weak in some Member States due to low collective bargaining coverage. Labour shortages are the result of: demographic development; a lack of attractiveness of some economic sectors, also due to poor working conditions; technological transformations, new jobs created by the green and digital transformations; and the lack of labour-market-relevant skills in the workforce.

7.7. Regional disparities arise between the core and periphery of the single market, and between urban and rural areas. Such gaps can be exacerbated by diverging wage dynamics. The rural areas are crucial for economic and social cohesion, agriculture and sustainable food systems.

7.8. The health and safety of workers remains a challenge, notably regarding occupational accidents and illnesses. The use of the best technologies can help in prevention measures to improve the working environment.

7.9. Unemployment and exclusion of women has reached a dramatic scale in some countries. Progress on equal opportunities between men and women has been made, but is still far from being satisfactory when it comes to positions of leadership. Discrimination persists despite the EU legal framework and it affects specific groups such as young people, people with disabilities, workers of a migrant background and LGBTQIA+ communities. An ageing population requires affordable care services in order to live in dignity.

7.10. If properly designed, social investment policies can have a positive impact on economic growth, productivity and inclusive and sustainable competitiveness, which is key to keeping good jobs in Europe ([3]) and are part of the solutions to the challenges described above. Implementation of reforms and policies under the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) should continue to be implemented by the EU and its Member States as a shared political commitment.

([2]) OJ C, C/2024/4056, 12.7.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4056/oj.

([3]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Boosting long-term inclusive growth through reforms and investment (OJ C, C/2024/3378, 31.5.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/3378/oj) and Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (a) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – The single market at 30 (b) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Long-term competitiveness of the EU: looking beyond 2030 (OJ C, C/2024/4056, 12.7.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4056/oj).

7.11. With regard to the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality, the various EU instruments should be used to address the challenges set out above in order to create a cohesive society that ensures a higher level of security for the EU, its citizens and its economy.

7.12. Social policies should be supported by better use of cohesion policy 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.

7.13. Furthermore, social protection systems and social policies allow Member States to meet their social and human rights obligations. Our social model is what makes the EU unique and positively distinguishes it from its competitors. The EPSR aims to enhance social cohesion and combat poverty effectively, reaffirming that social rights are integral to EU policies and that there is a clear link between the Pillar and other EU instruments related to social expenditure. 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.

7.14. The revised rules of economic governance reform must support growth-enhancing structural reforms and public investment, as well as increase ownership of the plans in Member States. These rules should not be to the detriment of public expenditure in essential services like health systems, education and justice, impacting their quality and inclusiveness. To counter the potential adverse effects, an EU fiscal space is crucial to stabilising social expenditure and enhancing investment. EU funded investment should also finance European public goods, some of which have been previously identified. Well-designed social investment and reforms can generate significant returns in economic growth through their effect on people and productivity, including stronger innovative capacity, new technology absorption and employment opportunities. Concurrently, national governments must review and ensure that their social protection systems have sufficient resources in areas where social support is most needed. Social infrastructures and networks, especially those related to social protection, need proper financing.

7.15. In that regard, it is crucial that governments take a clear stand on the coordination of national taxation systems to stop the erosion of the tax base, fight tax dumping and avoidance, and fully exploit the increased tax revenues to boost the EU's own resources for economic investment, and social and territorial cohesion.

7.16. Social dialogue at all levels can play a key role in enhancing growth, productivity, employment and competitiveness of European companies in global markets while also helping to improve the working conditions and well-being of workers. Ensuring a larger coverage of well-functioning social dialogue, including collective bargaining, remains a challenge for social partners and Member States alike.

7.17. Strengthening social and civil dialogue is paramount to ensure that people have an active role in managing the current major transitions. Social dialogue paves the way to collective bargaining, together with the workers' right to information and consultation and stronger participation in line with national laws and practices. Such instruments are necessary to adapt the workplace to the impact of new technologies, digitalisation and artificial intelligence and to update working conditions and workers' rights, which may also include the ongoing debate in the EU institutions on the right to disconnect.

