2030 Agenda Stakeholder Platform

Discussion Paper

Building bridges for sustainable, competitive growth: business, public administration, and stakeholders in action to reduce administrative burden

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Introduction

This Discussion Paper will provide participants taking part in the 2030 Agenda Stakeholder Forum with some background information on the Forum's focus, the topics that will be covered by speakers and presenters, as well as how the Forum's interactive parts will be run.

The Stakeholder Forum will focus on "Building bridges for sustainable, competitive growth: business, public administration, and stakeholders in action to reduce administrative burden". It is taking place in Warsaw, Poland on 27 May 2025, and is being organized by the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union and the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN).

The Agenda 2030 Stakeholder Forum is an international conference that brings together representatives of public administration and business to raise awareness of the needs and challenges of doing sustainable business. Participants will discuss administrative conditions and ways to increase synergies between the two sectors, creating a space to share experiences and build partnerships to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The format of the Forum will be a mixture of keynote presentations, a panel discussion, and an ESDN Exchange Space, which will feature good practice cases and offer a chance for in-depth discussions on various topics. More information on the keynote presentations and the topics covered in the Exchange Space can be found in their corresponding chapters.

Chapter 1 will focus on providing a backdrop to the Forum by summarizing recent European Commission reports, such as the Letta and Draghi Reports, as they provided the impetus for the new European Commission regarding competitiveness, which have helped pave the way for other initiatives and legislation to be developed and enhanced to support the EU remaining competitive in an ever-shifting world. This chapter highlights the challenges the EU faces regarding industry, as well as the proposed solutions to overcome those challenges and promote European businesses and innovations.

Against the backdrop of the two reports, both published in 2024, this chapter also goes into the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), the "Stop the Clock" Legislative Proposal, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the Competitive Compass, the Omnibus Simplification Package, and the Clean Industrial Deal, as these will have profound impacts on how the EU will prepare the private sector for the clean transition. These initiatives outline how the EU plans to address this transition, while at the same time reducing the regulatory burden on companies to report on their sustainable development practices without compromising the environmental and social targets that are important to the EU, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Chapter 2 focuses on the course of the Panel Discussion, including the key topics to be addressed and the range of perspectives expected from the participants. It sets the stage for the debate by highlighting the main themes and questions to be explored.

Chapter 3 focuses on the ESDN Exchange Spaces and outlines the structure and objectives of the table session, which will feature 12 thematic tables, each moderated by a designated facilitator. Participants will engage in three consecutive discussion rounds, each lasting 45 minutes. This session aims to foster a dynamic and interactive dialogue, allowing participants to exchange ideas and insights from diverse perspectives.

After the Forum, an ESDN Policy Note will be published highlighting the main outcomes, ideas, and recommendations from the presentations, the discussion panel, and the Exchange Spaces. The ESDN will publish this as soon as possible.

Chapter 1: Competitiveness – State of the art from the European Union

This chapter focuses on providing a backdrop to the Forum by summarizing recent European Commission reports, such as the Letta and Draghi Reports, as they provided the impetus for the new European Commission regarding competitiveness, which have helped pave the way for other initiatives and legislation to be developed and enhanced to help the EU remain competitive in an ever-shifting world. This chapter highlights the challenges the EU faces regarding industry and the proposed solutions to overcoming those challenges and promoting European businesses and innovations.

Against the backdrop of the two reports, both published in 2024, this chapter also goes into, the Competitive Compass, the Omnibus Simplification Package including the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), the "Stop the Clock" Legislative Proposal, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), and the Clean Industrial Deal, as these will have profound impacts on how the EU will prepare the private sector for the clean transition. These initiatives outline how the EU plans to address this transition, while at the same time reducing the regulatory burden on companies to report on their sustainable development practices without compromising the environmental and social targets that are important to the EU, such as the Paris Climate Agreement and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

This chapter will also provide a summary of an exploratory opinion made by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) at the request of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU. As one of the European Commission institutions that can reflect and provide feedback on EU legislation and initiatives, the opinions formulated by their members are important, as they represent a broad range of employers, trade unionists and representatives of social, occupational, economic and cultural organizations from EU Member States.

The Letta Report on the Single Market

The Letta Report, officially titled "Much more than a Market", was presented to the European Council in April 2024. Commissioned to assess and propose enhancements to the European Union's Single Market, the report outlines key challenges and offers strategic solutions to bolster the EU's competitiveness.

Challenges

1. **Fragmentation in Key Sectors**

The EU's Single Market remains incomplete, particularly in sectors like energy, financial services, and telecommunications. This fragmentation limits economies of scale and hampers the EU's ability to compete globally.

2. **Regulatory Complexity**

A complex and inconsistent regulatory environment across Member States creates administrative burdens, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), impeding innovation and growth.

3. **Insufficient Integration of Capital Markets**

The lack of a unified capital market restricts the efficient allocation of resources and limits investment opportunities within the EU.

