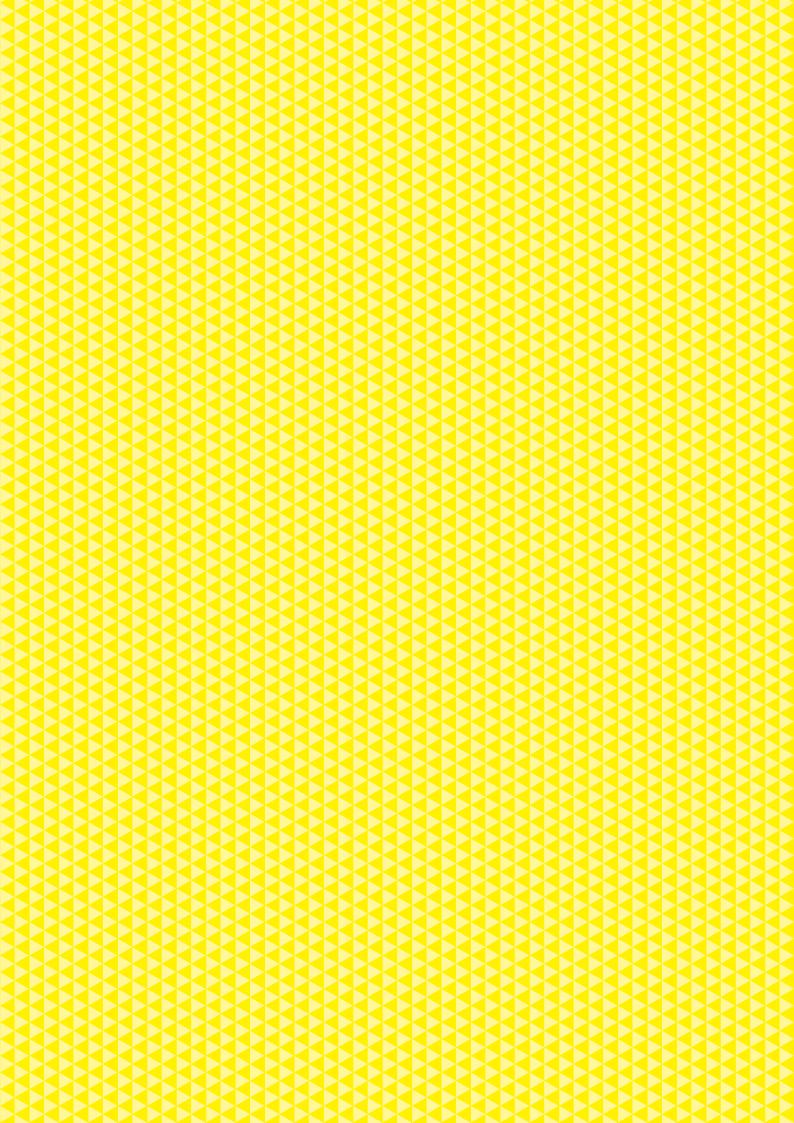




# VISION ON THE FUTURE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

9 May 2025





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Over the past decade, successive Governments of Flanders have always positioned the EU as the first and most important lever for Flanders's foreign policy. However, the EU's impact and significance have long since moved beyond foreign or international policy. To a large extent, the EU is also about domestic policy. With this vision, the Government of Flanders wants to increasingly use the EU as a lever for Flemish policy, whether domestic or foreign.

The EU has brought Flanders a great deal: economic growth, stability, access to the single market, room for innovation, social progress and security. At the same time, however, European prosperity and competitiveness are under pressure. Productivity growth is declining in a geopolitically volatile environment, and the EU faces several challenges.

The EU is the policy level par excellence to address challenges that are too big for one federated state or country, or are by definition cross-border. We like to keep policy as close to citizens as possible. However, if the EU can implement a more effective and efficient policy than local, regional and national governments, its action is appropriate. This does not alter the fact that careful consideration is required. To retain its legitimacy, the EU must continue to be built from the bottom up. According to the Government of Flanders, the EU should keep focusing on those tasks where its actions can generate the greatest added value for European actors, from citizens to governments.

The present text sets out the Government of Flanders's vision on how the EU should move forward in the short and medium term. It is intended to serve as guidance to help the Flemish public administration assess legislative and other initiatives.

Based on this Vision of the Future of the European Union, the Government of Flanders wants the EU to prioritise:

- respect for shared European norms, values, rights, freedoms and human rights
- a European migration policy fit for future challenges
- a sound budget for the EU and its Member States
- a deepening of the EMU, the banking union and the capital markets union
- the optimisation of the single market
- a vigorous and integrated industrial policy
- a European research and innovation union
- a European agricultural and fisheries policy that safeguards our food security
- a European transport and infrastructure union
- a European digital union
- an EU policy that allows ecology and economy to go hand in hand
- a European energy union
- the facilitation of decarbonisation and the circular economy
- the protection of the European social model
- a stronger commitment to fair international trade and trade agreements
- a strong commitment to defence (industry)
- added value, efficiency and subsidiarity to guide EU actions
- better regulation and regulatory burden reduction

With this in mind, the Government of Flanders sets itself the priority of adopting a government-wide approach in order to have an impact on the European agenda and decision-making in dossiers that are important to Flanders.

Flanders indeed benefits from a decisive Union that offers added value for Flemish citizens and businesses, is built from the bottom up and takes Flanders's interests and powers fully into account. It is therefore essential that Flanders co-decides the EU's agenda and direction, making sure the agenda reflects Flanders's policy vision and core interests, and that the Government of Flanders pursues a proactive and effective European policy.



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# **PREFACE**

For more than seventy years now, the European level has been crucial to peace, stability and cooperation in Europe and in Flanders. The world around us is changing dramatically. War, geopolitical tensions, protectionism and technological breakthroughs are causing fundamental shifts. Basic values and freedoms in democratic states governed by the rule of law are under pressure. The European Union, and therefore also Flanders, must redefine its position in an increasingly unpredictable world where economic and societal resilience are central.

The EU has brought Flanders a great deal: economic growth, stability, access to the single market, room for innovation, social progress and security. But at the same time, our prosperity and competitiveness are under pressure. Productivity growth is declining as new global power blocs are emerging. Climate change is a major challenge, but equally an opportunity. This requires a coherent and ambitious policy at the European level as well, one that lets ecology and economy go hand in hand. High energy prices put heavy pressure on our industry and citizens. At the same time, the geopolitical reality forces us to strengthen our open strategic autonomy and more actively diversify our trade relations.

For this reason, Flanders launched the present vision paper, making a clear call on the EU to ambitiously take up its core tasks and refocus on its strengths. We must resolutely commit to innovation, technological development and a stronger, robust industrial base as drivers of our prosperity. In addition, the EU must optimise its single market, safeguard fair competition and protect our socioeconomic market model. Flanders believes in a firm European approach when challenges transcend the Member States' scope, but equally demands respect for subsidiarity and institutional diversity.

Security, energy security, the digital and green transitions and economic resilience are areas where the EU can add value. Flanders expects the EU to not just respond but take real action here. Open strategic autonomy should become an actual strategy in this context, aimed at strengthening the European economy, promoting innovation and reducing dependencies on third countries. This is how we jointly build a prosperous, safe and resilient Europe for future generations.

In doing so, the Government of Flanders deliberately chooses to adopt a constructive and ambitious approach. We do not want to slow Europe down, but move it forward. Flanders does not just want to receive policy but actively help guide it. As an innovative region with an open and high-performance economy, we take our responsibility to further build the European project seriously.

The present vision paper provides a clear compass for a European Union that strengthens Flanders, and for a Flanders that strengthens the European Union.



# 1 FLANDERS'S VISION AND CORE INTERESTS

Over the past decade, successive Governments of Flanders have positioned the EU as the first and most important lever for Flanders's foreign policy. However, the EU's impact and significance have long since moved beyond foreign or international policy. To a large extent, the EU is also concerned with domestic policy. Through this vision, the Government of Flanders wants to increasingly use the EU as a lever for Flemish policy, whether domestic or foreign.

According to the Government of Flanders, the EU should keep focusing on those tasks where its actions can provide the greatest added value to European actors, from citizens to governments. Although it is the Government's opinion that there is room for a stronger and improved EU in those areas, a European initiative is not necessary in all of them. According to the Government of Flanders, the EU should focus primarily on deepening and further completing the single market for trade, capital markets, digitalisation, transport, energy and telecoms and protecting external borders against illegal migration, and on migration management and stronger cooperation between EU Member States in the areas of defence, security, health and climate. Therefore, the EU must further commit to building the European Pillar of Social Rights in the coming years.

The EU is the policy level par excellence to address challenges that are too big for one federated state or country, or are by definition cross-border. We like to keep policy as close to citizens as possible. However, if the EU can implement a more effective and efficient policy than local, regional and national governments, its action is appropriate. This does not alter the fact that careful consideration is required. To retain its legitimacy, the EU must continue to be built from the bottom up.

# 1.1 A Union of values, rights, freedoms and security

Flanders aims for a caring and prosperous Europe and fully endorses the principles of democracy and children's and human rights. The Union is more than its single market; it is a Union of shared values and norms, with a market model that has delivered social progress and prosperity for decades. The EU and its Member States can boast a rich democratic tradition that must be preserved with due care and diligence. Fundamental rights and freedoms must not be eroded. European democracy must be more assertive and resilient, respecting the rule of law and fundamental rights as cornerstones of European society. To that end, protection against foreign interference is vital.



