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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – EU Ports Strategy

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. Ports are major workplaces, central to Europe's economy and trade, and their contribution is essential in the welfare of societies and timely distribution of goods, energy and services. A successful EU Ports Strategy will depend on integrated governance, long-term investment planning, coordination across multiple policy domains and a strong social foundation that guarantees decent work, fair competition and active social dialogue while taking passengers' rights into consideration.

1.2. The EESC welcomes the practice of learning directly from the development of critical infrastructures since the previous regulations and that the future requirements from the EU have been taken into consideration.

1.3. The EESC supports energy-related port investments accompanied by strong social governance and the active involvement of social partners, recognising stakeholders, employers and workers as key contributors to resilience, security and the protection of critical infrastructure.

1.4. The competitiveness of EU ports should be strengthened through digitalisation and artificial intelligence, with social dialogue and passengers' rights remaining central and supported by sustained investment in skills.

1.5. The EESC calls for stronger implementation and interoperability of the European Maritime Single Window environment (EMSWe), including the reduction of duplicate reporting and administrative formalities.

1.6. Clean energy supply must be assured, and energy should be produced on-site, where possible. The EESC calls for enhanced coordination between public authorities, port operators, energy producers and maritime stakeholders to accelerate investment in port infrastructure and ensure secure, affordable and scalable fuel supply chains. During the transition process, it should also be ensured that energy suppliers (of conventional and non-conventional fuels) are aligned with the EU strategy for affordable energy and access to fuel supply. In particular, the development of on-shore power supply should be accelerated through grid connections, port-side reinforcement and extended financial support measures to enable the use of existing infrastructure and reach the targets already set at EU level.

1.7. The EESC calls for technology-neutral and inclusive transition pathways reflecting operational realities, and supports measures to reduce congestion and delays through digitalisation and optimisation, alongside proportionate safety standards for alternative fuels, including drop-in biofuels. An additional parameter for decarbonisation is the need for gradual replacement of Europe's old fleet ([1]), which bears higher operational costs and is vulnerable to contemporary risks. Current and future green shipping corridors should incorporate the just transition dimension, anticipating change through social dialogue.

1.8. The pressure on transport and energy networks and the necessary military mobility create a need for growth financing. The EESC recommends decisive financing support and clarification of its conditions.

1.9. Security policies should address working conditions and job security as key factors in reducing vulnerability to coercion by criminal networks. The increasing pressure from organised crime highlights the need for secure employment conditions, whistleblower protection and support systems for workers.

1.10. The EESC highlights the need for scrutiny of port financing and ownership, including vertical integration and strategic acquisitions. It calls for greater transparency in ownership structures and control of port assets, particularly where state-linked investors are involved.

1.11. The EU Port Strategy calls for improved concession and land-lease frameworks to ensure legal certainty, attract investment and support skilled employment, while balancing returns with appropriate obligations. The Commission should ensure a level playing field.

1.12. The EESC calls for social dialogue regarding FDI-related decision-making that affects European ports as well as in assessment and mitigation processes to ensure respect of the relevant labour and social regulations and applicable collective agreements according to national labour law and practices.

1.13. The EESC therefore calls for support for port governance models, such as the landlord model, that support both economic efficiency and (social) sustainability in port operations.

1.14. Regarding competitiveness and subsidising, it is necessary to consider in which cases it makes sense to subsidise ports outside the EU and under what conditions.

1.15. The EESC points out that European ports operate within a highly competitive global environment, where regulatory, financial and operational conditions may differ significantly between EU and non-EU ports.

1.16. The EESC calls for more targeted support for SMEs in the sector (which are affected directly or indirectly), smaller ports and non-liner shipping operators, including bulk and tramp segments, which may face disproportionate compliance and investment burdens.

1.17. The EESC calls for careful assessment of the impact of regulatory measures on the competitiveness of EU ports, avoiding distortions vis-à-vis non-EU ports. It also calls for fair allocation of EU climate and energy funding, including ETS revenues, to support decarbonisation and skills, while preventing disproportionate cost burdens.

([1]) OJ C 349, 29.9.2023, p. 41.

1.18. The Port Strategy should safeguard European management and control of strategic ports while reinforcing rail-connected supply chains to enhance resilience against geopolitical and economic disruptions.

