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**EUROPE AT A CROSSROADS:
COMPETITIVENESS, CONTROL AND CREDIBILITY**

March exposed the fault lines shaping the EU's direction. EU leaders pushed forward an ambitious "One Europe, One Market" agenda to boost growth and strategic autonomy, even as political divisions and structural barriers cast doubt on its implementation. At the same time, environmental debates revealed that, under economic pressure, the EU is increasingly willing to dilute its own ambitions in favour of competitiveness and industrial protection.

Beyond markets and industry, questions of voice and power came into sharper focus. While initiatives like Your Europe, Your Say! aim to bring young people closer to policymaking, a key question remains: how much influence do such participatory spaces actually have on EU decision-making? Meanwhile, a controversial regulation expanding detention and deportation in migration policy poses a serious threat to the EU's human rights commitments, and could lead to more coercive enforcement measures.

These developments point to a broader shift in how priorities are set under pressure. As the EU navigates mounting internal and external constraints, whose interests are being prioritised, and at what cost?





SINGLE MARKET & COMPETITIVENESS

EU LEADERS FORGE “ONE MARKET” PATH TO BOOST COMPETITIVENESS

Contribution by Elpida Gkoutzoupa

The European Union has launched the “One Europe, One Market” agenda to boost competitiveness, reduce bureaucracy, and strengthen strategic autonomy, with implementation targeted for 2026–2027. A key priority is deepening the single market by removing long-standing barriers and simplifying cross-border activities, although progress has historically been slow.

The agenda also focuses on reducing administrative burdens, supporting innovation and SMEs, and advancing regulatory simplification. Energy policy and industrial renewal are central, with measures aimed at lowering energy costs, increasing investment, and reducing external dependencies. At the same time, the EU seeks to mobilise investment through a more integrated financial system and to monitor progress via the European Semester.

Despite its ambitious scope, the success of the agenda will depend on effective coordination among member states, as ongoing divisions and differing national priorities may complicate its implementation.



YOUTH & EDUCATION CIVIC SPACE



YEYS 2026: GIVING YOUNG EUROPEANS A VOICE IN DECISION-MAKING

Contribution by Foteini Katsampani

The 2026 edition of Your Europe, Your Say! (YEYS), organised by the European Economic and Social Committee, brought together young people from across Europe in Brussels on 19–20 March to discuss key societal challenges and contribute to EU policymaking. Under the theme “Meaningful Connections, Active Participation and Democratic Engagement,” participants engaged in workshops and debates on issues including social inclusion, climate action, digital transformation, and youth wellbeing.

The event gathered representatives from 37 secondary schools and 43 individually selected participants from EU Member States, candidate countries, and the UK. Topics included housing affordability, digital rights, and youth representation as pressing concerns. Participants ultimately adopted five core recommendations, calling for stronger action on the housing crisis, improved digital literacy and privacy protections, greater youth participation in decision-making, enhanced support for young entrepreneurs, and increased engagement with EU affairs.

Since its launch in 2010, YEYS has aimed to connect young people with EU institutions, with its recommendations feeding into broader policy discussions, including the upcoming EU Youth Strategy in 2027. While initiatives like YEYS create valuable spaces for dialogue and cross-border exchange, questions remain about how effectively youth input translates into concrete policy outcomes.



ENVIRONMENT

EU ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY BULLETIN: KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN MARCH 2026

Contribution by Afroditë Gkortsou

March 2026 turned out to be a defining month for environmental policy in the European Union.

First, environment ministers debated proposed changes to CO₂ standards for cars and vans, with the European Commission signalling greater flexibility. A revised 90% emissions reduction target by 2035, down from the original 100%, alongside incentives for alternative fuels and EU-based production, reflected increasing concern for industrial competitiveness and jobs.

Second, momentum grew in March toward restricting PFAS “forever chemicals,” as the European Chemicals Agency’s Risk Assessment Committee confirmed their serious risks to human health and the environment. However, a parallel draft opinion from the Socio-Economic Analysis Committee highlighted the potential costs of a blanket ban, particularly for industries, including clean technologies, where alternatives remain limited.

Third, the entry into force of the Omnibus I Directive introduced substantial rollbacks in corporate sustainability rules. Framed as simplification, the changes reduce reporting and due diligence obligations for many companies, prompting criticism from environmental groups over weakened transparency and accountability.

Taken together, March proved to be a moment of recalibration, pushing the EU to confront the gap between its climate rhetoric and the messy reality of politics, economics, and public pressure.



MIGRATION & ASYLUM

TOWARD DETENTION AND DEPORTATION: HOW THE RETURN REGULATION IS SHAPING IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT

Contribution by Emma O'Flaherty

In March 2026, the European Parliament voted to open negotiations on the controversial Return Regulation, signalling a further shift toward stricter and more punitive EU migration enforcement. The proposal would allow Member States to deport people with no right to stay to third countries, including places they have no prior connection to, through the use of offshore detention centres, or “return hubs.”

Supported by a coalition of mainstream conservatives and far-right groups, the vote reflects a broader move toward deterrence-driven migration policies under the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum. Critics, including over 200 NGOs, warn that the regulation risks normalising expanded detention, forced returns, and intrusive surveillance practices, raising serious concerns for fundamental rights.

The proposal also grants authorities increased powers to identify and detain individuals, with the possibility of detention lasting up to two years and expanded entry bans. Combined with the externalisation of detention, these measures have drawn comparisons to more punitive enforcement models, with opponents warning of reduced oversight and heightened risks of abuse.

As negotiations with the Council move forward, the Return Regulation is emerging as a defining test of the EU's commitment to human rights, highlighting the growing tension between its punitive migration regime and the bloc's legal and ethical obligations.



POLICY MONITORING CORNER

Contribution by Foteini Katsampani

DIGITAL RIGHTS

13 March 2026

The Council of the EU agreed on its position to streamline artificial intelligence rules under the “Omnibus VII” simplification package. The proposal aims to reduce regulatory fragmentation and facilitate implementation of the AI Act.

Source: Council of the European Union (2026), Press Release, 13 March 2026
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/13/council-agrees-position-to-streamline-rules-on-artificial-intelligence/>

MIGRATION

5 March 2026

EU Justice and Home Affairs ministers discussed strengthening return procedures and cooperation with third countries as part of the implementation of the Migration and Asylum Pact.

Source: Council of the European Union (2026), Justice and Home Affairs Council, 5 March 2026
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/jha/2026/03/05/>

26 March 2026

The European Parliament backed proposals for migration “return hubs”. Civil society organisations raised concerns about safeguards for fundamental rights.

Source: The Guardian (2026), 26 March 2026
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/mar/26/meps-back-plans-for-return-hubs-raising-fears-of-human-rights-black-holes>

ENVIRONMENT

March 2026

EU policymakers continued discussions on the 2040 climate target under the European Climate Law. Proposals include a potential 90% emissions reduction goal, while observers note the importance of strong implementation mechanisms.

Source: European Commission (2026)
<https://climate.ec.europa.eu>



POLICY MONITORING CORNER

Contribution by Foteini Katsampani

SINGLE MARKET AND COMPETITIVENESS

19 March 2026

EU leaders launched the “One Europe, One Market” agenda aimed at strengthening competitiveness, reducing regulatory fragmentation and advancing strategic autonomy.

Source: European Council (2026), European Council Conclusions, 19 March 2026
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2026/03/19/>

SOCIAL AFFAIRS

5 March 2026

The European Commission reported progress on the “Union of Skills” initiative to address labour shortages and support the green and digital transition.

Source: European Commission (2026), 5 March 2026
https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/union-skills-one-year-concrete-action-keep-europe-competitive-2026-03-05_en

RULE OF LAW

30 March 2026

A civil society report warned about rule-of-law deterioration in several EU Member States, including concerns over judicial independence and media freedom.

Source: The Guardian (2026), 30 March 2026
<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2026/mar/30/five-eu-governments-consistently-dismantle-rule-of-law-finds-civil-liberties-union-for-europe>