# Priority: respect for shared European norms, values, rights, freedoms and human rights



Flanders expects the EU to not only promote its fundamental values in its external policy but also safeguard them internally. This includes:

- the democratic and rule of law principles
- respect for the ideals of the Age of Enlightenment, human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as:
  - human dignity and the right to self-determination
  - equality of citizens, regardless of their ideological belief, gender, age, disability or state of health, so-called race or sexual orientation

- freedom of expression, freedom of association, right to privacy, freedom of the press, freedom of education and freedom of religion
- respect for the European cultural, linguistic and ideological diversity
- respect for private life

This means that the EU must act firmly when democracy, the rule of law, human rights, independence of the judiciary, equal opportunities or civil society's position within Member States come under pressure. All Member States must propagate and defend those universal values and norms. Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union must be applied in full to hold countries that threaten the rule of law to account.

The EU is not on its own. As a guardian of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, it must actively join forces with the Council of Europe and other international partners. With a pan-European membership, this cooperation reaches beyond EU borders and enhances influence in neighbouring regions, creating a powerful synergy with real impact. The EU must be a frontrunner in defending democracy and human rights within the UN as well.

Flanders considers it important to keep highlighting European values such as freedom of cultural and artistic expression. By expanding the Europe of peoples and cultures, diversity is propagated as a strength and a value. European art and artists need to interact more with each other and with the people. Free movement for young people and youth workers, artists and cultural practitioners, as well as the protection of cultural heritage, can further this. For this reason, Flanders wants the EU to pay continued attention to youth, sport and culture, including ensuring a sustainable anchoring of European values.



# Priority: a European migration policy fit for future challenges



# A MIGRATION POLICY FIT FOR FUTURE CHALLENGES

Irregular and secondary migration to and within Europe not only harms the migrants themselves but also puts pressure on social cohesion and leads to a sense of rejection among European citizens. A strong joint European approach is therefore necessary. Irregular entries must be fought as much as possible, and the number of entries must be better distributed among the Member States. The ruthless business model of people smugglers must be broken. The EU plays an important role in addressing this issue. We support EU initiatives that decisively tackle irregular migration, with respect for human rights. At the same time, regular migration also implies a duty to integrate into European Member States. When doing so, effective integration into local communities in the European Union will contribute to a successful European model of regular migration.

Our external borders are a shared responsibility. Solidarity must always be the guiding principle between Member States as well as with refugees who are entitled to protection. Flanders expects the EU to put more effort into better border controls at Europe's external borders and a more effective return of persons staying illegally in the EU. Sustained efforts must be made to optimise the European asylum system in order to ensure EU stability, reduce tensions in society and improve migrant reception conditions. While the EU is experiencing an overall decline in asylum applications, Belgium is reporting a rise. Flanders is currently accommodating a large number of Ukrainians under the Temporary Protection Directive. All this is putting pressure on societal services in Flanders such as preventive healthcare, housing, schools, etc.

The external dimension of migration policy, where the EU can play a role in helping address the root causes of migration (see below, 1.5), must not be overlooked either. The EU should also use its international partnerships as a lever for readmission. We expect the EU to fit legal labour migration into a migration strategy that focuses on international cooperation. Legal labour migration is one of the solutions to fill structural labour market shortages caused by the ageing population. In doing so, we must be selective and expect the EU to cooperate only with countries that are willing to cooperate on return, so that legal labour migration becomes a lever against irregular migration. Flanders sees legal labour migration as the outer circle in a concentric approach. We focus on activating and reorienting labour, first within Belgium itself, secondly within the EU, and in the last instance, outside of the EU. Lastly, we focus on attracting talent from other EU countries and from outside the EU for high-skilled and medium-skilled shortage occupations.

# CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE

Since the COVID-19 crisis, the EU has, by necessity, increased its focus on crisis management. The war in Ukraine has added a clear resilience component. Extreme weather events caused by climate change are also forcing the EU to make a stronger commitment to resilience. The Government of Flanders regards these as themes where there is room for European action in line with its focus on added value in challenges that transcend one single Member State or federated state. Still, this is definitely an area where the right balance must be struck between EU and national/federated state action, given the potential scope of initiatives within the framework of those themes. The principle of subsidiarity applies here, as does respect for the responsibilities of the different actors, from governments to businesses and citizens. Another important principle for the Government of Flanders is that the EU must not duplicate the existing initiatives of other international organisations but should instead look for synergies and efficiency gains. EU initiatives in particular should be complementary to NATO actions. Lastly, resilience and security are also linked to competitiveness, which means that the need for and extent of government intervention is to be weighed in order to prevent market disruption. At the same time, we must proactively make our economy resilient to avoid future costs.

# 1.2 A Union that fosters economic and financial stability

The Government of Flanders wants a well-functioning Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) that promotes sound public finances, guarantees financial stability and stimulates economic growth. The further development of the banking union and capital markets union should also more broadly support the European Union's competitiveness by increasing the access and availability of capital.



# Priority: a sound budget for the EU and its Member States



# THE IMPORTANCE OF BUDGETARY DISCIPLINE AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

The Government of Flanders considers a balanced budget to be essential. A sound and forward-looking budget is imperative to tackling challenges. We impose this on ourselves, the EU demands it of the Member States under economic governance rules, and we also expect this of the EU and its institutions. In the context of the EU's large investment needs to enhance competitiveness, Flanders supports the Draghi Report's suggestion that the focus must be on mobilising private resources, while public investments will also have to increase without derailing the public debt ratio. The use of (European) public financing should be explored to rein in overall financing costs.

The coordination of Member States' economic policies within the Union comprises compliance with the fundamental principles of stable prices, sound public finances and monetary conditions, and a sustainable balance of payments.

Sound and sustainable public finances are an essential prerequisite for a prosperous and resilient EU. Like the federated states in Belgium, the Member States are first and foremost responsible for fleshing out and managing their budgets. According to the treaties, however, economic and budget policies are matters of common interest.

The Stability and Growth Pact (SGP), which sets out the rules that EU Member States' budgets must meet, is a crucial building block of the EMU. In 2024, the European budgetary framework was revised with three objectives: taking tighter control of the high debt burden that increased sharply after the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis, boosting reforms and investment, and promoting a multiannual counter-cyclical budgetary policy. Flanders attaches great importance to good compliance and the enforcement of the revised SGP, where necessary, including in today's challenging context. The multilateral fiscal surveillance must guarantee equality of treatment between Member States at all times.

Flanders also considers it important to closely follow up on the European Semester, with Member States aligning their fiscal and economic policies with the rules agreed at EU level, and that it remains the central tool for identifying excessive budget deficits and macroeconomic imbalances. This would make this process more efficient and much less bureaucratic, which is essential. More attention should also be paid to regional individuality and to the link with the challenges and actions to strengthen competitiveness.



# Priority: a deepening of the EMU, the banking union and the capital markets union



# A FINANCIAL SYSTEM THAT SUPPORTS SAVERS, INVESTORS AND BUSINESSES

Flanders aims to further complete the capital markets union to mobilise private capital and be able to offer companies the necessary funding. This is one of the areas where the EU can provide the most added value. Investment needs are high. The development of venture capital within an EU-wide drive towards a capital markets union should give Flemish companies more opportunities to finance their growth.

In addition, the EU should encourage EU citizens to use their savings to make productive investments. Flanders aims to create a better European ecosystem for scale-ups, making high-growth companies less dependent on international investors outside the EU. Flanders wants a well-aligned venture capital market within the EU, characterised by larger capital volumes and an increased willingness to take risks through private investment. Cooperation between the European Innovation Council (EIC) and the national promotional banks and institutions (NPBIs), such as the Flanders Holding Company (PMV), should be strengthened in this regard, as should cooperation between the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Tech Champions Initiative (ETCI).

Flanders is open to the EU trying to work out a 28th regime for companies, without this being the lowest common denominator of EU Member State rules, and with additional focus on increasing access to venture capital. Further anchoring the demand-driven innovative public procurement tool in the EU's innovation ecosystem presents many opportunities for supporting innovative start-ups and scale-ups.

# THE ROLE OF THE EURO

The euro is important to Flanders. As part of the euro area, Belgium fully enjoys the benefits of the single market. The euro makes trading easier and cheaper for an open economy and export-oriented region like Flanders. This is the case for trade both within and outside the euro area. Thanks to its strong international position, the euro acts as a lever for more stable and efficient financial markets, economic growth and influence, which also benefits Flanders.

# 1.3 A Union for prosperity and international competitiveness

Taking on international competition is definitely a challenge that the EU as a whole must face. Individual Member States taking fragmented national measures or shielding their own markets is detrimental to the EU as a whole, and in particular to countries and federated states with small, open economies and limited budgets, such as Flanders.

Flanders's economy is inextricably linked to the European market and regulation. As one of the EU's most open and industrialised regions, Flanders benefits from a bold EU policy that stimulates innovation, modernises infrastructure, keeps energy prices manageable, decarbonises the economy, improves environmental quality and ensures fair competition within the single market. A vigorous EU is an essential lever for safeguarding and strengthening the competitiveness of Flanders's economy. The EU must adopt a vision that fosters ecological transition while also supporting business competitiveness.



# Priority: optimising the single market



# REMOVING BARRIERS TO GROWTH

As a priority, the European Commission must create the right preconditions that can enable our businesses to grow. Our fundamental competitive advantage – the single market – must take centre stage in this, as it is the driving force behind European productivity and prosperity. Barriers in the single market are holding back our development and competitiveness.

For our businesses to fully benefit from cross-border trade, the single market needs to be deepened and broadened. Further harmonisation and mutual recognition of norms allow companies to sell their products and services across borders and expand their customer base, while competition also leads to lower prices, innovation and a broader strengthening of the business dynamics. However, significant obstacles remain, ranging from barriers to providing cross-border services in the form of restrictive market access and exercise requirements, to scarcity of financial resources and skilled labour for businesses to grow. The IMF calculated that internal trade barriers for goods within the EU are comparable to a 45% tariff. By comparison, this is only 15% in the US. The tariff equivalent for services is estimated to be even considerably higher, at 110% on average. Reducing intra-European trade barriers to US levels would yield a 7% productivity growth in the long run¹. All EU companies, workers and citizens should benefit from the freedom of movement. This is essential to retain support for the single market and increase European competitiveness. Flanders therefore advocates:

<sup>1</sup> IMF, Scaling Up the Single Market to Boost Productivity, 14.11.2024.