1.19. The EESC recognises that maritime connectivity for islands and peripheral regions is fundamental for territorial cohesion, economic resilience and affordability, and should be reflected across EU ports and transport policy.

1.20. The EESC calls on the European Commission to explicitly include the fisheries sector in upcoming investment instruments, notably the Sustainable Transport Investment Plan.

1.21. The EESC supports measures to ensure safe working environments, make maritime careers more attractive to young people and women and promote targeted upskilling and reskilling for a just green and digital transition.

2. **General comments**

2.1. There seems to be a general consensus on the need to review the EU Ports Strategy. EU Communication documents have marked a core shift in EU port policy, moving it from a sectoral issue to a systemic priority central to the objectives of the EU. Ports are becoming energy hubs and digital nodes, while also acquiring great geopolitical significance.

2.2. Recent crises have exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and reinforced the strategic role of EU ports in resilience and autonomy. This calls for stronger security, diversified trade routes and sufficient capacity for energy imports, including LNG, while preserving the EU's openness to global trade. In addition, the EESC stresses that globally competitive energy prices are essential for maintaining industrial activity, clean fuel production and logistics investment in EU ports.

2.3. Ports are central to Europe's economy, trade and transport networks – and not only as gateways for goods, energy and data but also major workplaces. Ports should also be recognised as strategic industrial hubs supporting reshoring, circular manufacturing and European supply-chain resilience.

2.4. Developing the EU maritime space is a core priority, since it facilitates the transition towards a cleaner and greener shipping industry, while also allowing for the needed investments in infrastructure, innovation and security, with multiple knock-on effects for regional economies.

2.5. *Strengthen competitiveness, innovation & digitalisation*

2.5.1. The EESC supports a strong focus on competitiveness, innovation and practical digitalisation and underlines that the competitiveness of EU ports is intrinsically linked to the competitiveness of the EU shipping sector and the wider maritime value chain.

2.5.2. European ports operate in a highly competitive environment. Concession and land-lease agreements between port authorities and private operators support efficient, financially sustainable operations while safeguarding public interests and enabling long-term economic and environmental objectives through private investment and expertise.

2.5.3. EU funding and external investment strategies, including initiatives such as the Global Gateway, should prioritise mutually beneficial partnerships and avoid supporting infrastructure that directly competes with EU port capacity.

2.5.4. Reducing regulatory complexity and overlapping reporting obligations is essential to safeguard the competitiveness and investment attractiveness of EU ports.

2.5.5. The EESC warns that disproportionate regulatory and cost burdens may accelerate carbon leakage, traffic diversion and industrial relocation to neighbouring non-EU ports, undermining both EU competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

2.5.6. Annex 1 proposes funding for EU ports exposed to unfair competition from third countries; however, priority should be given to preventing distortions to the level playing field, as compensatory funding may reinforce such distortions.

2.5.7. Unfair competition causes traffic diversion to non-EU transhipment ports and also impacts the capacity of EU ports to attract investment, including in clean energy, fuel production and industrial activities. The competitive position of EU ports vis-à-vis non-EU ports, including UK freeports, should therefore be duly considered.

2.5.8. The additional investments for reception and distribution of critical raw materials must also be taken into consideration.

Innovation and artificial intelligence (AI)

2.6. Artificial intelligence presents both challenges and opportunities and is expected to play an increasingly important role in areas such as safety, security and strategic planning. The strategy supports the digital and green transformation of EU ports through innovation, with targeted funding for port innovation systems supporting early investment in emerging technologies, including AI and underwater solutions.

Digitalisation

2.7. Digitalisation should drive connectivity by reducing administrative burden, ensuring interoperability and enabling efficient data exchange. Automation and digitalisation must be accompanied by employment impact assessments, social dialogue and measures for workforce planning, reskilling and quality employment.

2.7.1. Digital fragmentation across EU ports calls for standardised and interoperable frameworks that enhance efficiency while addressing cybersecurity risks and ensuring that no port is excluded due to high implementation costs.

