

SME priorities

to empower the Future of Europe

The European Union should be able to act better and faster on internal and external challenges. Indeed, most of the past crises like the financial crisis, the migration crisis, the pandemic and security and foreign policy crises have demonstrated that the EU is not always able to react jointly and timely. Europe must be able to better protect its own interest and values as well as to deliver for its citizens, businesses and workers.

Welfare, social stability and a more inclusive society are dependent on a strong economy based on our social market economy model. Only prosperous businesses can provide the resources to finance services of general interest, efficient public administrations and social protection for all. Therefore, having strong businesses and ensuring an entrepreneurial spirit for the EU, which consists of 99.8% of SMEs, is key. Businesses able to innovate, invest and create quality jobs are the precondition for a thriving European society.

Strengthen the economy

1. The EU must further support economic recovery and increase its global competitiveness. A strong economy in Europe relies at first on a well-functioning internal market. Therefore, Europe has to guarantee the four freedoms and a level playing field for all actors. This requires an effective and uniform implementation and enforcement of all jointly agreed rules. Accepting the rule of law is conducive to fair economic activity and is a fundamental element of the European Union. It should be defended with all means.
2. Crafts and SMEs are at the core of our economy. But they suffer from complicated regulatory requirements, high compliance costs and burdensome funding applications. The free circulation of goods, workers and services must be ensured also in times of crisis through a better coordination between member states and proportionate measures. To allow SMEs to focus on their business and to create value to society, regulations have to be based on the Think Small First principle, limiting unjustified bureaucratic burden. Policy makers must act accordingly.
3. Past crises showed that a strong economy requires a stable macroeconomic and fiscal environment. As a consequence, the debate about future fiscal rules and economic governance should aim to ensure sufficient flexibility allowing investments for the twin transition without endangering mid-term fiscal sustainability.
4. A competitive Europe needs to secure skilled labour fit for future requirements by supporting education and training (reskilling) and by promoting intra-European mobility. This also allows a positive economic perspective for the young generation. Europe should support dual education and apprenticeship as the best way to adapt labour qualifications to the constantly

changing market requirements and for the European SMEs to remain competitive. Furthermore, the EU has to position itself as attractive destination for international talents and to support migrants' inclusion in the labour market.

Deliver on climate change and on Green Deal

5. A focus on the local and circular economy plays an important role in reducing our impact on the climate and in making the Green Deal a success. Crafts and SMEs, thanks to their proximity business model, are essential to make it a reality. However, allowing SMEs to deliver demands a conducive business environment, especially in rural areas and in declining city centres.
6. Many innovative SMEs are frontrunners in the transition towards a greener economy. Nevertheless, the majority depends on an appropriate enabling framework and on a predictable regulatory environment to handle the transition in a successful manner. As a result, realistic transition pathways have to be developed for the different sectors or ecosystems, which will provide companies with a clear guidance on the way forward and ensure access to information, knowhow, finance, technology and skills.
7. The fight against climate change is a global challenge. This means, international cooperation through institutionalised platforms and agreements should encourage global climate efforts and ensure fairness for all European companies, while avoiding excessive burdens for SMEs. Moreover, we should build a new EU cooperation and development framework with third countries to support their green transition.
8. Energy supply at affordable prices needs to be secured for SMEs. In this regard, generation capacities and distribution networks must be further developed and permit procedures for energy infrastructure should be simplified and accelerated.

Foster digitalisation

9. Europe is lagging behind other regions when it comes to many aspects of digitalisation. Especially in rural areas, more joint efforts to improve the digital infrastructure (e.g. high-speed networks, digital clouds and super-computers) and partnerships are needed to catch-up and close the gaps.
10. In order to avoid the development of uncompetitive and monopolistic structures, SMEs require fair and equal access to data and digital platforms. Europe has the potential and the possibility to become the standard setter in the digital world, allowing it to strengthen its global role and improve its global competitiveness.
11. The availability of digital skills is one of the most relevant bottlenecks for the digitalisation of SMEs. The SME owners are not able to organise continuous training on their own, neither for themselves nor for their workers. An institutionalised education and training supply, also

in the field of cybersecurity, is crucial for the upskilling of entrepreneurs and workers which will allow a faster development of digitalisation.

Make the Conference on the Future of Europe more inclusive

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) represents a key institutional and societal debate able to relaunch an authentic and constructive dialogue in the interest of future EU generations. It allows an unprecedented participation of citizens from all over Europe. Both the citizen's panels and the conference platform create a huge number of new ideas and show also strong commitment to the European project. However, to transform these ideas into meaningful results and projects for the future of Europe, more in-depth and inclusive debates are necessary. This needs the involvement of all relevant parts of the society, including business organisations and social partners at all levels and may require a prolongation of the conference beyond Spring 2022 if needed for encouraging results. Furthermore, we recommend that the results of the Conference should be endorsed by the Plenary of the Conference in a final vote. Finally, business organisations and social partners have to be involved meaningfully in the follow-up of the CoFoE.