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Resolution of the European Economic and Social Committee

Contribution to the 2026 European Commission's work programme

(C/2025/4200)

Rapporteurs: **Christa SCHWENG (Gr. I)**
María del Carmen BARRERA CHAMORRO (Gr. II)
Krzysztof Stanisław BALON (Gr. III)

Advisors	Jukka AHTELA (to the Gr. I rapporteur) Ioannis GRIGORIADIS (to the Gr. II rapporteur) Piotr SADOWSKI (to the Gr. III rapporteur)
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1. Introduction

1.1. With this resolution, the EESC, the institutional voice of European organised civil society, contributes to shaping the European Commission's 2026 work programme. The EU must place democracy, human rights, sustainability, equality and social justice at its core. Social partners, civil society and the voluntary sector are critical infrastructure for societal resilience and must be recognised, protected and meaningfully involved in foresight, preparedness and recovery across all crises.

1.2. To maintain its global leadership in a rapidly changing world, the EU must adopt a new approach to competitiveness that integrates industrial policy, climate ambition and geopolitical strategy. This requires a strong emphasis on investment, fostering innovation and promoting social cohesion, while ensuring that economic growth is sustainable, social, inclusive and resilient. Competitiveness and economic growth must go hand-in-hand with social inclusion.

1.3. A resilient industrial policy must prioritise innovation, the green and digital transitions and the Union of Skills, while advancing lifelong learning and quality jobs. The social and solidarity economy must be supported as a driver of equity and cohesion. As defence readiness has become crucial in the new security environment, it must become a common priority, while staying grounded in rights, transparency and the rule of law.

1.4. Against the backdrop of a new geopolitical order where challenges and crises become the norm, undermining and threatening Europe, its values and its citizens, the EESC calls upon the EU to focus on civil, societal and military preparedness and stresses the need for social cohesion and a culture of resilience across all levels of society.

1.5. The multiple crises have impacted the quality of life of many Europeans. We must regain confidence in the functioning of our societies based on European values, in our economies and in Europe's place in the world by enabling Europeans to keep up with rapid societal developments and making sure that nobody is left behind. Access to education and training in order to acquire the skills needed in constantly changing labour markets will be key to Europe's competitiveness and prosperity.

1.6. Investment in research, development, skills and strategic sectors must be at the core of this industrial policy to ensure industrial resilience and long-term economic growth, as well as quality jobs. By focusing on technologies such as human-centred artificial intelligence and renewable energy, the EU can maintain a competitive edge in high-value industries.

1.7. Maintaining Europe's competitive social model requires well-defined investments in public services, social protection, and an ambitious Anti-Poverty Strategy. The EESC stresses the interdependence of food, water, nature and climate, calling for a rights-based Water Resilience Strategy as a core pillar of the EU Blue Deal.

1.8. Globally, the EU must lead as a peacemaker and engage with new partners. At home, delivering together means investing in civil and social dialogue, democratic participation and future generations.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

Industrial Policy

2.1. Deepen the internal market's move away from fragmented national industrial policies and towards a more ambitious and coordinated European approach that aligns regulatory, tax and trade policies to enhance global competitiveness and quality jobs.

2.2. Design technology roadmaps for emerging technologies; de-risk technologies through pilot projects and joint undertakings; adopt circular economy principles to reduce external dependence; make financial support more effective, including via the upcoming European Competitiveness Fund.

2.3. Implement a cross-cutting EU industrial water policy which can then be adapted to different sectors, complementing the Clean Industrial Deal. In this sense, the EU should consider exploring the potential of sodium-ion batteries, which could simultaneously enhance electrification and water resilience.

Competitiveness

2.4. Continue the simplification programme, thereby contributing to the competitiveness of European companies. Particular attention should be paid to firms with strategic market status (SMS). However, while regulatory simplification can enhance efficiency and productivity and make it easier to tap into the potential of the Single Market, it should not lead essential social, environmental and labour standards being weakened as these elements strike a balanced approach that supports businesses, protects workers and serves the broader interests of society.