7.18. The EESC:

— calls on the European Commission to monitor the implementation of all existing initiatives and, where necessary, to present new legislative and non-legislative initiatives;

— points out that the EPSR should continue to be used to steer the work on improving social cohesion and working conditions, in parallel with efforts to deliver the EPSR Action Plan and the 2030 targets on employment, education, skills and poverty;

— calls on the European Commission to monitor solutions already included in EU and national legislation on health and safety, work organisation and working conditions during the process of adapting to the use of artificial intelligence, and ensuring that a human-centred approach (e.g. algorithmic management) is taken;

— calls on the European Commission to promote the outcomes of European social dialogue and support the enforcement of social dialogue at national level; notes that the European Semester's Social Convergence Framework would be a valuable tool in this regard;

— calls on the EU institutions to recognise and value CSOs as key actors in designing and delivering the just transition. Through their interactions with local governments 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;

— calls on the EU institutions, in the framework of the next MFF, to consider adequate financial instruments for future-oriented social investments linked to the need to ensure the provision of European public goods: security (e.g. in food systems, water, energy supply and distribution, R&I, access to information, and strategic infrastructure), health, education and well-being;

— calls on the EU institutions to evaluate the need for a 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;

— calls on the European Commission to monitor and assess the Gender Equality Strategy which will come to an end in 2025, and begin work on a new strategy as a matter of urgency;

— calls on the European Commission to assess the outcomes of the other equality strategies and take appropriate action to continue to build a Union of Equality; this could include setting up an equality Directorate-General inside the European Commission;

— calls for an improved Youth Guarantee and similar programmes such as the ALMA ('Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve') initiative, that offer work opportunities to young people including those are not in any kind of employment, education or training (NEETs), and for steps to strengthen other programmes addressing long-term unemployment. An assessment of the European Child Guarantee is needed to monitor progress in reaching its objectives;

— calls on the EU institutions and Member States to devise targeted measures to increase the workforce in order to cope with demographic challenges, with the aim of achieving stable employment supported by active labour market policies and social dialogue. The EESC will closely monitor the initiative at European level to ban unpaid and bogus traineeships;

— calls for occupational health and safety strategies that seek to ensure zero death and accidents at work and enhance the fight against occupational illness. Prevention measures should be strengthened using new technologies including artificial intelligence. These strategies should also look at potential risks stemming from digital and demographic changes in the workplace, together with safeguards for workers against exposure to pathogens or dangerous agents and psychosocial risks;

— calls on Member States to properly implement the Directive on adequate minimum wage, which also has the objective to mobilise social dialogue and collective bargaining, at all levels. This will help support workers and enterprises, especially SMEs, anticipate change generated by the green and digital transitions that pose a challenge for social partners in many countries with regards to the coverage of collective bargaining;

— recognises the call from 'Your Europe, Your Say!' (YEYS) ([4]) for the introduction of special taxation guidelines for goods and services that have a detrimental impact on the climate, such as luxury goods. The revenue generated by these taxes should be used to fund climate-friendly initiatives and measures, supporting the EU's commitment to a sustainable and green economy.

8. **Securing health and decent living conditions: a solid societal dimension**

8.1. The aftermath of COVID-19, the energy crisis caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the ensuing high inflation are cause for concern for many people. The poverty rate shows a declining trend in some countries, but in others, particularly in remote areas, absolute poverty has increased among old people and women. Much more needs to be done to achieve Europe's goal of lifting 25 million people out of poverty by 2030, including combating systemic poverty, child poverty and in-work poverty.

([4]) Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS) is an annual youth event at the EESC. Five key recommendations from YEYS 2024, formulated and voted on by the youth representatives, are presented in the Summary Report.

8.2. In order to meet current and future social challenges, based on the UN 2030 Agenda, we need a renewed social contract for Europe to secure social rights, gender equality and better living and working conditions, while combating poverty and social exclusion and enhancing upward convergence in the EU ([5]).

8.3. The EESC emphasises the importance of mainstreaming a disability perspective in all EU policies, programmes and strategies. This includes ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to education, employment and social services. Policies should be designed to remove barriers and promote the full inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of society, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and equitable EU.

8.4. Demographic change, with low birth rates and an ageing population, will increase the demand for high-quality healthcare and social services in Europe, which must be accessible to all. Social protection systems must be made sustainable so that they can also deliver to future generations. Resources must be invested in qualification structures and in ensuring that there are effective public services and administrations with sufficient, motivated, adequately remunerated and well-qualified and trained staff at all levels.