4. **Talent Drain and Limited Mobility**

European talent often seeks opportunities outside the EU due to limited mobility and support within the Single Market, undermining the Union's capacity for innovation.

Proposed Solutions

1. **Introduction of a Fifth Freedom**

The report advocates adding a "fifth freedom" to the existing four freedoms of the Single Market. This new freedom would focus on enhancing research, innovation, and education, promoting the free movement of knowledge and ideas across the EU.

2. **Simplification and Digitalization of Regulations**

To reduce administrative burdens, especially for SMEs, the report recommends simplifying regulations and adopting digital solutions. This includes implementing the "once-only" principle, where information is submitted only once to public administrations.

3. **Creation of a Pan-European Initial Public Offerings Platform for SMEs**

Establishing a centralized platform for initial public offerings (IPOs) would facilitate access to capital for SMEs, encouraging growth and innovation within the EU.

4. **Development of a European Knowledge Commons**

The report suggests creating a shared European Knowledge Commons to foster collaboration in research and innovation, ensuring that knowledge is accessible and utilized effectively across Member States.

5. **Enhanced Mobility for Researchers and Innovators**

Promoting the mobility of researchers and innovators within the EU would help retain talent and stimulate innovation, addressing the current talent drain.

The Draghi Report on the Future of European Competitiveness

The Draghi Report, officially titled "The Future of European Competitiveness", was presented to the European Commission on 9 September 2024. Commissioned by President Ursula von der Leyen, the report offers a comprehensive analysis of the challenges facing the European Union's competitiveness and proposes strategic solutions to address them.

The Draghi Report serves as a strategic vision for sustainable growth, aiming to secure Europe's position as a global leader in innovation and economic resilience. It emphasizes the unity and solidarity of the European Union and its Member States, highlighting the importance of a cohesive strategy that leverages Europe's diverse strengths, ensuring that no region or demographic group is left behind.

The report serves as a blueprint for Europe's demographic and regional cohesion, addressing challenges faced by industry and companies within the Single Market. Its findings contribute to the Commission's efforts in developing a new plan for sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, particularly influencing the forthcoming Clean Industrial Deal aimed at fostering competitive industries and quality jobs.

Challenges

The main challenges that are outlined in the Draghi Report are presented below. For more in-depth examples and information, please refer to the Draghi Report in its entirety, which is linked above.

1. **Innovation and Productivity Gap**

Europe has been lagging behind the United States and China in terms of productivity growth and technological innovation. This gap is attributed to insufficient investment in research and development, as well as fragmented efforts across Member States.

2. **Fragmented Single Market and Capital Markets**

The EU's Single Market remains incomplete, with barriers that hinder the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor. This fragmentation limits the scalability of businesses and the efficient allocation of resources.

3. **Regulatory Overload**

A complex and often inconsistent regulatory environment across Member States creates administrative burdens, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), impeding innovation and growth.

4. **Energy Costs and Dependencies**

European **industries** face higher energy costs compared to global competitors, partly due to reliance on energy imports and fragmented energy markets.

5. **Demographic Challenges**

An aging population and declining birth rates threaten the sustainability of the EU's labor force and economic dynamism.

Proposed Solutions

In addition to outlining the challenges that the European Union and its Member States have regarding remaining competitive on the world stage, the Draghi Report also proposes solutions to the EU's competitiveness challenges.

1. **Massive Joint Investments**

The report calls for annual investments of €750–800 billion to boost competitiveness, focusing on areas such as digital transformation, green technologies, and defense. It suggests the issuance of common EU debt instruments to finance these investments.

2. **Completing the Single Market**

Efforts should be intensified to remove remaining barriers within the Single Market, facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor, and enabling businesses to scale up more effectively.

3. **Regulatory Simplification**

The EU should streamline its regulatory framework to reduce administrative burdens, particularly for SMEs, and foster a more innovation-friendly environment.

4. **Energy Market Integration**

Enhancing the integration of energy markets and investing in renewable energy sources can help reduce energy costs and dependencies, improving industrial competitiveness.

5. **Demographic and Regional Cohesion Policies**

Policies aimed at addressing demographic decline, such as supporting higher birth rates and attracting skilled immigrants, alongside targeted investments in less developed regions, can promote balanced growth and social cohesion.

[1]

Competitiveness Compass

The Draghi report originally identified three necessities for the EU to boost its competitiveness by: 1) closing the innovation gap; 2) decarbonizing the economy; and 3) reducing dependencies. The Competitive Compass, presented by the Commission in January 2025, sets out an approach to translate these necessities into reality.

The compass spells out how the European Union will boost innovation by:

- creating a friendly environment for young companies to start and expand, with a dedicated EU start-up and scale-up strategy
- helping big companies adopt new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, thanks to an "Apply AI" initiative
- making it easier for companies to operate across the EU by simplifying rules and laws, with a proposal for a 28th legal regime that will guarantee one set of rules across the EU
- supporting the development of new technologies, with action plans for advanced materials, quantum, biotech, robotics and space technologies

The compass sets out how we can shift to clean and affordable energy by:

- putting forward the Clean Industrial Deal, to help reduce carbon emissions, especially for energy intensive companies, and facilitate their transition to low carbon technologies

[1] https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/sustainability-due-diligence-responsible-business/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en

- presenting tailor-made action plans for energy intensive sectors, such as chemicals, steel and metals, which are the most vulnerable at this phase of the transition
- developing an affordable energy action plan to help bring down energy prices and costs

The compass identifies how the EU can further diversify and strengthen its supply chains by:

- developing a new range of clean trade and investment partnerships to help secure supply of raw materials, clean energy, sustainable transport fuels, and clean tech from across the world
- reviewing the public procurement rules to allow for the introduction of a European preference in public procurement for critical sectors and technologies[2]

Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD)

The Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) is a significant European Union initiative aimed at enhancing corporate transparency on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) matters. It builds upon and replaces the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD), expanding the scope and depth of sustainability reporting requirements.

The key Objectives of the CSRD are to:

- Enhance Transparency: Mandate companies to disclose comprehensive information on how their operations impact people and the environment, and how sustainability issues affect their business.
- Support the European Green Deal: Provide stakeholders with reliable ESG data to facilitate the EU's transition to a sustainable economy.
- Standardize Reporting: Implement uniform reporting standards across the EU to ensure comparability and reliability of sustainability information.

Originally, the CSRD applied to a broad range of companies, with reporting obligations phased in over several years:

- From 2025: Companies already subject to the NFRD must report on the financial year 2024.
- From 2026: Other large companies meeting at least two of the following criteria:
    - More than 250 employees
    - Net turnover exceeding €40 million
    - Total assets over €20 million
- From 2027: Listed small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), excluding micro-enterprises, with the option to opt out until 2028.
- From 2029: Non-EU companies generating over €150 million in annual turnover within the EU, with at least one EU subsidiary or branch.

Under these reporting requirements, companies were mandated to:

[2] https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/competitiveness-compass_en#:~:text=In%20January%202025%2C%20the%20Commission%20presented%20the%20competitiveness,Draghi%E2%80%99s%20report%20on%20the%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness.

- Adopt the Double Materiality Perspective: Report on both the impact of sustainability matters on the company and the company's impact on sustainability issues.
- Disclose ESG Information: Provide detailed information on environmental, social, and governance factors, including:
    - Business model and strategy in relation to sustainability
    - Sustainability targets and progress
    - Role of management in sustainability matters
    - Due diligence processes
    - Principal risks and risk management
    - Key performance indicators
- Integrate Reporting: Include sustainability information in the management report, published in a digital, machine-readable format.
- Obtain Assurance: Subject sustainability information to limited assurance by an independent auditor or certifier, with the possibility of moving to reasonable assurance in the future.

To ensure consistency and comparability, the CSRD mandates the use of European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), developed by the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG). These standards cover a wide range of ESG topics and are aligned with global reporting frameworks to facilitate interoperability.

Recent CSRD Developments

In February 2025, the European Commission proposed amendments to the CSRD to reduce the administrative burden on companies and enhance competitiveness:

- Narrowed Scope: Limit mandatory reporting to companies with more than 1,000 employees, focusing on those with significant impacts on sustainability.
- Simplified Reporting: Introduce simplified standards for companies outside the new scope, allowing voluntary reporting and reducing information requests from SMEs in value chains.
- Postponed Deadlines: Delay the adoption of sector-specific standards and the application of reporting requirements for certain companies.

These proposals aim to balance the need for sustainability transparency with the goal of reducing regulatory complexity and supporting business competitiveness.

The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)

On 25 July 2024, the Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence (Directive 2024/1760) entered into force. The aim of this Directive is to foster sustainable and responsible corporate behavior in companies' operations and across their global value chains. The new rules will ensure that companies in scope identify and address adverse human rights and environmental impacts of their actions inside and outside Europe. The Directive will contribute to the just transition to a sustainable economy, in which businesses play a key role.

A broad range of stakeholder groups, including civil society representatives, EU citizens, businesses as well as business associations, have been calling for mandatory due diligence rules. 70% of the businesses who responded to the public consultation sent a clear message: EU action on corporate sustainability due diligence is needed.

A third of companies recognized the need to act and are taking measures to address adverse effects of their actions on human rights or the environment, but progress is slow and uneven. The increasing complexity and global nature of value chains makes it challenging for companies to get reliable information on business partners' operations. The fragmentation of national rules on corporate, sustainability-related due diligence obligations further slows down the take-up of good practices. Stand-alone measures by some Member States are not enough to help companies exploit their full potential and act sustainably.

EU rules will provide a uniform legal framework and ensure a level playing field for companies across the EU Single Market. Such rules will also foster international competitiveness, increase innovation and ensure legal certainty for companies addressing sustainability impacts. The Directive will steer businesses towards responsible behavior and could become a new global standard with regard to mandatory environmental and human rights due diligence.

This Directive establishes a corporate due diligence duty. The core elements of this duty are identifying and addressing potential and actual adverse human rights and environmental impacts in the company's own operations, their subsidiaries and, where related to their value chain(s), those of their business partners. In addition, the Directive sets out an obligation for large companies to adopt and put into effect, through best efforts, a transition plan for climate change mitigation aligned with the 2050 climate neutrality objective of the Paris Agreement as well as intermediate targets under the European Climate Law. In February 2025, the Commission adopted an Omnibus Package to simplify due diligence requirements to better support responsible business practices.[3]

Figure 1: Beneficiaries from the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive

[3] https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/doing-business-eu/sustainability-due-diligence-responsible-business/corporate-sustainability-due-diligence_en

The European Commission's Omnibus Simplification Package

The European Commission's Omnibus Simplification Package, adopted in February 2025, aims to enhance the EU's competitiveness by reducing regulatory burdens, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), while maintaining the Union's sustainability objectives.

The European Commission has adopted a package of proposals to simplify EU rules, boost competitiveness, and unlock additional investment capacity. This is a major step forward in creating a more favorable business environment to help EU companies grow, innovate, and create quality jobs.

The first 'Omnibus' packages, bringing together proposals in a number of related legislative fields, cover a far-reaching simplification in the fields of sustainable finance reporting, sustainability due diligence, EU Taxonomy, carbon border adjustment mechanism, and European investment programs.

The proposals will reduce the complexity of EU requirements for all businesses, notably SMEs and small mid-caps (SMCs), and focus the regulatory framework on the largest companies which are likely to have a bigger impact on the climate and the environment, while still enabling companies to access sustainable finance for their clean transition.

The Omnibus Package seeks to overcome the challenges of regulatory complexity and the cost of compliance for EU companies, as they, and especially SMEs, face significant administrative burdens due to complex sustainability reporting and due diligence requirements. Because the regulatory environment is so intricate, it poses investment barriers and hinders innovation, which, in turn, affects the EU's ability to compete globally.[4]

According to a Commission press release on 26 February 2025, the Omnibus Package will:

1. **Make sustainability reporting more accessible and efficient**, specifically, the main changes in the area of sustainability reporting (CSRD and EU Taxonomy) by:

- Removing around 80% of companies from the scope of CSRD, focusing the sustainability reporting obligations on the largest companies which are more likely to have the biggest impacts on people and the environment;
- Ensuring that sustainability reporting requirements on large companies do not burden smaller companies in their value chains;
- Postponing by two years (until 2028) the reporting requirements for companies currently in the scope of CSRD and which are required to report as of 2026 or 2027.
- Reducing the burden of the EU Taxonomy reporting obligations and limit it to the largest companies (corresponding to the scope of the CSDDD), while keeping the possibility to report voluntarily for the other large companies within the future scope of the CSRD. This is expected to deliver significant cost savings for smaller companies, while allowing businesses that wish to access sustainable finance to continue that reporting.
- Introducing the option of reporting on activities that are partially aligned with the EU Taxonomy, fostering a gradual environmental transition of activities over time, in line with the aim to scale up transition finance to help companies on their path towards sustainability.

[4] https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/commission-simplifies-rules-sustainability-and-eu-investments-delivering-over-eu6-billion_en

- Introducing a financial materiality threshold for the Taxonomy reporting and reduce the reporting templates by around 70%.
- Introducing simplifications to the most complex "Do no Significant harm" (DNSH) criteria for pollution prevention and control related to the use and presence of chemicals that apply horizontally to all economic sectors under the EU Taxonomy – as a first step in revising and simplifying all such DNSH criteria.
- Adjusting, among others, the main Taxonomy-based key performance indicator for banks, the Green Asset Ratio (GAR). Banks will be able to exclude from the denominator of the GAR exposures that relate to undertakings which are outside the future scope of the CSRD (i.e. companies with less than 1000 employees and €50m turnover).

2. Simplify due diligence to support responsible business practices

The main changes in the area of sustainability due diligence will:

- Simplify sustainability due diligence requirements so that companies in scope avoid unnecessary complexities and costs, e.g. by focusing systematic due diligence requirements on direct business partners; and by reducing the frequency of periodic assessments and monitoring of their partners from annual to 5 years, with ad hoc assessments where necessary.
- Reduce burdens and trickle-down effects for SMEs and small mid-caps by limiting the amount of information that may be requested as part of the value chain mapping by large companies;
- Further increase the harmonization of due diligence requirements to ensure a level playing field across the EU;
- Remove the EU civil liability conditions while preserving victims' right to full compensation for damage caused by non-compliance, and protecting companies against over-compensation, under the civil liability regimes of Member States; and
- Give companies more time to prepare to comply with the new requirements by postponing the application of the sustainability due diligence requirements for the largest companies by one year (to 26 July 2028), while advancing the adoption of the guidelines by one year (to July 2026).

3. Simplifying the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) for a fairer trade

The main changes in CBAM will:

- Exempt small importers from CBAM obligations, mostly SMEs and individuals. These are importers who import small quantities of CBAM goods, representing very small quantities of embedded emissions entering the EU from third countries. This works by introducing a new CBAM cumulative annual threshold of 50 tons per importer, thus eliminating CBAM obligations for approximately 182,000 or 90% of importers, mostly SMEs, while still covering over 99% emissions in scope.
- Simplify the rules for companies that remain in CBAM scope: on authorization of CBAM declarants, as well as the rules related to CBAM obligations, including the calculation of embedded emissions and reporting requirements.
- Make CBAM more effective in the long term, by strengthening the rules to avoid circumvention and abuse.
- This simplification precedes a future extension of CBAM to other ETS sectors, downstream goods, followed by a new legislative proposal on the scope extension of CBAM in early 2026.

4. Unlocking investment opportunities

The Commission is also proposing a series of amendments to simplify and optimize the use of several investment programs including InvestEU, EFSI, and legacy financial instruments.

InvestEU, the EU's largest risk-sharing instrument to support priority investments within the Union, plays a key role in addressing financial barriers and driving the investments needed for competitiveness, research and innovation, decarbonization, environmental sustainability and skills. Currently, close to 45 % of its operations are supporting climate objectives.

The proposed changes are to:

- Increase the EU's investment capacity through the use of returns from past investments, as well as optimized use of funds still available under the legacy instruments, thus allowing for more funding to be made available to businesses. This is expected to mobilize around €50 billion in additional public and private investments. The increased InvestEU capacity will be mainly used to finance more innovative activities in support of priority policies, such as the Competitiveness Compass and the Clean Industrial Deal.
- Make it easier for Member States to contribute to the program and support their own businesses and mobilize private investments.
- Simplify administrative requirements for our implementing partners, financial intermediaries and final recipients, notably SMEs. The simplification measures proposed are expected to generate €350 million in cost savings.[5]

"Stop the Clock" Legislative Proposal

"Stop the Clock" is a legislative proposal adopted in April 2025 as part of the European Commission's Omnibus package, aimed at postponing the application of certain sustainability reporting rules under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and related frameworks.

It is an informal name for a temporary pause—not a cancellation—of some reporting timelines, particularly under the CSRD, to reduce administrative burden and give companies more time to prepare.

The key changes adopted are

- Postponement of sector-specific ESRS, where the adoption of sector-specific European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS) is delayed by two years. Instead of mid-2024, they are now expected by June 2026.
- Postponement of reporting for non-EU companies, where the CSRD reporting requirements for third country (non-EU) companies with significant EU activity are delayed by two years, now applying from 2029 (for FY2028) instead of 2027.
- Flexibility for SMEs, in which the Commission also reaffirmed the voluntary nature of sustainability reporting standards for listed SMEs and confirmed that SMEs can opt out until 2028.

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_614

Clean Industrial Deal

Faced with high energy costs and fierce global competition, European industries need urgent support. The Clean Industrial Deal outlines concrete actions to turn decarbonization into a driver of growth for European industries. This includes lowering energy prices, creating quality jobs and the right conditions for companies to thrive.

The Deal presents measures to boost every stage of production, with a focus on: 1) energy-intensive industries such as steel, metals, and chemicals, that urgently need support to decarbonize, switch to clean energy, and tackle high costs, unfair global competition, and complex regulations; and 2) the clean-tech sector which is at the heart of future competitiveness and necessary for industrial transformation, circularity, and decarbonization.

The main elements of the Clean Industrial Deal include: 1) affordable energy; 2) boosting demand for clean products; 3) financing the clean transition; 4) circularity and access to materials; 5) acting on a global scale; and 6) skills and quality jobs.

Affordable energy is the foundation of competitiveness. To lower energy bills for industries, businesses and households, while promoting the transition to a low-carbon economy, the Commission adopted the Affordable Energy Action Plan to:

- speed up the roll-out of clean energy, accelerating electrification,
- complete the internal energy market with physical interconnections, and
- use energy more efficiently and cut dependence on imported fossil fuels[6]

Boosting demand for clean products will come into effect through the Industrial Decarbonization Accelerator Act, which plans to increase demand for EU-made clean products, by introducing sustainability, resilience, and 'made in Europe' criteria in public and private procurements. A legislative proposal for the Industrial Decarbonization Accelerator Act is foreseen in the fourth quarter of 2025. It will facilitate faster permitting for modernization and decarbonization efforts of, in example, steel production sites. Finally, the Act will establish a low-carbon label to provide consumers with information on the carbon intensity of products. The label will initially cover steel and then cement. According to the Commission, the label would help companies achieve a green premium for their products.[7]

Financing the clean transition will see the Clean Industrial Deal mobilize over €100 billion to support EU-made clean manufacturing. The Commission will:

- adopt a new Clean Industrial Deal state aid framework to accelerate the approval of state aid to roll out renewable energy, decarbonize industry and ensure sufficient manufacturing capacity of clean tech;
- strengthen the Innovation Fund and propose an industrial decarbonization bank, aiming for €100 billion in funding, based on available funds in the Innovation Fund, additional revenues resulting from parts of the ETS as well as the revision of InvestEU;
- launch a dedicated call under Horizon Europe to stimulate research and innovation in these areas; and

[6] https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/clean-industrial-deal_en.
[7] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/carriage/industrial-decarbonisation-accelerator-act/report?sid=9101.

- amend the InvestEU Regulation to increase the amount of financial guarantees that InvestEU can provide to support investments. This will in turn mobilize up to €50 billion for the deployment of clean tech, clean mobility and waste reduction.

Circularity and the access to materials, especially critical raw materials, are key for EU industry. The EU needs to secure access to such materials and reduce dependence on unreliable suppliers. Integrating circularity in decarbonization strategies is crucial to making the most of the EU's limited resources. The Commission will:

- set up a mechanism enabling European companies to come together and aggregate their demand for critical raw materials;
- create an EU critical raw material center to jointly purchase raw materials on behalf of interested companies, which will create economies of scale and offer more leverage to negotiate better prices and conditions; and
- adopt a Circular Economy Act in 2026 to accelerate the circular transition and ensure that scarce materials are used and reused efficiently, reduce the EU's global dependencies and create high-quality jobs. The aim is to have 24% of materials circular by 2030.

Acting on a global scale will require the EU to find reliable global partners more than ever. In addition to ongoing and new trade agreements, the Commission will:

- launch the first Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships to diversify supply chains and forge mutually beneficial deals;
- ensure EU industry is economically secure and resilient, in the face of global competition and geopolitical uncertainties, through a range of trade defense and other instruments; and
- simplify and strengthen the CBAM, the EU's tool to put a fair price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods.

Skills and quality jobs must also be a priority, as the EU's workforce must have the necessary skills to support the transition to a low-carbon economy, including skills in clean technologies, digitalization, and entrepreneurship. The Commission will establish a Union of Skills that invests in workers, develops skills and creates quality jobs. Erasmus+ will reinforce education and training programs to develop a skilled and adaptable workforce, and address skills shortages in key sectors, with up to €90 million in funding.

The Clean Industrial Deal will also focus on horizontal enablers necessary for a competitive economy:

- cutting red tape,
- fully exploiting the scale of the single market,
- promoting quality jobs,
- better coordinating policies at the EU and national levels.[8]

[8] https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/clean-industrial-deal_en.

EESC opinion: The competitiveness of the EU's small and medium-sized enterprises in light of new administrative burdens/obligations

The EESC is committed to European integration and contributes to strengthening the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of the European Union by enabling civil society organizations from the Member States to express their views at European level. The EESC is a consultative body that gives representatives of Europe's socio-occupational interest groups and others a formal platform to express their points of view on EU issues. Its opinions are addressed to the Council, the European Commission and the European Parliament. It thus has a key role to play in the Union's decision-making process. The EESC fulfils three key missions:

- Helps to ensure that European policies and legislation tie in better with economic, social and civic circumstances on the ground, by assisting the European Parliament, Council and European Commission, making use of EESC members' experience and representativeness, dialogue and efforts to secure consensus serving the general interest;
- Promote the development of a more participatory European Union, which is more in touch with popular opinion, by acting as an institutional forum representing, informing, expressing the views of and securing dialogue with organized civil society; and
- Promote the values on which European integration is founded and advancing, in Europe and across the world, the cause of democracy and participatory democracy, as well as the role of civil society organizations.[9]

As the EESC is an important EU institution, they were asked by the Polish Presidency of the Council of the EU to make an exploratory opinion on the competitiveness of SMEs and administrative burdens they are facing regarding sustainability reporting. The full exploratory opinion, adopted on 26 February 2025, can be found and downloaded here. A summary of the main opinions is provided below.

The EESC:

- considers that, despite the launch of different EU initiatives in the past, further improvements on the reduction of the regulatory burden are still required, given that SMEs are facing double and triple legislative requirements as a result of the additional wave of regulation and existing requirements, also in relation to the Green Deal;
- takes the view, at the same time, that reducing the regulatory burden must not jeopardize compliance with social, environmental and consumer safety rights and standards established at international and EU levels, as well as with the principle of transparency and the rule of law in the EU;
- recommends that the Regulatory Scrutiny Board (RSB) is significantly strengthened and made more independent, by carrying out a 'consistency and subsidiarity check' at the beginning of each legislative process and being empowered with appropriate revision and advisory rights;
- recommends that the SME test and the competitiveness check should be merged into one procedure;
- recommends making use of artificial intelligence and machine learning tools to create an easy-to-use 'single reporting tool' that can provide SMEs, mid-caps and other companies with all EU-relevant reporting obligations, deadlines and sanctions;

[9] https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/about.

- points out the need for the European Parliament and the Council of the EU to develop an expedited procedure for impact and risk assessments carried out by their own policy departments in the case of amendments that would substantially reshape the proposals adopted by the European Commission;
- believes that the Council of the EU and national authorities should also make greater use of the opportunities for reviewing responsibilities (subsidiarity), particularly with regard to the impact on SMEs, consumers, administration and justice.[10]

[10] https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/competitiveness-eus-small-and-medium-sized-enterprises-light-new-administrative-burdensobligations#downloads.

Chapter 2: Discussion Panel on Balancing Regulatory Burden and the EU's Climate Ambitions – Introducing different perspectives

This chapter focuses on the Panel Discussion that will take place directly after the opening of the 2030 Agenda Stakeholder Forum. The Panel will consist of experts from the European Commission, the UN Global Compact, the European Economic and Social Committee, as well as colleagues from the Polish private sector. Each panelist will have a few minutes to make opening statements, before the moderator, Witold Strzelecki, Managing Director at Business & Science, will kick off the panel discussions.

The Panel will be providing an overview of the ongoing developments at the EU level and the recent initiatives launched by the European Commission, as they reveal a clear ambition to ensure that the process of decarbonizing the EU economy goes hand-in-hand with strengthening the European economy. How can we ensure that this is not treated as a zero-sum game — and that we succeed in achieving our objectives in both decarbonization/sustainability and economic growth? Furthermore, how can we make sure that the simplification efforts currently being pursued by the Commission do not evolve into deregulation, potentially undermining the EU's climate and decarbonization targets?

More targeted questions for each presenter can be found below. The event organizers would like to encourage participants to build on the questions that will be asked during the Panel Discussions, as there will be time for a Question & Answer with the panelists, and to make use of the breaks throughout the day.

Kamil Wyszkowski
Executive Director at UN Global Compact Network Poland

1. From the UN Global Compact's perspective, how do you assess the EU's ongoing efforts to simplify ESG reporting obligations? Do these steps reflect a pragmatic recalibration of existing requirements, or do they risk undermining the EU's earlier legislative commitments?
2. What potential ripple effects could the EU's simplification initiatives have on the global ESG reporting landscape? Might this lead other regions to reconsider their approaches, or will international alignment still be essential for EU businesses to stay globally competitive?
3. In light of the evolving and uncertain ESG reporting landscape, what practical advice would you offer to businesses striving to stay compliant and future-ready?

Piotr Biernacki
Chair of Sustainability Committee of the Polish Association of Listed Companies, Member of EFRAG Sustainability Reporting TEG, ESG Reporting Partner at MATERIALITY Poland

1. With the European Commission's simplification proposals now clearer, do you see them as truly facilitating compliance for businesses — particularly mid-caps and SMEs — or are there potential unintended consequences that could place additional strain on those very firms?
2. In your view, are the Commission's simplification efforts delivering meaningful clarity and efficiency, or do they risk veering into deregulation that could compromise the EU's long-term decarbonization commitments?

3. Considering the well-documented ‘Brussels Effect,’ what could be the global ramifications if the EU retreats from its original ESG reporting directives? How might such a move impact regulatory convergence and the confidence of international markets that have already started aligning?

Antonina Maria Wozna
Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union, European Commission

1. From DG FISMA’s perspective, how would you characterize the current trajectory of the Omnibus package as it proceeds through both the Council and the European Parliament? Are there particular divergences or alignments that stand out?
2. Given the evolving nature of EU legislative negotiations, has DG FISMA identified any emerging risks — either from Parliament or Council amendments — that could substantially deviate from the Commission’s original intent behind the simplification agenda?
3. The Better Regulation agenda promotes principles such as proportionality, coherence, and technology neutrality. How is the European Commission translating these ideals into practice within the current Simplification agenda — particularly in ways that tangibly reduce administrative burdens for stakeholders?

Corina Andrea Murafa Benga
European Economic and Social Committee Member, Romania

1. While the simplification agenda appears to cater significantly to business needs, to what extent are civil society organizations meaningfully engaged in shaping its direction and priorities?
2. What mechanisms should be in place to ensure that the drive for regulatory simplification does not dilute key social protections or environmental standards?
3. Given the EESC’s call for accelerated action, how can the EU strike the right balance between delivering simplification quickly and maintaining the rigor and inclusiveness necessary for high-quality policymaking?

Chapter 3: ESDN Exchange Spaces on Good Practices between Government and the Private Sector fostering Competitiveness and Sustainability

The purpose of the Exchange Spaces is to allow participants the chance to exchange with their peers from other countries on good practice cases. Table leads will present their cases for 10-15 minutes, leaving about 30 minutes for more in-depth discussions with participants. Exchange Space 1 on navigating the impacts of geopolitics and other policy challenges on the SDGs will have a total of five different tables. Participants will be able to visit two out of the five tables over two rounds. During the Exchange Space, participants will be able to visit three out of the twelve tables.

Short texts of the Exchange Space interventions are provided below. It is highly encouraged, therefore, to think about which topics and tables interest you the most. To make the discussions more fruitful after when it comes to the 30-minute discussions, please think about potential questions to ask the table leads, and bring any relevant ideas or examples you might have from your own country or context to share at the table. Please keep in mind that each table will undoubtedly be interesting and have something to offer, so if some tables seem like they are crowded, please consider moving to a less crowded table.

Additionally, all participants will be able to hear summaries from all twelve tables. The table leads will be asked by the moderator to provide answers to these questions:

1. What were the top 3 topics that you discussed on your table?
2. What were the 2 most interesting or most surprising highlights during your discussion?
3. Which main recommendation would you like to share that has the potential to improve the current situation?

Table 1: Aligning EU Regulations with Market Competitiveness and Sustainability

Amanda Koefoed Simonsen, Partner and ESG Practice Lead in Copenhagen Changery, Denmark will address how policymakers can design regulations that drive innovation while maintaining sustainable development and supporting economic growth.

Table 2: Addressing Barriers to Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) in Sustainability – European organized civil society's perspective

Corina Andrea Murafa Benga, European Economic and Social Committee Member, Romania will address how SMEs can be better supported by adopting sustainable practices while avoiding excessive regulatory burden, how boosting European competitiveness can go hand in hand with sustainability and social cohesion, and not compromising environmental and social commitments, as well as how reporting requirements can be streamlined while ensuring accountability and data quality.

Table 3: Addressing Barriers to Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) in Sustainability – stakeholder perspective

Agnieszka Ozimkowska, Sustainability advisor for SMEs in Enterprise Europe Network Łukasiewicz – WIT, Poland and **Marcin Olszewski**, Internalization advisor in Enterprise Europe Network Łukasiewicz – WIT, Poland will address what sustainable reporting means for SME businesses, the tools that are needed, and what initiatives can be helpful to support SMEs in meeting sustainable criteria.

Table 4: Leveraging Digital Transformation for Sustainable Development: ESG Standard – digital tool supporting companies report

Karolina Opielewicz, Polish Chamber of Commerce, Poland will address how digital tools can reduce administrative burdens while enabling effective monitoring and enforcement of sustainability goals.

Table 5: Sustainable Public Reporting: Opportunities and Challenges

Sydney van der Post, ESDN Advisory Board Member and Policy Officer – Sustainable Development Goals, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands will address how annual public reports can facilitate dialogue between public administration, businesses, and the House of Representatives.

Table 6: Basque's SDG and Agenda 2030 Strategy focuses on sustainability and competitiveness

Mikel Hidalgo Bordegarai, Advisor to the General Secretariat of Communication, Social Innovation, Basque Government, Basque Country will address how the Basque public authorities put in place transformative ways to support local business in acting more sustainably, involving different stakeholders and socio-economic agents, and align the regional budget with the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs supporting.

Table 7: Best Practices in business - public administration collaboration for Sustainable Development from Austria: Business Initiative „WIN"- Sustainable Styria (implementing SDGs on the regional level)

Gernot Vorraber, Member of the Specialist Team for Sustainability Coordination in Department 14, Water management, Resources and Sustainability at the Office of the Regional Government of Styria will address how regional governments can support companies, municipalities and other organizations in implementing the SDGs through subsidized consulting services and balance economic development with environmental and social responsibility, as well as how the results of such programs can be used in evaluations.

Table 8: Digital Tools to reduce Administrative Effort in Sustainability Reporting

Victoria Diekkamp-Reimann, Head of German Sustainability Code, Germany will address how digital tools can support sustainable business practices, how the German Sustainability Code supports companies in sustainability reporting and with the implementation of CSRD that reduces time and effort.

Table 9: Education and Capacity Building for Sustainable Transition

Luminita Bălălău, Director, Department of Sustainable Development Strategies, Programs and Projects, Government of Romania will address the role of a Sustainable Development Expert in shaping policies and strategies that address environmental, economic, and social challenges.

Table 10: Speeding up - Implementation of Acceleration Zones for renewable energy sources in Czechia

Anna Pasková, Director – Department of Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development, Ministry of the Environment, Czechia will address how public administration can reduce administrative burden and speed-up the permitting process for sustainable development, economic growth and energy security, as well as the lessons that have been learned.

Table 11: Synergy for Sustainable Development – Joint Actions of Business and Administration

Eric Mulholland, European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) Executive Coordinator, Austria and **Agnieszka Jabłońska**, Senior Expert, Sustainable Economy Department, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology, Poland will address the ideas for strengthening collaboration between the business sector and public administration in the context of achieving SDGs, and how to identify challenges, barriers, and best practices that can foster synergy in actions.

Table 12: Impacts of Sustainability Reporting on Young Entrepreneurs – Entrepreneurship as a form of activism

Isaac Jyväsjärvi, ESDN Youth Network Member and Member of the Finnish National Youth Council, Finland will address how entrepreneurship can be considered a powerful form of activism in challenging norms, driving inclusion, and advancing sustainability, as well as how young entrepreneurs can build value added businesses that create lasting social and environmental impact beyond traditional advocacy.