2.5. While competitiveness is a key strategic goal for the EU'S long-term prosperity, it is crucial that it does not lose its social dimension. Competitiveness and productivity are crucial for high-quality jobs, good working conditions, social dialogue and collective bargaining. Workers' participation in corporate governance can boost productivity and support resilience.

2.6. Adapt competition rules to balance market efficiency with industrial resilience and innovation, economic growth, industrial competitiveness and uphold the EU's social market economy model.

2.7. Ensure that EU competition rules enable investment in the green and digital transitions and promote services of general interest, while tackling market concentration and the abuse of dominant positions in order to protect enterprises, workers, consumers and the most vulnerable people.

Green transition and decarbonisation

2.8. Strive for strategic autonomy in critical industry sectors such as the health, chemical and pharmaceutical industries and develop an integrated roadmap covering their whole supply chains.

2.9. Target policy measures transferring the cost benefits of clean electricity to Energy Intensive Industries (EII).

2.10. Ensure that the voice of civil society is heard through its role in the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) when preparing the Circular Economy Act.

2.11. Reform the electricity market in such a way that it meets not only the objective of climate neutrality by 2050 at the latest, but also those of security of supply and stable, affordable prices, with specific attention to access to energy for people in vulnerable situations.

2.12. Ensure that the Single Market fosters upwards social and economic cohesion, while upholding UN SDG environmental standards.

Research, Technology and Innovation

2.13. Offer researchers within the European Research Area (ERA) a unified regime, ensure decent working conditions and career opportunities in the R&I system, especially for young researchers, and offer the opportunity to researchers from third countries to work and move freely within the EU.

2.14. Anchor competitiveness policy in long-term investment and innovation, supporting sustainable industrial transformation and the green and digital transitions.

2.15. Ensure that digitalisation and AI are human-centred and do not lead to precarious employment, that algorithmic systems used in employment processes and labour relations are transparent, fair and discussed within the framework of social dialogue and collective bargaining, and that the human in control principle is effectively applied when implementing AI legislation.

2.16. Invest in re-skilling and lifelong learning, which is critical to ensure that workers can access jobs created by the technological change.

2.17. Promote the participation of social partners and civil society in shaping EU research agendas.

Economic Policy and Cohesion

2.18. Ensure macroeconomic and financial stability through a credible medium-term fiscal framework in view of ensuring economic and systemic resilience.

2.19. Establish an EU investment fund which aims to provide financial resources for investment projects that are of strategic European interest, financed by a mix of resources, including Member State contributions and new own resources.

2.20. To close the investment gap with the US and other major competitors, put in place the conditions for venture capital, especially to support start-ups and to scale up firms and companies.

2.21. Improve the framework conditions for private investments in the Single Market. This includes implementing central components of the Capital Markets Union / Savings and Investment Union and completing the Banking Union. One central element of the agenda should be promoting supervisory convergence and strengthening the role of the European Supervisory Authorities.

2.22. Tax simplification should promote giving cost-efficient information, improving the use of and exchange of information between tax authorities. It should not lead to unfair or unintended changes of tax liabilities or open up possibilities for tax evasion or harmful tax competition. An impact assessment should be undertaken for every proposal in order to properly assess the concrete implications for taxpayers and tax authorities of new legislative initiatives.

2.23. Identify the most effective solutions for EU islands and present a holistic strategy for islands that tackle the issue of insularity.

2.24. Include more actively civil society in the EU Cities agenda and bear in mind the issue of affordable housing and its link with cohesion policy.

Social Policy

2.25. Ensure that equal treatment and fair mobility of workers becomes a cornerstone, with effective enforcement against abuses.

2.26. Develop a just transition comprehensive policy package by the European Commission, focused on the impact on workers and ensuring the involvement of social dialogue. If public money is used for incentivising company transition plans, social conditionalities should be taken into account. Establish upskilling and reskilling programs with focus on sectors most affected by twin transitions such as tourism and transport.

