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European Economic
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Between high ambition and pragmatism: Proposals for a reform of fiscal rules without treaty change

This study examines major reform proposals of EU fiscal rules from an economic and legal perspective. We disassemble the reform proposals in their components and analyse them in their specific proposed form in comparison, thereby shedding light on what is legally possible, economically sensible, and which parameters are to be looked at when putting together a final reform package.

We show that quite far-reaching reforms of EU fiscal rules are feasible without treaty change as current secondary legislation restricting member states' fiscal policies are much more detailed and often much stricter than the original treaty provisions.

Especially proposals that shift the current rules towards expenditure rules and which provide for limited borrowing for public investment can be implemented by changing secondary legislation only, provided the parameters are set such that the original deficit thresholds in the treaty are not violated.

The same holds for measures lending greater importance to the Macroeconomic Imbalance Procedure. Increasing the reference value on the debt ratio would require a unanimous vote in the Council after consultation of the European Parliament and the ECB.

Proposals that try to shift fiscal rules from rules to standards and focus on empowering independent bodies are instead legally much more difficult to reconcile with the EU treaties.

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Requesting service: Group II – Workers'group
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The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on fundamental rights and civic space

This report was compiled for the European Economic and Social Committee at the request of the Diversity Europe Group by a consortium of four partners - European Civic Forum, Civil Society Europe, European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and the Institute of Public Affairs. It examines how the COVID19 pandemic has affected the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) across Europe. It also focuses on how solutions implemented in individual EU Member States have impacted CSOs' ability to exercise their fundamental rights and freedoms.

The report is based on in-depth analysis of existing studies and reports, a survey, 29 expert interviews and three focus groups. It showcases a number of ways in which the pandemic has affected the functioning of civil society organisations in the EU. The observations emerging from the different stages of the research were characterised by a high degree of consistency, validating the picture depicted.

Finally, the study investigates possible policies at EU and national level to address the challenges identified and includes recommendations on how to implement them.

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Authors: Filip Pazderski (Institute of Public Affairs) with the contribution of Giada Negri and Chayma Khazzani (European Civic Forum); Ivana Rosenzweigova, Boglarka Szalma and Luben Panov (European Centre for Not-for-Profit Law); Carlotta Besozzi (Civil Society Europe).
Direct link: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/publications-other-work/publications/implications-covid-19-pandemic-fundamental-rights-and-civic-space>
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Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) in the Residential Sector

To address untapped energy efficiency potential in the building sector and increase the building renovation rate, the European Commission (EC) proposes introducing mandatory Minimum Energy Performance Standards (MEPS) in the building sector as part of its Renovation Wave strategy.

In December 2021, the EC proposed revising the EPBD to reflect higher ambitions to achieve the energy and climate targets by 2030 and to achieve a zero-emission building stock by 2050. For many years, mandatory environmental protection requirements and energy efficiency standards have been applied in different sectors to achieve certain safety, environmental and/or energy efficiency goals; for example, the phase-out of incandescent light bulbs, and energy efficiency building codes for new constructions. Therefore, MEPS could potentially also increase the number of energy efficiency renovation projects and lead to decarbonisation of the building sector. The total benefits from MEPS can be substantial. However, introducing MEPS for existing buildings is a relatively new approach. Increasing the refurbishment rate could lead to a high financial burden for building owners and tenants. As part of this study, we have analysed examples and indicated the risks that need to be considered for the successful application of MEPS.

As municipalities and cities are close to their citizens, they should be consulted and involved at all levels. MEPS should be reasonable, practical and effective (applying SMART regulation principles), be flexible, have clear exceptions (to preserve the historical value of buildings) and be complemented by support mechanisms to ensure that housing is affordable. To make MEPS effective, it is critical to incorporate local governments and building owners and their experiences into the design and implementation of renovation programmes.

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Crisis costs for European SMEs – How COVID-19 changed the playing field for European SMEs

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has become the landmark for one of the greatest recessions ever experienced. As such, many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) were exposed to financial and employment-related losses. However, not all industry sectors suffered same negative rates of income or job disruptions and there is still limited evidence on the matter. In addition, the invasion of Ukraine from Russia has become the trigger for a new wave of economic crisis for all business sectors and sizes.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to develop a systematic classification of COVID-19 (and international crisis)-related impacts on SMEs. It also includes an identification of “winning” or “losing” adaptation factors shaping crisis management. To achieve its finalities, the study develops an explanatory framework by generating six categories of “pandemic challenge areas” (Containment Measures, Workforce, Finance, Digitalisation, Public Assistance, European Diversity) and a targeted performance analysis for SMEs in 6 industry sectors (Manufacturing, Construction, I&R, Tourism, Agro-Food, Retail) over an EU-12 sample of countries. Based upon research evidence, the study ultimately proposes a list of policy recommendations for recovery and competitiveness of SMEs alongside four pillars (emergency support, regulation & governance, training & skills and innovation, sustainability & cohesion).

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The European Economic and Social Committee in 2040 – Critical Variables and Four Scenarios

Based on the evaluation of previous research and other documents, stakeholder interviews and consultation as well as an online survey, this report drafts possible futures of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC).

The EESC is confronted with multiple challenges, including an uncertain future relevance of the EU and acceptance of the “Project Europe” by citizens, socioeconomic transformation processes and new participation possibilities as well as a changed structure of civil society. Against this, questions of representation and legitimacy as well as of impact and added value of the Committee must be asked. In this context, there are two fundamental variables for the future development of the EESC: First, there is the question of “Who will be involved / represented?” and second, “What will be the EESC's core tasks, what is its specific added value?”.

For the EESC in 2040, four scenarios developed within this study present different possible pathways. While the first scenario describes the erosion of the EESC’s legitimacy, three others put forward possible choices for the future identity of the EESC focusing on “Assessment and Foresight”, becoming the “Agora of Civil Society” or a “Coreper” of Social Partnership”. The scenarios are an invitation to dialogue; to reach an understanding with others about what will be of decisive importance for the future of EESC.

In the coming years, the EESC – and many other stakeholders – have to set the course so that it can continue to be a relevant building block of the European house in 2040 deciding on involvement, scope, identity and aspirations, structure and working formats, equipment and use of resources.

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Hydrogen for the de-carbonization of the Resources and Energy Intensive Industries (REIIs)

This study deals with the use of hydrogen for the de-carbonization of the Resources and Energy Intensive Industries (REIIs) and gives a specific insight of the situation of the steel-making industry.

The growing use of hydrogen in our economy is synonym for an equal increase in electricity consumption. This results from the fact that the current most promising technologies of H₂ production is water electrolysis. For this purpose, the EU hydrogen strategy foresees a progressive ramp up of H₂ production capacities. But bottlenecks (especially regarding energy needed for electrolysers) may occur. Capacities should reach 40 GW (around 10 Mt/y) by the end of 2030.

The steel-making industry relies heavily on H₂ to decarbonise its process (through direct iron ore reduction). Our study analyses the conditions under which this new process will be able to compete with both European and offshore existing carbonised assets (i.e. blast furnaces). It emphasises the need for integrated and consistent policies from carbon prices to the carbon border adjustment mechanism through carbon contracts for differences but also highlights that a better regulation of electricity prices should not be neglected

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