2.8. *Advance energy transition, sustainability & clean industries*

2.8.1. The decarbonisation of ports is at the core of EU maritime policy and is in line with the strategic objectives of the European Green Deal. The green and digital transitions must be implemented in line with the principles of a just transition, which requires the participation of employers and of workers' representatives. Green shipping corridors, which aim for zero-emission routes between two or more ports, should already incorporate the principles of a just transition into their piloting initiatives.

2.8.2. Ports increasingly attract investment in renewable energy production, with associated infrastructure such as LNG terminals, offshore wind hubs and future hydrogen imports concentrated in port areas. Integrating energy and maritime security planning is therefore essential. Energy hub projects must ensure quality employment, workforce upskilling and the involvement of social partners.

2.8.3. The EESC notes that ports – which are at the interface of fisheries, maritime transport and energy systems – can accelerate decarbonisation by enabling fishing fleets' access to low-carbon fuels and related infrastructure.

2.8.4. The EESC notes with concern that the ecosystem for alternative maritime fuels remains underdeveloped, with limited availability of bunkering facilities, storage capacity and distribution networks across EU ports.

2.8.5. The EESC stresses that the limited availability of sustainable alternative maritime fuels remains a key obstacle to decarbonisation and calls for coordinated action to ensure their safety, scalability, affordability and accessibility across all market segments including SMEs and the bulk/tramp sector. Actions should encourage direct electrification, renewable hydrogen and hydrogen derived e-fuels, while advanced sustainable biofuels and drop-in biofuels also play a role, provided we avoid food/feed competition and high ILUC risks.

2.8.6. The EESC supports participation of the European Union and Member States in the clean energy marine hubs (CEM-Hubs) initiative to accelerate deployment of scalable alternative fuel ecosystems and reduce investment risks.

2.9. *Protect & secure ports*

2.9.1. EU ports face a rapidly evolving mix of traditional and hybrid threats, along with geopolitical risks.

2.9.2. Growing concerns exist regarding drug trafficking, the increasing sophistication of criminal networks and the pressure placed on port workers, with stigmatisation further hindering recruitment. The EU should therefore adopt a comprehensive and continuous approach to background screening, understood as an ongoing and holistic process throughout employment, to protect port and customs workers from coercion and to effectively combat organised crime. Such measures should be implemented in full respect of workers' rights, data protection rules, proportionality principles and social dialogue mechanisms, ensuring that workers are treated as partners in strengthening port security and resilience.

2.9.3. The EESC recognises that organised crime increasingly exploits containerised trade for drug trafficking, with growing sophistication shifting port security towards intelligence-led, risk-based approaches that require closer coordination among relevant authorities and operators.

2.9.4. Narcotraffic should be recognised as a strategic European threat. Port operators must be required to actively collaborate and reinforce the exchange of intelligence data.

2.9.5. Regarding drones and hybrid risks, ports must have an anti-drone plan, including the integration of early drone detection sensors.

2.9.6. Port control centres must be considered critical assets, therefore regular checks must be implemented, including drills.

2.10. *Access to finance & investment*

2.10.1. Financing the transformation of EU ports is a central challenge which requires a mix of EU funding instruments and private capital. EU funding mechanisms should prevent fragmentation of the internal market and avoid reinforcing inequalities between Member States with different fiscal capacities.

2.10.2. EU and national public funding, including State aid, should be conditional on compliance with collective agreements (if applicable), ILO fundamental labour standards and fair working conditions.

2.10.3. The EESC highlights the need to develop port land to attract investment in and support for evolving logistics and industrial activities, requiring development-friendly spatial planning and dedicated funding, including for military mobility needs.

2.10.4. Further expansion needs are linked to land availability, military mobility, the distribution of materials, and energy production and distribution.

2.11. *Social cohesion, skills and quality jobs*

2.11.1. Regarding workers' safety, developing skills and attracting talent, the human dimension of port activity is taken in consideration in the Communication.

2.11.2. Skills initiatives must complement – not substitute – broader social action. Support for ports should include protection of local employment, respect of the relevant labour and social regulations and applicable collective agreements according to national labour law and practices.

2.11.3. Workers' safety is paramount. Automation and digitalisation are reshaping port employment by reducing demand for manual labour while increasing the need for technical, security and digital skills, including in risk management related to hybrid threats, trafficking and cyber-attacks. These changes create both opportunities, such as higher productivity, job stability and safer working conditions, and risks, notably job displacement and social resistance.