8.5. Affordable, decent and sustainable housing for all were recognised by the Liège Declaration of the Belgian Presidency of the Council. The EESC calls for an EU platform to support national, regional and local partnerships to end housing exclusion.

8.6. The European Health Union aims to guarantee affordable, accessible, good quality, preventative and curative healthcare. The Health Union was set up in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and includes crisis preparedness, a comprehensive approach to mental health, beating cancer, as well as strategic autonomy and reform of pharmaceutical legislation. The EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 must focus on health, both building on the progress made under the previous mandate and expanding further, including prioritising rare diseases and their consequences, strengthening cooperation to counter the fragmentation within, and disparities among, national health systems.

8.7. The EESC:

— calls for action on the SDGs and for a comprehensive EU Anti-Poverty Strategy which must include coordinated efforts across the Member States to reduce poverty. This strategy should address both immediate needs and systemic issues such as income inequality and lack of access to social services. It should be aligned with the EPSR and incorporate best practices from the Member States to ensure effective, sustainable poverty reduction across the EU;

— supports the appointment of a Commissioner responsible for housing, with a dedicated portfolio and a proper Directorate-General, and adopting a holistic approach in the form of a European Action Plan on Social Housing to address the housing crisis. This action plan should mobilise funding under the next MFF and provide affordable, decent and sustainable housing for all. Special emphasis should be placed on ensuring that housing policies address the needs of vulnerable groups, including the elderly, people with disabilities and low-income families;

— stresses that energy supply is classified as a service of general interest. 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;

— calls for the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, together with the strong disability rights agenda, to be implemented by the Commission during the new mandate. The Commission should therefore prepare an action plan with initiatives for policies, programmes and legislative work. This action plan should seek to ensure the inclusion and equal treatment of persons with disabilities, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;

— calls for a 'One Health' approach to safeguard citizens' well-being and guarantee access to water, food safety and sovereignty, and access to sustainable healthcare and social services as public goods;

([5]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council 2023 – Strategic Foresight Report Sustainability and people's wellbeing at the heart of Europe's Open Strategic Autonomy (OJ C, C/2024/4057, 12.7.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4057/oj).

— recognises the role played by liberal professions, SMEs, other stakeholders and CSOs in making local communities more resilient, equitable, healthy, sustainable and socially just; stresses that actively preserving the environment is vital for a sustainable future;

— points out that health policy does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is a critical sector for the EU's economy alongside energy, food security and technology. Healthcare should therefore be valued as a public social investment and not seen as a cost. Efforts are needed to step up investment in both prevention and guaranteeing the long-term sustainability of healthcare in line with the concept of the 'Right to Health', that was prioritised during the Conference on the Future of Europe;

— calls on the EU to 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;

— underscores the need for a paradigm shift recognising the value of care in our societies by building on the European Care Strategy; calls for a European Care Guarantee to be adopted, ensuring access to affordable and high quality care for all those who need it. The guarantee should empower those in need of care while supporting their caregivers, including lifting the burden of unpaid caring responsibilities from women;

— also calls for EU complementary funding to support Member States as they expand and enhance care services and improve coverage. Investment in the care economy is essential for improving the quality of life for all, particularly those who are most vulnerable;

— recognises the value of care and care work in our society, and the care economy's potential for creating good quality jobs and decent working conditions for care workers, including domestic workers. Steps must be taken to attract new workers to the healthcare sector and invest in an educated, skilled, gender-balanced and motivated workforce, which is held in high social esteem and adequately renumerated. These steps will be crucial to ensuring resilient and qualitative healthcare in Member States;

— stresses the need to move towards a strategy based on dignified ageing and intergenerational solidarity, and calls for a European Strategy for Older Persons;

— recognises the YEYS call for a standardised common strategy on sexual and reproductive rights across the EU. This strategy should guarantee access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for all, promoting gender equality and safeguarding fundamental rights.

9. **Participation of citizens, robust civic space and meaningful civic dialogue**

9.1. Participation is a crucial component of European democracy, and a prerequisite for building trust and legitimising EU policies in the eyes of citizens. The concept of participatory democracy is enshrined in Article 11 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU): this stipulates that citizens have the right to participate in the democratic life of the Union and that institutions undertake to consult and take decisions as broadly and transparently as possible.