- further removing obstacles to the free movement of goods and services, including for the circular economy (see below, 1.4);
- focusing on horizontal and economically important services with high growth potential and added value, such as technological, industrial and financial services;
- examining how the Services Directive can be deepened and broadened, while respecting the exceptions for services of general interest;
- supporting the digitalisation of the economy by focusing on data interoperability and the use of digital tools (e.g. Single Digital Gateway) to reduce costs for businesses, especially in cross-border services, licensing procedures and public e-services

# **PURSUING A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD**

The single market is one of the EU's greatest assets, yet unfair competition and differences in national aid measures threaten to undermine it. Flanders advocates:

- applying State aid rules transparently and strictly: relaxing the European State aid framework is not a sustainable response and risks undermining the level playing field within the EU. To avoid distortion of competition, all Member States should have equal opportunities to support their businesses with fair and predictable regulations. If the Commission does allow a relaxation, it should be within a temporary and strictly delineated framework with sufficient controls to maintain the internal level playing field;
- enforcing competition rules more strictly: the European Commission must take proactive action against non-EU businesses that distort the single market through State aid or other measures;
- enforcing single market rules



# Priority: a vigorous and integrated industrial policy



# A VIGOROUS AND INTEGRATED INDUSTRIAL POLICY

Flanders attaches great importance to a strong and forward-looking European industrial policy that reconciles competitiveness and sustainability. European industry is under pressure from rising energy prices, unfair international competition, administrative burdens and strategic dependencies. Defence and security policy needs also require attention in this context. At the same time, the climate transition necessitates major adjustments in production processes and infrastructure. Flanders therefore advocates the adoption of an integrated and coordinated approach to meet these challenges.

It wants to position itself as a pioneer of sustainable, innovative and competitive industrial growth in the EU and maximise its expertise regarding industrialisation in specific sectors. However, this still requires an EU policy that allows for this. In addition, the EU can create levers to strategically strengthen the industry by stimulating cross-border cooperation, for example. Flanders should actively participate in that.

Flemish industry plays a crucial role in the European economy. Flanders is home to the world's second-largest chemical cluster and boasts strong industries such as agri-food and pharmaceuticals. To keep Europe's industry resilient and competitive, Flanders argues in favour of introducing a mix of measures, with free-market forces and technology neutrality at the core. This allows companies and researchers to develop the most efficient, cost-effective and long-term sustainable methods, unconstrained by pre-imposed choices. The EU must strengthen research and innovation, mobilise funding for innovation and scale-up (including decarbonisation

technologies), reduce administrative burdens without compromising policy objectives, and tackle unfair competition. It is also important to reduce dependencies on a limited number of external suppliers by focusing on in-house production, diversifying supply lines, and developing substitutes and recycling for critical raw materials.

In this context, the Important Projects of Common European Interest (IPCEI) are a key instrument for Flanders that requires further optimisation. The instrument must remain focused on effectively addressing market failures and must not cause a subsidy race between Member States. The scope, governance and administrative burdens also need to be fine-tuned. The added value of the IPCEI lies in its ability to enhance the role of European industry and enterprises in international value chains, mitigating the risks of strategic dependencies and facilitating transitions beyond the carrying capacity of individual Member States. Another important step to further reduce strategic dependencies is the EU legislation on semiconductors, critical raw materials and clean technologies.

A demand-driven approach from the EU may be helpful in a sputtering market creation for climate-neutral technologies and green products. Public contracts, for instance, may be tools that can support the demand side. EU commitment to this is possible, subject to prior impact analyses for businesses, citizens, market forces and government.

To achieve a true industrial transformation, research and innovation results must be turned into concrete industrial applications faster. This requires a good match between European research and innovation support programmes and the priorities of industrial sectors, with increased focus on technology transfer and scale-up. Therefore, Flanders is in favour of focusing sufficiently on collaborative research and innovation (R&I) activities, such as those created within the innovation clusters that contribute directly to competitiveness and sustainability, with fast and accessible funding mechanisms for companies, scale-ups and research establishments. In this context, Flanders always advocates funding projects on their merits and placing excellence at the core.

Flanders wants the industry to be properly supported in order to accelerate its green transition. We take advantage of the review moments and adjustment opportunities provided for in European directives and regulations to assess the feasibility of the annual reduction path for ETS1, its climate effectiveness and its impact on competitiveness, carbon leakage and trade patterns. If necessary, Flanders will advocate proper adjustments. In addition, we ask the European Union to adjust the RFNBO target so that we can use more than just green hydrogen to make our industry more sustainable. In addition to private investment, public investment plays a crucial role in creating optimal preconditions to grow our industry and support competitiveness. We should consider European financing instruments that can leverage and reduce risks, such as contracts for difference at the EU level for low-carbon technologies in energy-intensive industries and financing through the European Investment Bank. The Innovation Fund is crucial as well.

We must continue to protect our businesses from the risk of carbon leakage. Measures to that end must also take the competitive position of sectors that export their production outside the EU into account, as well as the protection of the entire value chain.

Finally, the renewed European commitment to defence and security also leverages industrial innovation and development (see below, 1.5).



# Priority: a European Research and Innovation Union



# **ENCOURAGE KEY ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Flanders considers it important that the EU continues to put its weight behind promising innovative sectors as a priority. These include semiconductors, artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technology, biotechnology, space, cleantech and digital technologies such as extended reality. The EU must retain and reinforce its technological lead. Flanders will actively contribute to this through the pioneering work of its strategic research centres imec, the Flanders Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), the Flemish Institute for Technological Research (VITO) and Flanders Make. This is also done through participation in several Joint Undertaking programmes and research and implementation programmes such as Horizon Europe and the Digital Europe Programme.

### FRONTRUNNER IN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

Flanders welcomes the European Commission's heightened focus on R&I. It is one of the key drivers to re-energise the EU's competitiveness and kick-start economic growth, while also addressing societal challenges and increasing crisis resilience.

The European Framework Programme (FP) for R&I plays a key role in this by providing strategic funding and collaboration opportunities to stimulate cutting-edge research and innovation. This helps create a sustainable and prosperous future for Flanders and the EU. Investing in R&I can help address societal challenges and ensure that we remain resilient and competitive on a global level. The European programme's added value (each euro in costs will ultimately bring five euros in benefits) and Flanders's strong participation in and fundraising from the FP demonstrate its significance<sup>2</sup>.

Continued and substantial investments in research and innovation (R&I) within the EU and national investments in own systems for research and development (R&D) to meet the 3% of gross domestic product (GDP) target are needed. Flanders wants to raise the long-term joint (public and private) R&D investment target to 5% of GDP, taking further steps in the coming years towards 1% for the Flemish public administration. Flanders calls on the Member States to invest in favourable national conditions and meet the 1% public and 3% total R&D spending targets.

# INTRODUCING THE 5TH FREEDOM: FREE MOVEMENT OF RESEARCH, INNOVATION, KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

Flanders calls for sustained efforts to strengthen the European Research and Innovation Area (ERA) and the European Education Area (EEA). To ensure the integration of the fifth freedom, i.e. free movement of research, innovation, knowledge and education, the EU must strengthen the R&I capabilities of a single European market and remove barriers. This includes increasing researcher mobility by reducing administrative obstacles, strengthening European Open Science policy and infrastructure, developing European data spaces, and committing to strong and accessible European ecosystems of research and technology infrastructures and supercomputers. The other general preconditions for competitiveness are important as well.

### BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND THE MARKET

Flanders considers it important to guarantee a broad research base, laying the foundations for future innovations. It is in favour of further strengthening pre-competitive, collaborative R&I activities that help bridge the gap between research and the market by linking research to enterprises. It is important to continue to facilitate the knowledge flow and knowledge-sharing between companies and knowledge institutes within and outside innovation clusters. An important focus point is to involve economic operators in the formation of such a partnership at an early stage in order to create co-ownership. Flanders is of the opinion that efforts should be made to link up with smart specialisation strategies and that further work should be done around place-based innovation.

<sup>2</sup> Horizon 2020 evaluation, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\_24\_461

Flanders places a high priority on research and technology infrastructure policy. Those infrastructures increase the EU's R&I attractiveness. To bridge the gap between science and the market, a stronger connection between research and technology infrastructures<sup>3</sup> is needed, and Flanders is pushing for a European strategy to encourage pan-European collaboration and cross-border infrastructure networks. Flanders suggests taking a strategic approach to identifying the most relevant technology infrastructures and always linking them to strategic priorities formulated at the European level in order to also facilitate connections with industry through partnerships (in line with industrial policy).

The above elements also require sufficient private capital to finance investment (see below, 1.2).

# ENSURING KNOWLEDGE SECURITY AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Global scientific collaboration is essential to tackle the global challenges facing the EU. Flanders strongly supports the idea of openness to international R&I collaboration, adhering to the principle of 'as open as possible and as closed as necessary'. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are core values for international collaboration on scientific excellence and innovation. Those principles must therefore continue to be respected and safeguarded. Flanders also considers it vital to strike a balance between global collaboration and knowledge security. It calls for a European knowledge security policy and a screening mechanism for foreign investments that can take targeted and proportionate action where necessary.

# SKILLS, EDUCATION AND THE LABOUR MARKET AS DRIVERS OF TRANSITION

The successful participation of Flemish universities, universities of applied sciences and arts, and research establishments in European framework programmes, Erasmus+, and in the alliances of European universities shows that Flanders is a leading knowledge region. In this regard, there are a number of central levers at the European level, particularly in the areas of cross-border collaboration in education and research, as well as smart specialisation. This could relate to breakthrough technologies that benefit industry, as well as to better links between universities, knowledge institutes, companies and governments. Pooling and concentrating European research resources within European research projects, as is done within the Horizon Europe programme, should continue to create opportunities for Flemish knowledge establishments to participate in pan-European industrial and scientific research projects. This should also enable Flanders to attract and retain academic talent.

Flanders welcomes the European Commission's ambition to strengthen the Erasmus+ programme, as a stronger Erasmus+ promotes international mobility and collaboration, and strengthens the capacity of educational institutions in Flanders. Moreover, the EU must support academic freedom and develop a responsible international knowledge security policy, in cooperation with the Member States and knowledge institutes (see below). European (specialisation) clusters can be built to promote smooth knowledge sharing.

The availability of qualified labour is essential. For this reason, it is also important to offer support in coordinating and developing the competencies needed to facilitate that transition. This implies a constant focus on competency development in key sectors, including training infrastructure. The EU can promote employment and inclusion by facilitating and stimulating a faster recognition of foreign qualifications. This contributes to a smoother integration of newcomers into education and the labour market. Flanders can profile itself as a frontrunner in Europe by actively promoting the multilateral Treaty on the Automatic Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications to other countries with strong and quality higher education systems. The above treaty was launched in 2021 by the Benelux countries and the Baltic States. In addition, it is crucial that the EU commit to an ambitious and accelerated implementation of transparency instruments in higher education and research, such as the European degree label. The existing Bologna instruments, including the Diploma Supplement, the ECTS system and the national qualifications frameworks, must also be strengthened and better aligned to promote comparability and mobility within the European Higher Education Area.

<sup>3</sup> Research infrastructures (collections, telescopes, supercomputers, etc.) focus primarily on scientific excellence. Technology infrastructures (wind tunnels, demonstration facilities, living labs, etc.) concentrate on spillover effects and scale-up within strategically important technology domains.

Education measures must be taken at the proper policy level, with respect for the principle of subsidiarity. Decision-making must take place as close to citizens as possible. At the same time, Flanders intends to make full use of the EU's role in fostering mutual learning between Member States and tackling cross-border challenges. By actively exchanging experiences and good practices, we strengthen our education policies together.

In terms of labour market policy as well, we strive for a European social agenda that respects the principle of subsidiarity. Flanders is closely monitoring European regulations, specifically their impact on Flemish employment policy. In light of the commitment to competitiveness, strengthening human capital is also important. Flanders supports the EU's efforts to develop a Union of Skills, which can address the challenges surrounding skills shortages. We are in favour of taking a broader approach to skills rather than considering them purely from an economic perspective. Flanders endorses the EU's ambitions to attract international talent from outside the EU to fill structural shortages in high- and medium-skilled shortage occupations and to further stimulate the EU's economic growth.

In the context of the European Semester, Flanders requests that the country-specific recommendations – such as those on labour market shortages and the activation of vulnerable groups – be broken down to federated state level as much as possible (see below, 2.1), especially since Europe expects these recommendations to be heeded directly by the ESF programme.

The EU must support Member States in modernising their labour market policies to give everyone the opportunity to participate in the labour market. To support vulnerable groups, it is also important to offer better guidance towards funding from EU programmes. To attract talent within the EU, Flanders supports efforts launched by the European Labour Authority (ELA) and the European Commission to boost the single European labour market, such as the EURES platform. The Public Employment Service of Flanders (VDAB) aligns its policy with those channels and instruments whilst focusing on cost efficiency and return on investment.



# Priority: a European agricultural and fisheries policy that ensures our food security



# ENSURING FOOD SECURITY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD PRODUCTION

Flanders expects the EU to strengthen the food security policy through an integrated approach that ensures the availability of nutritious food and promotes food production sustainability. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post-2027 has a crucial role to play in properly compensating our agricultural and horticultural farmers to achieve a sustainable agricultural model. It should also make additional efforts to support our farmers in making the transition to sustainable agriculture. In doing so, Flanders is also investing in innovative techniques to make agriculture resilient. Flanders continues to push for innovations such as new genomic techniques on the basis of acceptable risks. Flanders will defend that position within Belgium and Europe, so that federal and European policies also support Flanders's ambitions in that regard.

At the same time, the CAP must be made simpler, more flexible and cost-efficient, giving farmers sufficient room to develop their business strategies whilst taking the environmental carrying capacity of the regions in which they operate into account. In doing so, the EU must focus strongly on innovations in agriculture, as well as on reducing administrative burdens and avoiding unnecessary regulatory burdens within European agricultural policy and in other policy areas with an impact on agriculture. All this should benefit the EU's young farmers. In addition, young farmers deserve specific attention within agricultural policy, given the challenges we face regarding generational turnover in agriculture. The exception in European competition law that allows

farmers to unite in producer organisations to be stronger in price negotiations must be retained. Agricultural and horticultural farmers must be given a stronger bargaining position. The European Union is responsible for a large portion of the market policy regarding agricultural products. It is therefore important that it continues to focus on instruments that support farmers, as the smaller link in the food chain.

Flanders also expects the EU to proactively defend the interests of the fisheries sector vis-à-vis third countries, while maintaining access to fishing grounds and catch opportunities, and allowing the most efficient use of funds through the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) for investments in innovation. In doing so, it is also important to revise the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) with a greater focus on workable solutions. The EU must also work to ensure a level playing field between aquaculture products originating from the EU and those imported from third countries.



# Priority: a European transport and infrastructure union



# CROSS-BORDER INFRASTRUCTURE, TRANSPORT AND MOBILITY

Flanders is a major logistics hub in the EU with a central location and the presence of world ports that act as an economic gateway to Europe. Flanders will proactively engage with the EU to further strengthen the role of ports within a broader European port strategy and expects the EU to acknowledge the strategic role of ports as logistics and energy hubs.

Flanders has one of the densest transport networks in Europe (by land and water), but suffers from an investment backlog in structural transport infrastructure maintenance. To reduce the associated safety and reliability risks and the potential economic, societal and environmental impact, Flanders will invest heavily in reliable, efficient and safe infrastructure. Flanders expects the EU to provide a framework that allows Member States to build strategic infrastructure faster and calls for simplified permit procedures and accelerated European co-financing, including investments in inland navigation, rail transport and cross-border connections, which make the flow of goods more efficient and strengthen the logistics chain. Those infrastructure projects connect industrial clusters across Europe, with the accelerated roll-out of the necessary energy and transport infrastructure as the backbone of the industrial transition.

Flanders expects an ambitious and coherent infrastructure and transport vision from the EU, with a clear long-term agenda committed to sustainable, safe and smart mobility. Building a robust and cross-border European transport network that is multimodal, interoperable and future-proof is crucial in this respect. At the same time, we must also decarbonise the EU in this area, protect its critical physical and cyber infrastructure, continue its digitalisation and improve social conditions in the sector. Flanders counts on a strengthened European commitment to the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), with additional focus on missing links, a sustainable modal shift and smart logistics hubs that support the competitiveness of the European economy.

The transport sector faces many challenges in terms of the green transition to sustainable and climate-resilient transport (infrastructure). A sustainable modal shift (the switch from less environmentally friendly means of transport to more sustainable alternatives) is emerging in view of (European) climate targets. To achieve the climate targets, Flanders expects the EU to support the necessary transition to emission-free mobility, including technological collaboration and fair co-responsibility between Member States. The Government of Flanders supports the European ambition and timeline to make new cars emission-free and is actively working towards that end. The transition to zero-emission mobility is supported with attention to feasibility and af-

fordability, without imposing stricter demands than the European targets (gold-plating).

Finally, Flanders is also asking the EU to capitalise on the significance of transport and infrastructure to support military mobility and strengthen defence (see below, 1.5). In doing so, it is important to increase our ports' accessibility as hubs for moving NATO troops who need support (shelter, supplies, etc.) and especially good transport infrastructure. That obviously includes train links (3RX<sup>4</sup>), but also high and sturdy bridges, etc. The EU should play a facilitating role in this through the promotion of cross-border cooperation and its support programmes.



# Priority: a European digital union



# A COHERENT DIGITALISATION POLICY WITH A FOCUS ON STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Flanders ranks among the European sub-top in terms of digitalisation. With a DESI score of 55.8, Flanders exceeds both the Belgian and EU averages. Flanders also confirms its top position in the world's education league table, as shown in ICILS 2023. Flemish stakeholders perform strongly in European programmes, but are faced with scale limitations. Further growth requires a broader European approach.

To remain competitive, Europe needs to invest heavily in 5G, cloud technology, AI, high-performance computing and cybersecurity. Access to sufficient computing power and infrastructure is crucial for industrial efficiency and our open strategic autonomy. Digital sovereignty requires structural European cooperation.

Initiatives such as European data spaces require a scale that transcends national or regional borders. Flanders is willing to contribute but counts on the EU to provide direction, avoid overlap and ensure interoperability. This is how we reinforce Europe's innovative strength and economic growth together.

Flanders expects a coherent and effective European digitalisation policy that acknowledges and reinforces regional strengths. Cross-border cooperation must be further promoted through targeted programmes and strategic investments.

At the same time, Flanders calls for an ethical digital transformation that respects fundamental rights and privacy. In terms of the regulation of digital services, emerging technologies and artificial intelligence, we advocate establishing a dialogue with our international partners to ensure that European rules are in line with international standards, a level playing field is maintained for our economic operators, and the security of our citizens and their data is guaranteed. We also call attention to digitalisation and data in European external (trade) relations (see below, 1.5).

The EU must also support the digital transformation of businesses through cooperation, access to infrastructure, and policies tailored to regional needs. Flanders wants to help guide European digital policy to make sure it matches and works towards our technological and economic ambitions.

<sup>4</sup> Rhein-Ruhr-Rail Connection

The digital world is evolving rapidly and new technologies, such as AI and big data, are raising questions that were less prominent when the GDPR was drafted in 2016. The EU must act as a leading force in AI. We want to enable, develop and use human-centred AI, not constrain or hinder it through excessive regulation. We want to support research and application development and provide freedom while respecting human rights. We need to adapt our data protection to the changing digital world, without fundamentally scaling back privacy safeguards.

# PLURALIST MEDIA POLICY IN A RELIABLE AND LEGALLY SECURE FRAMEWORK

European media policy has a significant impact on Flanders. A key focus point for Flanders is ensuring a level playing field for all media companies, while preserving media pluralism and freedom. Flanders strives for a safe and quality EU information space in traditional and online media, giving citizens access to reliable and diverse information.

Media policy is primarily a federated state power. We expect the EU to provide clear and consistent regulation, and an environment in which creativity can flourish, in those areas within media policy where it adds value. The EU has long been aware of the challenges facing the media sector, ranging from disinformation to safeguarding fair competition against Big Tech to boosting Europe's innovative strength. Flanders supports the necessary protection mechanisms against the spread of extremism and criminal content. However, when developing new EU initiatives, policy actions must strike the right balance between freedom of expression, respect for privacy and access to reliable information.

The European level is a good level of governance to facilitate cooperation with media organisations from other Member States to work on creative and innovative projects that benefit our media landscape.

# 1.4 A social and sustainable Union that protects citizens



# Priority: an EU policy that allows ecology and economy to go hand in hand



# AN AMBITIOUS AND PRAGMATIC CLIMATE POLICY

Flanders aims for a climate-neutral economy, regarding the energy and climate transition not just as a necessary step towards the future but also as an opportunity for sustainable economic growth, job creation, technological advancement and enhanced open strategic autonomy. In that process, the EU must recognise Flanders's specific context as a densely populated and highly industrialised region and be mindful of the societal and economic impact of environmental and climate targets on Flemish companies' competitiveness and their short-term viability.

To offer our citizens and companies clarity on the reduction path towards climate neutrality in the EU by 2050, we advocate setting an ambitious and pragmatic 2040 target at the European level as soon as possible. It is vital to evaluate and monitor the feasibility of EU targets, and sub-targets in particular. If it turns out that those sub-targets do not contribute sufficiently to the EU climate targets or that better alternatives are available, Flanders will advocate adjusting those sub-targets/obligations. In doing so, Flanders recognises and consolidates the importance of clear and stable regulation for companies and consumers and a predictable

policy that supports long-term investments in sustainability. Flanders alone will not save the climate, but we want to be part of the solution. Flanders will make a fair contribution to achieving international and European energy and climate goals, and primarily the EU's 2050 climate neutrality goal.

Flanders urges the EU to help Member States to clearly communicate future challenges. Citizens and businesses must be informed in a timely manner so that they can make the necessary preparations to keep their energy bills affordable.

Flanders expects the EU to ensure that it receives a maximum backflow of the funds raised in Belgium as part of the European climate and energy policy, so that European funds can be put to optimal use by leveraging them (see below, 1.3).



# Priority: a European energy union



# A BALANCED ENERGY POLICY FOCUSED ON AFFORDABILITY AND SECURITY OF SUPPLY

It is crucial that the EU recognises the importance of a balanced energy strategy that focuses on affordability, decarbonisation and security of supply. Flanders stresses that a strong industrial policy requires a balanced and sustainable energy mix. It is essential to argue in favour of a balanced energy mix, where nuclear power is part of European policy alongside renewables. Energy efficiency must be considered as well.

High energy prices not only affect industry's competitiveness but also put significant financial pressure on people in vulnerable situations. The EU can address these issues by promoting the accelerated roll-out of low-carbon energy sources, improving European energy market integration and prioritising cross-border energy links and interconnections between Member States. Supporting a stable investment climate is also vital to attract additional low-carbon energy production. By doing so, EU policy should reduce dependence on energy imports and increase the EU's open strategic autonomy.

Flanders needs a resilient network with sufficient flexibility to address the future electrification and congestion challenges. Smart grids take centre stage in this, alongside the digitalisation of energy management to guarantee system efficiency and stability. Europe must work on and provide adequate financing for strongly integrated energy infrastructure, including hydrogen, electricity and storage infrastructure, and an integrated electricity grid. There is also a need for strategic collaboration with non-EU countries to interconnect energy grids and for the import of energy sources such as (green) hydrogen, nuclear fuels and sustainable biomass.

# THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: FROM SCARCITY TO OPPORTUNITY

Flanders has established itself as a frontrunner in the circular economy and waste management in Europe. The circular economy is an indispensable tool to reduce our dependence on the availability of raw materials and the associated environmental impacts. It is important that the EU develops a supportive framework that helps companies become more circular, without losing their competitiveness. That includes:

• European incentives and regulations for the circular economy: Flanders supports a coordinated EU approach to sustainable raw materials management, prevention strategies, circular production and consumption models and reuse and recycling, including a harmonised framework for secondary raw materials and waste management, without unnecessary administrative barriers and with opportunities for innovative technologies.

A level playing field must be worked on both inside and outside the EU for high-quality and safe primary and secondary materials;

- promoting the European single market for the circular economy, for waste, by-products and end-of-waste;
- the importance of critical raw materials: sustainable drilling in the EU and significant diversification of imports.

Finally, a strongly developed European bioeconomy is essential to strengthen the EU's open strategic autonomy, boost sustainable economic growth and meet climate targets. The bioeconomy offers solutions for the circular utilisation of raw materials, replacing fossil materials and securing critical nutrients such as phosphorus. A European approach is vital in this to guarantee coherent legislation, cross-border collaboration and a level playing field.



# Priority: facilitating decarbonisation and the circular economy



# **DECARBONISATION AS AN ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY**

The transition to a low-carbon economy must be accompanied by growth opportunities for businesses. Flanders expects the EU to provide a supportive framework that helps businesses in their transition without undermining their competitiveness. That includes clear and simplified, technology-neutral regulations that enable and help achieve a broad mix of innovative technologies to reduce CO2 emissions and decarbonise industry. Flanders calls for coherent and simple regulations for carbon capture, use and storage (CCUS). EU financing instruments should help accelerate the uptake of forward-looking technologies.

# **ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES AND GREEN-BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRE ACTION**

We advocate using systems such as a programming approach or region-specific solutions when developing EU policy. This allows Member States and regions like Flanders to strike an efficient and responsible balance, allowing the interests of both nature and industry to come into their own.

The EU must also engage in constructive coordination with economic operators for its environmental policy so that it lets ecology and economy go hand in hand. For instance, it must protect and improve the competitive position of economic operators, ensure transparent, targeted, workable, controllable and proportionate regulations, and achieve a business- and SME-friendly environment that pursues the necessary environmental goals and improves environmental quality. European environmental goals must be achieved in an efficient and structured way through targeted action based on European policy measures to create a level playing field, among other things. We expect the EU to scrutinise the coherence and cumulative impact of (new) regulations, instead of imposing new regulations each time. In addition, we expect it to promote innovative and sustainable initiatives that accelerate the green transition.

The EU must create conditions that are amenable to air pollutant emission reduction and air quality improvement.

We continue to push for a European phase-out of PFAS, provided that an equivalent and people- and environmentally friendly alternative is available for the application. We are exploring how best to do this, keeping in mind the availability of alternatives.

Flanders continues its leading policy on substances of very high concern (SVHC), including PFAS, and is committed to innovation to replace such substances, on the one hand, and clean them up, on the other. The recommendations of the 'PFAS-PFOS' parliamentary committee of inquiry continue to serve as guidance. The PFAS Action Plan and the Vision on Substances of Very High Concern are being translated into concrete actions to protect citizens' safety and health in a way that continues to allow for the realisation of industrial projects. In doing so, we are committed to an area-specific and cost-effective, risk-based approach that strikes a workable balance between protection of people and the environment, protection of strategic sectors, environmental benefits and socially responsible spending. Based on those same principles, we are shaping a Flanders-wide PFAS Action Framework. The cross-policy area SVHC hub is being continued. We aim to introduce extended producer responsibility for PFAS and other harmful substances and continue the process with the federal government and other Regions to establish a sectoral fund to finance damage caused by substances of very high concern such as PFAS. In this regard, we prioritise the clean-up of sites where PFAS-containing firefighting foam was used.

Flanders supports an equal European norms framework and similar approach to the PFAS issue at the European level.

Flanders is a densely populated area where many functions converge. Moreover, it boasts a wealth of nature and is located in a water-sensitive delta. This is precisely why it is so important for the European water and nature policy to be customised to a region like Flanders. We engage in a dialogue with the European Commission on the impact and opportunities of general environmental objectives for densely populated and economically important regions like Flanders. With regard to the Water Framework Directive and the Nitrates Directive, Flanders calls for an ambitious yet pragmatic phasing of targets. Improving water quality, biodiversity and water resilience should indeed go hand in hand with other societal goals. We therefore advocate using systems such as a programming approach or region-specific solutions to make the most efficient use of the environmental space available in Flanders. We screen all European licensing requirements and directives as well as their impact on the competitiveness of Flanders's economy and its companies. We use the outcomes of that screening to engage in dialogue with European agencies. The integrated development of policy actions is also of importance at the European level. Flanders has a (pro)active impact on new European initiatives and monitors the balance between ecology and economy in new and existing legislation.

It expects that European nature goals can be achieved to the maximum extent possible in the protected areas in Flanders, with habitat relocations being explored and advocated at the European level whenever possible and useful. When implementing European climate and environmental legislation such as the Nature Restoration Law, Flanders always starts from the specific situation of its environment and provides a bespoke action plan. In doing so, linkage opportunities and derogation possibilities are maximised. The European Commission also advocates flexibility in the achievement of targets. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post-2027 must also contribute proportionately to the EU's nature, environmental and climate goals.

In addition, Flanders is requesting European support for the integration of water resilience measures, focused on coherence between agricultural policy, mobility policy, the European Climate Adaptation Plan, the EU Soil Strategy and the Nature Restoration Law. Flanders needs nature-based solutions that are also cost-efficient. The EU can play a supporting role in the uptake of innovative solutions in agriculture and food industries, as in the field of water technology and circular water use. The EU can also be important for releasing the necessary funds.

# PROTECTION OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL MODEL



# Priority: protecting the European social model



The European Union must defend the European social model within its diversity. The European social market economy balances economic freedoms with social responsibilities, social protection and solidarity. In 2017, the EU underlined this shared vision with the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights. That pillar, with 20 concrete principles, serves as guidance for a fair and inclusive European labour market and society. We endorse and implement the objectives and strive for upward social convergence and progress in the EU, while respecting the division of powers, the principle of subsidiarity and the individuality of each Member State.

An open and strong single market, which is crucial for a resilient and prosperous Flanders, requires strong social foundations at the European level. Flanders fully subscribes to the objectives and ambitions of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This starts with protecting the very weakest in our society, which is our children and young people. Flanders expects the EU and the Member States to pay continued attention to the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

Social dialogue is paramount in a competitive, prosperous and social Europe. Flanders supports the EU's efforts to strengthen that dialogue.

It expects the European Union to continue fighting social dumping, which is a persistent challenge within the European single market. Social dumping refers to situations in which companies abuse differences in social regulations between Member States or violate labour laws to keep down wage costs or worsen working conditions. The European Union recognises social dumping as a threat to both workers' labour rights and the fairness of the single market. For this reason, the EU is playing an increasingly active role in combating it through regulation, surveillance and cooperation. Flanders, too, reports a growing number of seconded third-country nationals at risk of social dumping and unfair competition. It therefore calls for a clear framework and better enforcement of the rules. We call on the EU to take the initiatives needed to prevent secondment abuse and tackle fraud, primarily through better cooperation and information exchange between national control services. To that end, we advocate strengthening the European Labour Authority.

Moreover, we expect the European Union to support economic growth, prosperity and social justice within the digital, environmental and demographic transitions. Due to that single market and increasing secondment or cross-border labour, the European Union must set minimum standards that guarantee workers' rights and ensure quality jobs, healthy working conditions and decent wages. The EU must also help promote gender equality on the labour market, both in traditional sectors and for new types of work within the digital transition.

# CITIZENS' HEALTH IS FUNDAMENTAL

Health is one of the most fundamental human needs. Without good health, all other facets of life come under pressure. Based on its competences, the European Union can assume an important role for those aspects of healthcare that extend beyond Flanders's powers. More specifically, the existing GDPR legislation needs to be adapted so that health data sharing benefits patients, and we want to successfully enable innovations and digitalisation in healthcare for the benefit of our citizens. Our ageing population necessitates a strong healthcare system. Europe can add value here through strategic investments and by stimulating cooperation.

The EU also has a role to play in addressing medicine shortages. Collaboration must be facilitated for the negotiation and procurement of hard-to-access medicines. Entering into dialogue with other European Member States and European cooperation can also add value with regard to pricing and reimbursements, which remains a Member State competence. The EU must maintain an attractive investment climate to foster innovation, R&D and investment in the pharmaceutical industry.

# 1.5 A resilient Union with an open mind to the outside world

The EU can no longer take a stable and secure international future for granted. The global political landscape has evolved significantly in recent years due to growing geopolitical tensions, health and climate crises, wars on Europe's external borders, increasing protectionism and greater political and economic instability. Global conflicts deepen geopolitical fault lines, which at the same time put our (trade) partnerships around the world to the test. These challenges have a major direct impact on Flanders. International partnerships and diplomacy – at all levels – remain an indispensable pillar in promoting peace and stability, including for wealth creation in Flanders.



# Priority: a stronger commitment to fair international trade and trade agreements



# STRONGER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION EMBEDDED IN A EUROPEAN COMMITMENT TO OPEN STRATE-GIC AUTONOMY AND ENHANCED EUROPEAN COMPETITIVENESS

The EU must take the lead in stabilising and reinforcing the multilateral legal order, with the United Nations (UN) at its core. Respect for the UN Charter principles, in particular sovereignty, territorial integrity, political independence and self-determination are central to this. In that light, the EU must continue to be a leader in conflict prevention.

Flanders considers it important that the EU builds international partnerships with an open mind. It is not an option for the EU to fold back on itself in response to protectionism in some parts of the world and disrupted trade flows. Open economies like Flanders have no interest in isolating themselves from the world. More than ever, new alliances must be forged. All this must be done within the multilateral framework of the World Trade Organisation.

In this context, the EU must remain committed to concluding new, ambitious, open, fair and sustainable free trade agreements. To that end, the EU must step up efforts to open up additional markets and supply lines for our businesses in order to also reduce our strategic dependency and strengthen Europe's competitiveness. Flanders ensures respect for human rights in free trade agreements and the social and environmental standards currently applied by the European Commission. Flanders and the EU must promote corporate social responsibility.

In our trade relations with third countries, the EU must devote renewed attention to agreements that guarantee access to advanced green and digital technologies and critical raw materials.

In addition, the EU must be mindful of maintaining a level playing field and protecting against unfair competition from outside the EU. Pending a global level playing field at the World Trade Organisation level, we are enforcing the level playing field more strongly. Specifically for agri-food products, we advocate applying the same standards within European trade policy as those used within the European Union. Generally speaking,

it is important that products imported into the EU comply with the applicable European standards, including those regarding product standardisation and food safety. The Government of Flanders therefore supports a stronger commitment to monitoring and enforcing the European single market. Stronger cooperation between Member States' customs services, food safety agencies and the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) is recommended. Distortions of the level playing field by third countries through suppressed demand or subsidised competition must be addressed through the (trade) protection instruments available to that end. We ask the EU to focus increasingly on reciprocity in trade relations, in terms of both market access and mutual recognition agreements on production standards. Trading must be fair at all times.

The risks which the European Commission cites in its Economic Security Strategy are undeniably part of to-day's economic and geopolitical era. Responding to those risks is distinctly part of the tools used by certain geopolitical actors. There is no doubt that Flanders, too, must raise awareness of those risks and will play a role in addressing them. The latter not least because our economy is founded on knowledge-intensive sectors, foreign investments and international trade flows. It is therefore essential to always strike a good balance between promoting our economic interests, on the one hand, and protecting them, on the other. For Flanders, it is important that new initiatives are not always or not unilaterally shaped from the prism of economic security.

Certain partners deserve special attention. The United Kingdom (UK) is an important partner for Flanders economically, historically, culturally and scientifically. Despite the fact that Brexit remains a reality that brings challenges, we are looking ahead. Flanders wants the EU to continue its constructive dialogue with the UK so as to strengthen cooperation again while respecting the agreements made, with a focus on trade, energy, research, student mobility and fisheries. The US also remains an important partner, despite the challenging and strained relationship. This uncertainty is all the more reason for the EU to diversify its partnerships with partners across all continents.



# Priority: a strong commitment to defence (industry)



# A STRONGER SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY FOCUSED ON R&D&I, INDUSTRY AND RESILIENCE

'Defence and public security' has become a priority within the EU. This is reflected in the substantial increase in EU Member States' defence budgets and the EU's enhanced commitment to crisis preparedness and defence readiness. These developments translate into various strategies, initiatives and projects to strengthen the defence industry, for example, and an increased focus on investment in dual-use infrastructure and military mobility.

The Government of Flanders favours stronger cooperation between EU Member States on defence and security. Flanders advocates the development of a real defence union with a single defence market. In doing so, the EU must take care not to duplicate NATO efforts, but to complement them and create synergies. The defence industry must be given sufficient access to (growth) capital, including by mobilising private capital. Even in a single defence market, (de facto) protectionism must be combated and the level playing field preserved.

It is also vital to create and strengthen ecosystems in which defence, industry and knowledge institutes collaborate on military product innovations. The EU must monitor broad defence needs and capacities and make projections so that targeted policies can be developed and industry and knowledge institutes can respond accordingly. A stronger European Defence Technology Industrial Base (EDTIB) is vital. According to Flanders, the EU must also acknowledge the role of SMEs and knowledge institutes in this. Flanders can contribute to

strengthening the EDTIB based on its federated state powers and areas such as research, development, innovation, technology, economy, industry and export control. It will respond to these defence initiatives by making its policy defence-friendly and strengthening its high-tech security and defence ecosystems. In light of a further strengthening of its defence industry, Flanders is striving for efficient export control that concentrates on real threats and a level playing field for Flemish defence companies. In this context, the European framework will be the frame of reference founded on principles like 'no gold-plating', 'only-once' and 'level playing field'. Flanders continues to argue in favour of a clear, qualitative European framework without moving towards parallel or sector-specific systems alongside already existing European frameworks.

Lastly, Flanders calls for sufficient attention to be paid to the resilience of our democratic society. Authoritarian regimes are pursuing increasingly assertive foreign policies, using a variety of political, economic and military means to advance their interests globally, including in European Neighbourhood countries. In the process, they deliberately deploy disinformation, cyberattacks and other hybrid threats to undermine the stability of democratic societies. Flanders therefore considers it crucial to not only tackle external threats but to also strengthen the EU's internal democratic resilience and that of its citizens. For this reason, Flanders calls on the EU to be vigilant about this and take appropriate measures without affecting the freedom of expression.

### EU ENLARGEMENT BASED ON CLEAR ACCESSION CRITERIA

The geopolitical shifts over the past years have had a profound impact on the EU enlargement policy. Whereas primarily normative objectives – like promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law – used to determine the accession dynamics, today, (geo)political considerations are at least as important. Hence, it is important for Flanders to maintain good relations with candidate countries. We also want to strengthen cooperation with countries on the EU's eastern and southern fringes to address common challenges. That is why we are committed to good neighbourhood policy. There is also an aim to deepen the strategic partnership with Türkiye.

Flanders stresses that further EU enlargement is only possible on the basis of a fair and transparent accession process rooted in the Copenhagen criteria, which are the fundamental conditions that candidate countries must meet. Therefore, accession must be based on individual progress and merits. The Copenhagen criteria must be strictly applied, and there can be no fast-track procedure. At the same time, potential enlargements must always take into account absorption capacity limits. The EU must be able to prepare for future enlargements. Internal reforms that strengthen the Union's functioning and decision-making are necessary in the context of possible future enlargements; otherwise, a larger EU risks losing effectiveness.

Lastly, Flanders argues in favour of a simplified and accelerated accession procedure – a so-called internal enlargement – for federated states that democratically and legitimately secede from existing EU Member States. This will perpetuate the commitment to European values and structures in a credible manner. However, European law currently does not contain any specific legal procedure that allows for this internal enlargement.

# **VALUES IN EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY**

Flanders has the ambition to contribute actively to the achievement of Europe's foreign policy goals. To that end, it pursues a value-driven and solidarity-based foreign policy that furthers peace, security and prosperity elsewhere in the world. In doing so, Flanders stresses the need to focus on spearheads like human rights, such as the fight against the death penalty and torture and the protection of human rights defenders, as well as the right to peaceful and political protest in third countries. The focus on a free and pluralistic press, and freedom of (artistic) expression are also of great importance in this context.

Flanders expects the EU to take an active role on the world stage. Not by pointing fingers, but through mediation, active dialogue and leveraging its economic strength for mutually reinforcing partnerships and development. The EU must increasingly position itself as a geopolitical actor in bilateral relations and on multilateral forums. The European External Action Service and EU delegations abroad are key actors in this. Again, the Government of Flanders is in favour of strengthening cooperation and creating synergies between diplomatic delegations of the EU, on the one hand, and its Member States and regions abroad, on the other.

Flanders expects the EU to fulfil an active and ambitious role in its development cooperation, with specific attention to partnerships that contribute to stability, peace and security and the promotion of human rights and democracy. Flanders calls on the EU to intensify its relations and cooperation with partner countries in areas such as migration, trade, economy and humanitarian aid. In doing so, it is vital that the EU contributes to inclusive solutions in crisis situations and backs political processes aimed at sustainable transition.

# 1.6 An efficient Union that respects institutional diversity



# Priority: added value, efficiency and subsidiarity to guide EU actions



# FOCUS, ADDED VALUE, EFFICIENCY AND IMPACT TO GUIDE EU INSTITUTIONS

The EU must focus on the competences enshrined in the treaties and where it can add true value. It is the policy level par excellence to address challenges that are too big for one federated state or country, or are by definition cross-border. If the EU can pursue a more effective policy than each Member State individually, its action is justified.

Efficiency and result orientation must be central, with a strong focus on spending resources efficiently and avoiding administrative burdens. This applies to new regulatory initiatives as well as EU budget spending. Before developing new regulation, the existing package and its impact must be reviewed. Sometimes it is better to adapt existing rules than to additionally impose new ones. Even for new expenditures, the Government of Flanders expects the European Commission, before tabling any new proposals, to conduct a thorough and data-driven assessment of the remaining budgetary margins, the scope for further efficiency gains and the extent to which the EU institutions themselves will cut their coat according to their cloth.

# A MULTILAYERED UNION THAT EMBRACES INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY IN THE MEMBER STATES

Flanders has much to gain from a strong and democratically supported EU that remains true to its motto 'united in diversity'. The European institutions must continue to embrace, respect, protect and promote linguistic and cultural diversity in the EU as a strength.

The Government of Flanders is convinced that federated states are ideally suited to build the crucial bridge between citizens and the European policy level. After all, federated states are sufficiently close to citizens to be able to properly assess the policy initiatives to which the EU can add value, and can offer experiences and insights for them that make the actions feasible. It is therefore essential that the EU's institutional balance continues to be respected. The Union must not want to replace the other levels of government that are often closer to citizens, but instead demonstrate its added value in the areas attributed to it by the treaties.

The EU must take due account of the role of federated states and regions with legislative powers in the Member States. Recent crises have reinforced the centralisation trend within certain sections of the European Commission. For instance, Member States are increasingly required to use a single point of contact in their relations with the European Commission or are forced to work out one single plan, even if this detracts from the institutional reality and applicable division of powers, despite the fact that most EU Member States have a federalised or decentralised state structure. Federated states like Flanders should have a voice in the EU not just because they have far-reaching powers but also because they ensure that policy objectives are actually achieved. In addition, they transpose and implement EU regulations within their powers and subsequently know the challenges involved. Moreover, they are the largest recipients of EU funds, which means they have a wealth of experience in managing and implementing EU funds and programmes.

Flanders therefore calls on the EU to continue to respect each Member State's institutional individuality, as stipulated in Article 4(2) of the Union Treaty. In doing so, the EU must involve federated states as fully-fledged partners in the development and implementation of policy measures, in line with the powers assigned to them. According to Flanders, European policy should allow for a differentiated approach to achieving EU goals. The European Union must not become a superstate. For example, Flanders argues in favour of the EU taking into account the unique characteristics of each Member State and federated state throughout the decision-making process, such as population density, available space and the extent of industrialisation, specifically the presence of energy-intensive industries.

This is also an important principle in the context of EU economic governance. After all, Flanders should be able to flesh out its own fiscal and socioeconomic policies. For this reason, Flanders requests that the EU separately review Flanders's policy, budgetary and operational programmes and break down the country-specific recommendations under the European Semester to federated state level to the maximum extent possible. More use should also be made of regional statistics and indicators.

Flanders is a very specific region with a high population density. This requires policies that leave room for the region's individuality. With a view to achieving EU goals, European policies must allow for a differentiated approach that heeds the differences between large countries with lots of open space and small, densely populated areas.

### THE PRINCIPLES OF SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY AS COMMON THEMES THROUGHOUT POLICY

The principle of subsidiarity is designed to safeguard the ability of Member States to take decisions and action in areas in which the Union does not have exclusive competence. At the same time, the principle justifies intervention by the Union when the objectives of an action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, but can be better achieved at Union level "by reason of the scale and effects of the proposed action". That principle is enshrined in the European treaties (Article 5 EU Treaty).

Besides subsidiarity, we also put the principle of proportionality at the centre. The EU must always look for the least intrusive and most effective way to achieve its goals without imposing unnecessary rules or excessive burdens on Member States, citizens or businesses. Proportionality means that measures taken by the European Union must not go beyond what is necessary to achieve its goals.

Flanders ensures that the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality are respected in European decision-making. The Commission's legislative activity has steadily increased. This is owing, in part, to various successive challenges identified as crises and to the fact that it is rarely held to account based on those principles. The Government of Flanders will (again) monitor this more closely, but asks the EU institutions to do the same. In the event of future changes to EU treaties, we will devote due attention to subsidiarity but also to strengthening Flanders's role and voice in EU decision-making.



# Priority: better regulation and regulatory burden reduction



# STRIVING FOR BETTER REGULATION AND AVOIDING REGULATORY BURDENS

In the 2019-2024 term, the EU adopted 13,000 new acts<sup>5</sup>, most of which also created new obligations for society and increased the administrative burdens for companies. This hinders our competitiveness and productivity and pushes up consumer prices. Flanders calls on the European Commission to make greater efforts to combat excess regulatory burdens and to check whether existing EU regulations are still effective and consistent. We expect the European Union to avoid unnecessary regulatory burdens and excess regulations when it creates new policy initiatives and regulations as well. In this sense, we are concerned about the multitude of newly announced initiatives by the European Commission and their impact on regulatory burdens. We call on the EU to adjust existing regulations where necessary before resorting to new ones.

Flanders endorses the importance of administrative simplification and welcomes administrative burden reduction. However, it recognises that a distinction must be made between administrative burdens imposed by regulation, on the one hand, and achieving the ambitious and pragmatic objectives set out in that regulation, on the other. Therefore, reducing regulation must not completely undermine the achievement of such objectives.

Therefore, Flanders advocates creating a predictable European regulatory framework that:

- leaves room within the European legislative process for a sound feasibility and impact analysis, including an SME and competitiveness test;
- adopts the 'fit for purpose' principle, with the Commission systematically reviewing whether regulation is still adequate within the broader framework of EU objectives;
- applies the 'one in, one out' principle;
- evaluates and monitors targets in EU regulations, and adjusts them whenever necessary (see above, 1.4);
- uniformly implements, applies and enforces EU regulations within the single market;
- applies the 'no gold-plating' principle across EU Member States to avoid fragmentation and incoherence;
- applies the 'once only' and 'think small first' principles to reduce the cumulative burdens on businesses;
- applies the innovation principle to promote regulations and policies that are smart, forward-looking and designed to stimulate innovation activities;
- prioritises infringement proceedings that deal with the most significant and serious breaches of the single market;
- lets the Member States be guided by the Commission, whenever necessary and relevant, to support them in the transposition and implementation of European rules.

A good regulatory framework may also involve deciding not to introduce new rules. Flanders requests that the European Commission always choose the most appropriate instrument for the intended purpose (carrots versus sticks).

<sup>5</sup> The EU adopted 13,000 acts, including 515 ordinary legislative acts, 2,431 other legislative acts, 954 delegated acts, 5,713 implementing acts and 3,442 other acts. Draghi Report, The Future of European Competitiveness, Part B, p. 310.

# INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND DECISION-MAKING

The Government of Flanders sees opportunities to improve the institutional framework and decision-making within the current treaties. Before considering any treaty changes, we must try to exhaust all the options already provided for in the treaties. In the face of the challenges for the EU, it is not desirable to plunge into years of negotiations, given the substantial focus and capacity such a process requires. The EU and its Member States need this focus and capacity to strengthen Europeans' prosperity. Internal reforms must also be prepared in light of the accession perspective offered to candidate countries.

According to Flanders, this should involve:

- reorienting the EU budget towards the priorities but also towards the possible accession of candidate countries:
- restoring the institutional balance in favour of the Council and the European Parliament. Currently, the European Commission holds too much power;
- making adjustments to decision-making: an extension of qualified majority decision-making may be considered in specific cases. After all, this possibility is already provided for in the treaties. The Government of Flanders sees an opportunity to do so in the implementing decisions and sanctions of the Common Foreign Policy, provided the strategic framework and decisions in principle are decided unanimously

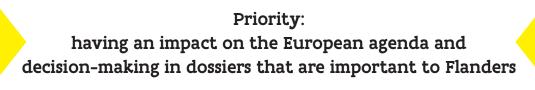
<sup>6</sup> See Position: The Government of Flanders's key priorities regarding the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2027, VR 2025 0404 MED.0105.

# 2 ROLE OF FLANDERS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

Decisions taken at the European level have a major impact on Flanders. The Flemish public administration and the citizens, businesses and civil society of Flanders feel that impact every day. It can be very direct and concrete through EU regulations and obligations, or rather indirect through European budgetary agreements for example. Moreover, the largest share of EU funds in Belgium goes to the federated states.

Flanders benefits from a decisive Union that offers added value for Flemish citizens and businesses, is built from the bottom up and takes Flanders's interests fully into account. It is therefore essential that Flanders co-decides the EU's agenda and direction, making sure the agenda reflects Flanders's policy vision and core interests, and that it pursues a proactive and effective European policy.

# 2.1 Making Flanders's voice heard at the EU level



From January to June 2024, Belgium held the EU presidency, in which Flanders also played an important role. Despite the complex nature of cooperation within Belgium, Flanders showed strong chairmanship and successfully completed several negotiations.

# (PRO)ACTIVE STATEMENT OF POSITION ON THE EU AGENDA

Flanders aims to identify its key interests at the earliest possible stage of the European regulatory process in order to timely raise them at the official, diplomatic and political levels. As a result, Flanders plays an active role within EU policy development and regulation and seeks to make its mark at each stage of the policy cycle.

Every year, the European Commission publishes a work programme that contains the topics it will focus on during that year. Each time, the Flemish public administration thoroughly analyses this work programme. The Government of Flanders annually determines the priority dossiers on which it wants to have an additional and (pro)active impact. The stakeholders of the Flemish public administration are always consulted when these priorities are set.

Politically supported position papers are drawn up for the most important EU dossiers. These papers offer negotiators and administrations sufficient guidance to fulfil their tasks and to timely and actively publicise Flanders's positions within Belgium and the EU. When determining its positions, Flanders also engages in enhanced cooperation with civil society. To that end, the Flemish public administration organises (strategic) consultations.

Flanders is the only federated state in the EU to have drawn up its own reform programme under the European Semester for the 2011-2024 period. The Flemish Reform Programme was delivered directly to the European institutions and annexed to Belgium's National Reform Programme. As part of the new economic governance, Flanders has prepared a contribution to the national medium-term fiscal structural plan and will also prepare one for the annual progress reports. By doing so, Flanders continues to closely follow up on the European Semester.

# LEVERS FOR POLICY INFLUENCE

As soon as Flanders has identified its interests and/or determined its positions, it is key to feed them into the decision-making process as well as possible and to make Flanders's voice heard at the EU level. This is done both directly and indirectly.

The direct contacts are diverse. The first lever Flanders has to that end is the Delegation of Flanders to the EU, which advocates Flanders's interests in the European institutions and is part of the Permanent Representation (the Embassy) of Belgium to the European Union. The Delegation of Flanders to the EU and its attachés keep their finger on the pulse of the European agenda and encourage Government of Flanders ministers to maximise European contacts and participation in European-level meetings.

Flanders also wants to focus more on the underlying structures, as this is where important (technical) decisions are taken. In the coming years, Flanders intends to not only closely follow up on committee procedures ('delegated acts' and 'implementing measures') but to also actively represent Belgium in committees and expert groups pertaining to Flemish powers. These committees play an increasingly important role in European decision-making.

The second important lever is the individual contacts of the Government of Flanders members. These contacts can take place within the framework of Belgium's official representation on the Council in accordance with the Cooperation Agreement "European Union". This agreement governs both the statement of positions (see below) and the representation on the EU Council of Ministers in accordance with the internal division of powers within Belgium that is extended to foreign policy (in foro interno, in foro externo). It created a division into categories with corresponding agreements on representation. A rotation system is agreed between the federated states for those categories for which they can act as a representative. This rotation system allows Flemish ministers to represent Belgium on the Council. Such a cooperation agreement, with all governments co-deciding and representing the Member State on an equal footing in accordance with the internal division of competences, is entirely unique in the EU. The Government of Flanders attaches great importance to this and makes every effort to participate in formal and informal Council meetings. It also uses them to establish contacts with other Member States and senior and political representatives of EU institutions. However, they can also establish contacts of their own outside the Council arena. It is the Government of Flanders's desire and ambition to intensify contacts with the EU institutions, and the European Commissioners in particular. These contacts serve to put Flanders's perspectives, interests and best practices on the radar.

Flanders has an impact on Belgium's statement of position even when no Flemish minister participates in the Council. In fact, the Cooperation Agreement "European Union" also stipulates that coordination must take place before each Council session. Flanders always takes an active role in this with a position that has been coordinated within Flanders. This is thus the main lever for our more indirect impact on policy.

This practice does not alter the fact that the Cooperation Agreement "European Union" needs to be urgently reviewed and aligned with the constitutional, European and international reality.

The Flemish Parliament is also committed to EU policy. It has an active Committee on Foreign Policy, European Affairs and International Cooperation. In addition, it established the 'Infopunt Europa' (Europe Information Centre) to strengthen ties between the Flemish Parliament and European decision-making. The Europe Information Centre supports Members of Parliament in checking and supervising the Government of Flanders's EU policy. Members of the Flemish Parliament who want to carry out subsidiarity tests of European legislation or initiate a political dialogue with the European Commission on the content of European legislation can contact the Europe Information Centre.

### **OUTREACH, ALLIANCE BUILDING AND NETWORKING**

We are strengthening our outreach to various other actors to defend our interests and build alliances. We are intensifying the direct ties with the European Commission at various levels. We are reinforcing the relationship

with Flemish Members of the European Parliament. We are further strengthening our contacts with other Member States and regions. Flanders works closely together, specifically with strong European regions, such as the Basque Country and North Rhine-Westphalia. Participation in European networks is key in this context. These collaborations are deliberately embedded in Flanders's (pro)active EU policy and will be extended in the future.

The Flemish public administration pursues strategic secondments of civil servants to the European Commission who, because of their expertise, temporarily follow up on important dossiers as seconded national experts or national experts in professional training. This offers additional opportunities for direct connections between Flanders and the EU.

We are also pursuing wider networking with Flemish people in EU institutions. The Delegation of Flanders to the EU is building that network as an umbrella concept that can be called and built upon in various arrangements.

# 2.2 Transposition and implementation of EU regulation

By adopting a more proactive approach and having an impact on European decision-making throughout the policy cycle, we ensure that EU rules are increasingly aligned with the reality in Flanders and are easier to implement. In doing so, the Government of Flanders applies the 'no gold-plating' principle in its policies to retain the competitive position of Flemish companies, including SMEs. The Flemish public administration itself does not set higher standards, goals or norms when transposing European or other international regulations into Flemish regulations so as not to undermine Flanders's economy and competitive position. In addition, the administration pursues a level playing field in the transposition and implementation, taking Flanders's current interests and individuality and the principle of subsidiarity into account.

# 2.3 Strengthening the EU reflex in Flanders

Flanders aims to be transparent about its EU policy. European developments of relevance to Flanders are reported, and these reports are disseminated to stakeholders. The Government of Flanders and the Delegation of Flanders to the European Union are always available for debriefing sessions in the competent Flemish Parliament Committee following each European Council of Ministers' meeting that a Flemish minister attended. The Government of Flanders regularly keeps its finger on the pulse through the Monthly Communication on Developments in the EU Council of Ministers. Every six months, the Minister-President informs the Government of Flanders about ministerial meetings in the European and multilateral contexts, in which Flanders can play a role.

The Liaison Agency Flanders-Europe (VLEVA) fulfils a key role in the follow-up of EU policies. As a bridge between the EU and Flemish local authorities, civil society and the Flemish public administration, VLEVA ensures the smooth and proactive flow of information and knowledge-sharing. The Flemish public administration has a cooperation agreement with VLEVA that defines four core tasks. VLEVA is encouraged to remain fully committed to these core tasks, which feed into Flanders's EU policy. VLEVA and the Flemish public administration will further integrate cooperation.

The Government of Flanders creates a solid EU reflex within the Flemish public administration by providing training to civil servants. This training, organised within the framework of the 2024 Belgian EU Presidency, is being continued. It will allow Flemish civil servants to broaden their practical and targeted knowledge and gain experience in developing a broad network within the EU administration. In doing so, they can better respond to EU decision-making. In addition, those who are not professionally engaged in it on a daily basis can also more easily flag their concerns to their colleagues, for example, in the context of implementing EU rules (see above, 2.2).

Influencing policy is important, but so is capitalising on opportunities in the EU context. This can be done, for instance, by promoting good practices in Flanders and participating in calls for technical assistance (for instance, within the framework of the Technical Support Instrument). Responding to EU financing is also vital to really use the EU as a lever for Flanders.

Lastly, the EU should not just be of interest to the limited number of people in Flanders who are professionally engaged with it. Given its broad impact, it is also essential to publicise this to a wider target audience and in government communications



# COLOPHON

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# **NOTES**