2.11.4. New materials and higher traffic volumes require enhanced workers' safety, including updated training to address emerging risks. Training systems should be jointly developed by social partners, provide transferable qualifications and guarantee lifelong learning.

2.11.5. It is necessary to ensure that lashing is done in a safe manner by a qualified workforce in European ports.

2.11.6. Safety concerns and demographic trends make it difficult to develop skills and attract talent in ports. Increasing the participation of women and young people is essential to strengthen workforce diversity and availability, supported by concrete targets, safe working environments and equal pay. The competitiveness and resilience of EU ports depend on high-quality employment, strong labour standards and effective social dialogue, with workers recognised as a strategic asset for safe and efficient operations and fair competition ensured through alignment of competition policy with labour standards.

2.11.7. The EESC would like the impact of vertical integration to be more explicit. The revision of the merger guidelines should evaluate whether there is a risk of reduced competition as well as safeguard employment in the port and logistics sector.

2.11.8. Fishing is among the activities that add value and allow for social development. Consideration must be given to preserving fishing as an important economic contribution to the lives of EU families, food sovereignty and development of coastal communities.

3. **Specific comments**

3.1. *Military mobility*

3.1.1. Ports must be capable of handling heavy military cargo and specialised vessels. Additional critical mobility needs will stress the already limited port capacity in some very important areas.

3.1.2. The challenge lies in dual-use capacity, therefore adaptable infrastructure and coordinated planning are essential.

3.2. *Connectivity*

3.2.1. Passenger and commercial connectivity in EU ports underpins territorial cohesion, tourism and economic activity. A European multimodal transport model should recognise rail and other modes as complementary pillars within the Trans-European Transport Network, supporting efficient freight distribution and passenger mobility. The EESC emphasises the need to improve the performance and interoperability of port connections with road, inland waterways and, in particular, rail networks within the TEN-T framework.

3.2.2. Short sea shipping should also be better supported as a key component of the internal market and sustainable transport system.

3.2.3. Ferry networks are essential for island and remote maritime regions, where sea transport is often a substitute for land connections, while major cruise ports serve as gateways for global tourism, linking EU port cities to international travel flows.

3.2.4. Connectivity extends beyond routes to integration with urban transport systems. As ports evolve into multimodal hubs, this enhances efficiency but may generate congestion and environmental pressures; avoidable modal shift to more carbon-intensive land transport should therefore be prevented.

3.3. *Port ownership and international cooperation*

3.3.1. Risks related to ownership and control, including technological lock-in and involvement of foreign state-owned high-risk entities, may create strategic leverage over Member States, notably through control of infrastructure, equipment and software ownership.

3.3.2. Point 1 of the strategy notes that ports risk becoming a battleground amid global geopolitical competition, a reality already evident in the EU and beyond. While the strategy rightly identifies investment needs and proposes public funding instruments, it does not sufficiently address the differing investment capacities of port managing bodies, which are a key determining factor and can be strengthened through action at Member State level.

3.3.3. EU cooperation with third-country ports should be conditional on respect for labour rights, international labour standards, environmental regulations and fair competition.

3.3.4. Social partners, national governments and the EU should cooperate at tripartite level to establish common standards, build consensus on port governance and cooperation and promote just transition principles, respect for labour law, international law and the fight against trafficking. Stakeholder training is essential to manage transitions and ensure fair competition.

3.3.5. Assessment of foreign investments in ports should include not only strategic and security considerations but also potential impacts on employment, industrial relations, collective bargaining frameworks, where applicable, and social dialogue.

3.4. *The role of smaller ports in ensuring social cohesion*

3.4.1. The EESC underlines the vital role of small and medium-sized ports, particularly in island and remote regions, in ensuring mobility, supply chains and territorial cohesion. It calls for adequate EU support to prevent marginalisation and enable their adaptation to sustainability requirements.

3.4.2. The repeated references to small and medium-sized ports lack a clear definition, creating uncertainty as to their scope and relation to the EU core network, while an undefined roadmap risks being overly generic and raising subsidiarity concerns.

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of the European Economic and Social Committee
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