9.2. Citizens brought together at the Conference on the Future of Europe questioned EU decision-making and asked for more flexibility in deciding and acting, especially when confronted with urgent global challenges.

9.3. Ensuring that people of all ages have opportunities to engage in and contribute to civic life is a key aspect of developing both civic responsibility and the credibility of the democratic process. Through a robust system of structured participation, young people can contribute to shaping the EU's future through innovation, engagement and dedication. Independent, free and representative CSOs are a safeguard for democratic societies, and have a key role to play in developing, implementing and monitoring EU policies. CSOs channel collective engagement: this complements forms of direct citizen participation that convey individuals' opinions, thus counterbalancing any attempt by Member States to suppress civic space.

9.4. Social partner organisations are an essential part of organised civil society. However, recognised social partners have a specific role in shaping economic, labour and social policies that promote the upward convergence of living and working conditions across Member States. This should be fully recognised and upheld in social dialogue structures and processes at all levels and is distinct from civil dialogue.

9.5. The EESC notes with concern developments in some Member States that have led to a shrinking space for CSOs, although 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. Discriminatory societies are incompatible with the EU, which strives for balanced economic prosperity, social progress and inclusiveness.

9.6. Citizens have never spoken so loudly about what they want. Their voices need to be heard when decisions are taken in the EU, through participatory and e-democracy tools such as the European Citizens' Initiative, citizens' panels, and crowdsourcing citizens' policy ideas.

9.7. Europe must be a safe, cross-border enabling space for civil society, including social economy entities. Structured civil dialogue at all levels of government should be encouraged and promoted in all Member States.

9.8. Mechanisms for civil society dialogue should therefore be strengthened in order to ensure structured and meaningful dialogue that factors in civil expertise. The current ad hoc and piecemeal arrangements are inadequate and rely too much on the goodwill and personal initiatives of the individuals and services involved.

9.9. The EESC, as the institutional voice of organised civil society within the EU, 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 citizens, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU governance.

9.10. Therefore, the EESC:

— calls for structural support for the role of CSOs in building resilient societies through civil and social dialogue and acknowledges the pivotal role of CSOs in fostering resilient, equal and sustainable societies through grassroots initiatives. CSOs must not be excluded from decisions on EU policies, the future of Europe or its people. Care must be taken to keep up an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society ([6]). Standards must be applied to civil dialogue across the EU institutions, in order to implement Article 11 TEU effectively ([7]);

— calls for the EU institutions to take the lead and develop a strategy for civil society ([8]), with a clear action plan. Moreover, the EESC calls for an annual civil dialogue or civic space scoreboard ([9]), 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 ([10]);

([6]) Treaty on European Union (TEU), Art. 11 (2).
([7]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj) (points 1.6; 5.4).
([8]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj) (point 5.1).
([9]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj) (point 1.10).
([10]) Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Strengthening civil dialogue and participatory democracy in the EU: a path forward (OJ C, C/2024/2481, 23.4.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/2481/oj) (point 1.10).

— calls for action to empower young people as drivers of a more sustainable future for the EU and acknowledges that challenges such as climate change, the digital transition and demographic shifts are priorities and opportunities for young people to drive change within the EU. Spaces for their structured participation must be provided and emphasis placed on how their innovation, engagement and dedication can shape the EU's future;

— considers that it is important to recognise and value the important role played by civil society in implementing many key aspects of EU policy making, including the European Pillar of Social Rights. Civil society plays an integral role in maintaining the EU's unique socio-economic model and in promoting sustainable growth, social cohesion and inclusiveness;

— 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, not least by designating 2025 as the European Year of Volunteers;

— recognises the YEYS request for further youth engagement and representation in EU decision making, as well as the establishment of a youth quota in European Parliament elections. This would ensure that young people are directly involved in shaping the future of Europe, fostering a more inclusive and representative democratic process;

— fully supports the YEYS recommendation to have a robust legal framework for social media in order to address and mitigate polarisation and disinformation. This framework should aim to safeguard democratic processes, protect people from harmful content and guarantee a fair and informed public discourse across the EU.

9.11. By playing our role, we can ensure that during this legislative term of the EU institutions, all CSOs will be able to make their voice heard and play a legitimate role, for the benefit of all.

Brussels, 18 September 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE