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## Belgian EU Council Presidency asks for EESC support with its key priorities

Competitiveness, SMEs and social inclusion are at the heart of the **Belgian Presidency programme**. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) makes policy recommendations on the relationship between economic governance, long-term inclusive growth and sustainable security, and the power of the social economy in combating poverty and social exclusion.

In the first half of 2024, Belgium holds its thirteenth Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the priorities of which were the subject of two debates organised by the EESC the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of January in plenary.

**“The Belgian Presidency has been very good in including social partners and organised civil society in its work. This allows us to infuse civil society input into the work of the Presidency in these pivotal times, ahead of the European elections”, comments EESC President Mr. Oliver Röpk.**



The current Presidency comes at the end of the European Union's institutional cycle, which is marked by the terms of the European Parliament. **The Belgians will have to steer the last major legislative compromises between the EU Council and MEPs** over the coming weeks. At the same time, they will be guiding the EU Council during the campaign for the European Parliament and the European elections themselves, when Europeans will want to hear about the EU's future direction, next priorities and adjustments to current policies.

**The Belgian Presidency has already asked the EESC for 13 advising opinions, on the relationship between economic governance, long-term inclusive growth and sustainable security, and the power of the social economy in combating poverty and social exclusion.** They will contribute to the discussions on the **Strategic Agenda 2024-2029**, which EU leaders are expected to adopt in June 2024 as the Union's plan and objectives for the next five years. **As an input to the Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, the Belgian Presidency will have an interinstitutional declaration adopted in April on the future social agenda of the EU. This document will be signed by the European institutions, social partners and civil society organisations.**

One of the priorities of the Belgian Presidency, whose motto is **“Protect, Strengthen, Prepare”**, is to **“pursue a green and social transition”**. The aim is to ensure that both the economy and society continue to see the benefits in having an **ambitious EU Green Deal**, and in tackling the triple crisis of climate, biodiversity loss and air pollution together. Another priority is **“strengthening the social and health agenda”**: supporting fair labour mobility, mental health at work and access to sustainable social protection.

The Belgian Presidency also want to focus on **“strengthening European competitiveness”**, including by continuing to work towards a level playing field for businesses, **especially SMEs, so that they can compete fairly, both within Europe and on the global stage**. The current Presidency intends to continue the Union's efforts to pursue a balanced trade policy and to

preserve (or restore) the rules-based international order within the framework of "**promoting Global Europe**".

For further information about this article, click [here](#).

## European Commission opens participation to Critical Medicines Alliance

The 16<sup>th</sup> of January, the European Commission's **Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)** launched an open call for expression of interest to join the **Critical Medicines Alliance**. The set up of the Alliance is one of the key actions to prevent and address shortages of critical medicines announced by the Commission in October 2023.



The Alliance will bring together all relevant stakeholders, and work to strengthen cooperation between the Commission, national governments, industry, and civil society. It will identify the challenges, priorities for action, and possible policy solutions to the issue of shortages of critical medicines in the EU. The Alliance is a consultative mechanism that will also act as a network to accelerate the delivery of EU action in this field.

### A new industrial dimension to the European health Union

The Critical Medicines Alliance will become the industrial arm of a strong European Health Union. It will develop recommendations and provide advice to the Commission, Member States and other EU decision makers on how to address long-standing medicines shortages. Building on the **Union list of critical medicines** published by the **European Medicines Agency** in December 2023, it will focus on medicines with the highest risk of shortages and the highest impact on healthcare systems and patients.

The Alliance will help unlock manufacturing, contractual or financing solutions to allow better strategic autonomy for critical medicines, in the interest of European citizens. It will build on the experience from other EU alliances that address major industrial challenges (such as the **Batteries and Critical Raw Materials Alliances**) and will be able to rely on a varied toolbox of policy measures, such as:

- Exploring how to **diversify global supply chains** through **strategic international partnerships**;
- Boosting Europe's capacity to **produce and innovate in the manufacturing of critical medicines and their ingredients**, in coordinated way;
- Developing a **common strategic approach to medicines stockpiling** in the EU;
- Helping to **leverage and align EU and national funding** to implement solutions to medicines shortages.

## Open to all

The Critical Medicines Alliance is open to all companies and organisations, Member States, local and regional authorities and their agencies, social partners, civil society, health professionals, patients, consumers as well as other stakeholder groups, EU bodies and agencies. Those who are interested should complete the interest form available on the website of the Alliance.

The Alliance will last for 5 years. It is expected to start its work this coming Spring and publish its first recommendations on actions to take to improve the supply of critical medicines by this Autumn.

## Background

The Commission adopted on 24 October 2023 a **Communication presenting actions to better prevent and mitigate critical medicine shortages** in the EU for this winter and beyond. Recent critical shortages, including of certain antibiotics, show that continued coordinated action is needed to make Europe's medicine supply chains more resilient in the long run.

*For further information about this article, click [here](#).*

*To complete the form available on the website of the Alliance, click [here](#).*

## Rebalancing the scales: Why is Europe's labour market in disarray?

The 7<sup>th</sup> of February, Euronews published an article arguing that the European Commission is in a race against time to upskill and retrain the labour market for the industries of tomorrow. Europe is suffering from a **major labour market imbalance**. While there are widespread staff shortages in many industries, in others, there is a surplus of skilled workers and too few jobs.

A report by **EURES, the European employment services network** found that the EU's 27 Member States plus Norway and Switzerland experienced labour shortages in the second and third quarter of 2022 while 24 of these countries experienced labour surpluses. A labour shortage can occur when there is an insufficient number of skilled persons willing to accept specific roles in a particular field in a set location. A labour surplus occurs when there is a higher number of skilled persons looking for work within a particular industry than there are roles available.



One of the advantages of having an EU passport is being able to move, work and live freely within the European Union. In turn, this prevents job markets from stagnating, drives up the number of prospective candidates for roles within highly skilled industries and keeps the job market competitive. However, some of the advances of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are having a negative effect on Europe's labour market:

## Digitalisation

Almost every sector within the European economy is undergoing a digital transformation. New technologies, designed to boost output, reduce human error and make processes more efficient, are being introduced across the board. **However, many of these cutting-edge technologies require a certain set of skills, which creates the need for employers to retrain and upskill staff.**

## An ageing population

According to the Commission, approximately 21% of the EU's population in 2022 was aged 65 and over. The Commission also found that half of the population was older than 44. As a consequence, **the working population across the EU is in decline**, it is expected to drop from 265 million in 2022 to 258 million in 2030.

## The transition to a climate-neutral economy

The development of clean energy technologies and the shift away from fossil fuels are creating and **destroying jobs**. For example, SolarPower Europe, an industry voice in Brussels, found that the solar workforce grew by 39% to 648 000 workers by the end of 2022, from 466 000 workers in 2021. While previous estimates expected there to be 1 million new jobs in the industry by 2030, it now looks likely that sustained solar growth will create one million jobs by 2025. On the other hand, the coal industry is under pressure to cut millions of jobs and make way for the energy transition.

## Fluctuating working conditions

According to the **European Trade Union's EU Job Quality Index**, working conditions deteriorated in Greece, Spain and France in 2021. Job satisfaction is one of the push and pull factors affecting professional migration. For example, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO) reported last year that almost three-quarters of intern nurses and midwives said they would consider leaving the country when they qualified. While healthcare is one of the sectors suffering from staff shortages across the EU, **there are also shortages in the software, construction and engineering sectors.**

## What is Europe doing to help?

As you know, the Commission has come up with a number of solutions to tackle the shortage and surplus of workers in specific fields, here is two:

- Upskilling Europe's workers: The **European Union's Pact for Skills** is an all-encompassing support package designed to help public and private organisations cope with the green and digital transitions. National and local authorities, private companies, education and training providers as well as employment services can all become members. Through **networking, guidance and knowledge hubs**, participants can avail of webinars, a host of different workshops and access information about EU and national funding opportunities.
- Boosting recognition of qualifications from outside the EU, to attract staff from further afield: In November 2023, the EU unveiled the **Skills and Talent Mobility**

**package** to make the EU more attractive to talent from third countries and help address critical labour shortages. The package aims to match employers in the EU with jobseekers from non-EU countries and has also proposed measures to help simplify the recognition of qualifications to promote student and labour market mobility.

For further information about this article, click [here](#).

## **Physicians in the EU: Which countries have the most physicians and healthcare workers?**

**The 31th of January, Euronews published an article explaining how the World Health Organization (WHO) believes Europe has a “ticking timebomb” to address when it comes to a shortage of health workers.**

The European Union had more than 1.82 million medical practitioners in 2021 – maintaining a stellar physician-to-population ratio – amidst a looming threat of health worker crisis. According to the latest statistics released by Eurostat, the continent also had an average of 136 physiotherapists for 100,000 inhabitants.

The average is significantly better compared to other regions of the world, although there are still stark differences across the 27-member bloc. For example, there are 234 per 100,000 inhabitants in Germany to just 12.7 in Romania. The numbers come amidst multiple suggestions of a looming health worker shortage, especially in the EU's eastern countries.



A report published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in September 2022 highlighted the number of ageing healthcare workers and called a surge in chronic diseases resulting in increased demand for healthcare as a "ticking timebomb". In 13 out of 44 countries included in the report, more than 40 per cent of doctors were above the age of 55 - posing a threat to the sustainability of the workforce. Despite relatively stable figures, insufficient recruitment and lack of retention could worsen the situation amidst an ageing workforce, the report suggested.

"We cannot wait any longer to address the pressing challenges facing our health workforce. The health and well-being of our societies are at stake – there is simply no time to lose," Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe said in March.

### **Austria has the highest number of practising physicians**

Among EU member states, Austria had 540 practising physicians per 100,000 people, the best ratio in the bloc. Practising physicians involve health care professionals who are directly providing services to patients during the period of counting. Although Germany consisted of more than 20 per cent of the EU's total physicians in absolute terms, its relatively large population size meant the ratio was not more than its neighbours.

By contrast, France, Belgium, and Hungary made up for the lowest ratios, falling behind the 350-per-100,000 inhabitants mark.

### Italy leads the number of license holders – but what is wrong?

Italy, compared to other EU member states whose count was included in the latest release, had the highest number of licensed physicians, followed by Sweden and Germany.

That figure, however, does not translate when it comes to the "actual" practising medical professionals.

Although the number of registered healthcare professionals soars to more than 700 per 100,000 inhabitants in Italy, an increasingly ageing workforce and large emigration of doctors leave a void. According to a 2020 study in The Lancet, 54 per cent of Italian doctors were aged 55 years or older and closer to their retirement. Around 1,000 medical doctors were also leaving the country annually after their licenses were granted.

For further information about this article, click [here](#).

## News from our Members

### Michel Picon is the new President of U2P



Mr. Michel Picon, President of U2P

**Mr. Michel Picon, President of the National Union of Liberal Professions (UNAPL)** since 2019, took up his new duties as **President of the Union of Local Enterprises (U2P)**, at the National Council meeting of January 25<sup>th</sup>. **Mr. Bruno Le Maire, French Minister of Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty** was present at the event. Mr. Michel Picon succeeds Dominique Métayer, representative of the craftsmen of the building (CAPEB), in the context of rotating presidency between the founding organizations of the U2P (CAPEB, CGAD, CNAMS and UNAPL).

The appointment of Mr. Michel Picon at the head of the U2P, **France's leading employer force**, which represents 3.5 million small and medium-sized businesses in the crafts, retail and liberal professions sectors, two thirds of French companies, is excellent news for the liberal professions. It is indeed the first time since the creation of the U2P in 2016 that a representative of the liberal professions takes the presidency. Thanks to his commitment of 5 years as President of UNAPL and his knowledge of the specific problems of the liberal professions, Mr. Michel Picon will have at heart to carry the voice of this sector, as well as the problems of all craft and trade enterprises.

For further information about this article, click [here](#).



**Event: Wallonia Salon des Professions Économiques 2024 Edition**



The 8<sup>th</sup> of February, the *Fédération des professions comptables et fiscales* of Belgium (FECOFI) is going to organize an event addressing the rise of AI and its implication for the professional sphere. It will be the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the salon, titled “**Accountants dealing with AI!**”



Amongst the participants will be **Ms. Trojanowski, co-founder of HumanTech Partners**, who will explain how professional accountants can make use of AI in their work. **Mr. Jacquemin, President of UNPLIB**, will also be present in order to debate on the matter with consultants.

Mr. Bernard Jacquemin,  
President of UNPLIB

*For further information about this event, please click [here](#).*