2.27. Manage structural change in a socially fair way, through inclusive governance frameworks that prioritise participation, social and civil dialogue as well as collective bargaining.

2.28. Establish a Just Transition Observatory, responsible for research and data collection, involving organised civil society at all stages of transition.

2.29. Deliver an initiative on telework and the right to disconnect.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

3.1. Introduce a common defence policy and a comprehensive European defence, as strategic autonomy and defence readiness are crucial in the new security environment. More common procurement and investing in EU defence industry are crucial, without unduly undermining social investments, while taking into account social conditionalities, including those related with collective bargaining.

3.2. Carry out an EU-wide public communication campaign to raise awareness and support among the European public regarding the need to safeguard Europe's peace, security, prosperity and values, and the EDTIB's essential contribution thereto. In the EESC's view, public confidence in the EU's defence capacity also depends on the perception that security includes protection of fundamental rights and access to essential services.

3.3. Strengthen climate diplomacy and in particular establish a Civil Society Climate Diplomacy Network; reinforce the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs).

3.4. Address climate-induced migration.

3.5. Address climate change as a global security threat by integrating climate security into defence strategies, through climate-resilient infrastructure, sustainable resource management and leveraging new technologies by securing financial support for climate mitigation and adaptation.

3.6. Involve civil society and the private sector as key partners in advancing climate and water resilience.

3.7. Ensure that all EU policies, including industry, energy, agriculture and preparedness in general across all sectors, support water resilience and bring energy security and food security in line with climate objectives.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

4.1. Implement an anti-poverty strategy that aims to eradicate extreme poverty and address housing, energy and mobility poverty. It must also explicitly recognise the link between persistent poverty and democratic exclusion, ensuring that people with lived experience of poverty are part of policy co-creation and civic participation and that nobody is deprived of access to essential energy resources.

4.2. Follow up on the action plan on the pillar of social rights, including an effective policy package to provide support to workers in the digital and green transition through anticipation and management of change, with social dialogue and collective bargaining as leading principles.

4.3. Effectively address the cost-of-living crisis to support many of the EU's ambitions: ensuring a just twin transition, reducing inequalities in opportunities and outcomes, and ensuring shared prosperity for all people across the EU.

4.4. Develop the gender equality strategy post-2025 with the aim of eradicating gender-based violence, close gender gaps in the labour market, achieve equal participation in different sectors of the economy, address gender-based wage and pension gaps, close the gender gap in care work, achieve gender balance in decision-making and politics, and assess the progress made so far.

4.5. Acknowledge the key role of well-functioning social and civil dialogue at all levels in developing and implementing labour market and social policies.

4.6. Develop and implement an inclusive European Skills Agenda, taking into account the roadmap for quality jobs and prioritising digital literacy, critical thinking and transversal skills essential for democratic engagement, ethical technology use and informed decision making.

4.7. Rapidly adopt the skills portability initiative to allow for faster and easier mutual recognition of skills in the EU.

4.8. Address the demographic challenge all over Europe with a special focus on intergenerational solidarity and promoting reforms in Member States.

4.9. Enforce social dialogue on the deployment of AI systems and highlight that any initiative adapting existing law should take into consideration the protection of workers' rights and ensure that humans remain in control in all human-machine interactions.

4.10. Fully implement the Youth Guarantee and the ALMA initiative, as well as assess the European Child Guarantee.

4.11. Prioritise the Housing First Model in order to combat homelessness amongst working people and vulnerable groups.

4.12. Implement a European Care Guarantee, including childcare, to provide affordable, accessible and quality healthcare and care services for people in the EU and quality care work for workers in this sector, in order to close the gender gap in unpaid care responsibilities and help women stay in the labour market and have access to a robust safety net.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

5.1. Focus on incentives and on equitable and efficient implementation of the EU international biodiversity commitments ahead of the next Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biodiversity (COP 17), for example by examining biodiversity credits and ensuring that all new financial tools are socially and environmentally sustainable.

5.2. Ensure fairer food chain distribution, stronger trade reciprocity, action on speculation, youth involvement, and mandatory sustainability in procurement.

5.3. Ensure that all EU policies, including industry, energy, agriculture and preparedness in general across all sectors support water resilience, as this is a social equaliser: lack of access to clean water perpetuates inequality, exclusion and environmental injustice, particularly in marginalised and climate-affected communities.

5.4. Promote reforestation programmes across Europe.

5.5. For the integration of a European Water Resilience Strategy, grounded in the principle of the human right to water, in the implementation of the Preparedness Union Strategy.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

6.1. Recognise organised civil society and social partners as pillars of democracy and key actors for upholding European values of human rights, solidarity and the rule of law.

6.2. Adopt a civil society strategy, with a clear action plan, as well as implementation measures.

6.3. Stronger democracy at work through social dialogue, collective bargaining and full implementation of workers' information, consultation and representation rights. EU institutions should provide relevant support for social dialogue and collective bargaining, at all levels, with a view to further developing the capacities of social partners and taking relevant implementing measures, including financial measures, to increase the coverage of collective bargaining, especially in countries and regions where its potential remains untapped.

6.4. Empower young people as drivers of a more sustainable future for the EU by creating spaces for their structured participation.

6.5. Pursue overall efforts to fight disinformation and misinformation, which can have detrimental consequences for our democracies and our security, by fully implementing the Action Plan on Disinformation; develop a plan that ensures quality in local and regional information, providing adequate resources to the European External Action Service to fight and control foreign information manipulations and interference, while safeguarding the independence and free capacity of civil society and protecting freedom of expression.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

7.1. An EU common defence policy going hand in hand with a genuine fully-fledged common foreign and security policy which goes beyond the current one.

7.2. Greater strategic autonomy requiring a coordinated approach that bridges EU defence with EU foreign policy trade and industrial policies, research and innovation, full interoperability among Member States and joint or coordinated defence procurement, together with a Single Market for defence products and services.

7.3. Increased resilience of trade agreements by diversifying imports and creating market opportunities for European companies. These would improve security and mitigate geopolitical risks, while promoting the enforcement of social and environmental standards, ensuring a global level playing field for fair competition.

7.4. Promote peace, security and defence, global justice and global progress by protecting and actively engaging in the multilateral system.

7.5. Create a strategy for improving youth engagement in social and civil dialogue in the EU neighbourhood, including Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans, Georgia, Armenia and the Euromed region.

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

The EESC makes the following proposals/requests:

8.1. The enlargement process should continue in the direction of peace, prosperity and democracy while creating long-term stability on our continent with the involvement of social and civil actors. This should prominently involve Ukraine, whose democratic resilience under aggression exemplifies the defence of European values, alongside Moldova and the Western Balkans.

8.2. A strong investment policy, focusing on the most advanced technological sectors, on the creation of a European energy market that substantially reduces energy prices, and on the implementation of fair green and digital transitions.

8.3. A European Fund for Strategic Investments to be set up, focused on financing European priority projects. Furthermore, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034 should significantly increase the resources earmarked for investment priorities, bearing in mind strong social conditionality.

8.4. A pragmatic assessment to ensure the full effectiveness of the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF).

8.5. Sufficient funding for the European Defence Union, to include a strong financial envelope to reach the target of investing 80 % of European defence acquisition budgets within Europe by 2040, and new financing tools to boost technological capacity.

8.6. Defence investments should be accompanied by robust oversight mechanisms and transparent reporting, ensuring accountability while protecting legitimate security interests. Social partners and civil society should be involved in monitoring the socio-economic impacts of defence investments.

8.7. Innovative civil dialogue processes that align with young people's interests and ways of engaging. The EU Youth Dialogue and the 'EU Youth Test' are strong examples of participatory policy-making instruments that involve youth representatives in consultation, impact assessments and mitigation, fostering youth mainstreaming at institutional level.

Brussels, 19 June 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE