



EUROPEAN FREE TRADE ASSOCIATION

CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE

Ref. 24-2438

13 December 2024

Work Programme 2025

I Introduction

1. The main objectives of the EFTA Consultative Committee (EFTA CC) are threefold:
 - 1) To actively shape EFTA and EEA agendas, and influence EFTA and EEA-related policies in the areas that affect the social partners;
 - 2) To be a forum for dialogue among social partners from all EFTA countries, and a link to social partners in the EU Member States and EU accession countries;
 - 3) To raise awareness of the social, economic and environmental aspects of EFTA's free trade agreements (FTAs) and the EEA Agreement, and the role of the social partners.
2. To achieve these objectives, the EFTA CC will organise various activities throughout the year. These activities may take the form of meetings in person, virtual meetings or the issuance of EFTA CC opinions or resolutions based on the many policy areas mentioned in the Work Programme. The Work Programme is a flexible working document and can be adapted to new developments in EFTA and the EU. The EFTA social partners will continue to work closely with EFTA parliamentarians in the EFTA Parliamentary Committee (EFTA PC) to achieve these goals.
3. The EFTA social partners also share a close working relationship with the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC). At least one meeting will be organised with EU counterparts in 2025. Through close cooperation between the EFTA CC and bodies of the EESC, members of the Consultative Committee may participate in relevant meetings of the EESC, and vice versa, where mutual benefits can be derived therefrom, especially by avoiding the duplication of work in the two committees as described in the EFTA CC Rules of Procedure.
4. The Icelandic Workers will chair the EFTA CC in 2025, as set out in the Note on the Rotation System of the EFTA Consultative Committee Chair and Bureau 2024–2029, which was adopted at the meeting of the Committee on 21 November 2023.

II List of priorities in 2025

a. European Economic Area

New EU leadership and its implications for the economic and social policy field

With the EU parliamentary elections in June 2024, the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen as President of the European Commission in July, and the European Parliament hearings of the Commissioners-designate in November, summer and autumn 2024 marked a turning point towards new leadership in the European Union. This change of leadership will have a direct impact on the EEA EFTA States, which are part of the Internal Market through the EEA Agreement, as well as on Switzerland, which has a series of bilateral agreements with the EU.

The EFTA CC will follow the implications of this change in leadership closely for the economic and social policy field and other related areas. Key documents in this regard are the [Political Guidelines](#) of the incoming Commission President (July 2024), the [Letta report](#) (April 2024), the [Draghi report](#) (September 2024), the [Mission Letters](#) to the Commissioners-designate (September 2024) and the forthcoming 2025 Work Programme of the European Commission. The following announced/planned initiatives are of particular interest to the EFTA CC:

- Key initiatives in the industrial policy field, such as the Clean Industrial Deal, the Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act, the Single Market Barriers Prevention Act and the Circular Economy Act;
- Key initiatives in the employment and social policy field, such as the announced Action Plan on the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the new Pact for European Social Dialogue, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, the European Affordable Housing Plan, initiatives looking at how digitalisation and artificial intelligence are impacting the world of work and people's mental health, and the announced proposal to introduce a right to disconnect;
- Initiatives aimed at supporting “fair wages, good working conditions, training and fair job transitions for workers and self-employed people, notably by increasing collective bargaining coverage”;¹
- Actions within the education and skills field, such as the establishment of a “Union of Skills”, the Skills Portability Initiative, the EU Teachers Agenda and the European Schools Alliance.

The EFTA CC will work closely with the EU social partners (through the [EEA Consultative Committee](#)), with the EFTA parliamentarians and with the EFTA Member States to remind the EU side that a large part of the upcoming EU legislation will have a direct impact on the EEA EFTA States and on Switzerland. They will stand in support of all initiatives aimed at strengthening collective bargaining and the role of social partners in Europe.

¹ [Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029](#), p. 18.

Cross-sectoral EU initiatives and the EEA

Over the last years – as became visible in the Draghi and Letta reports as well as in von der Leyen’s Political Guidelines – the EU’s understanding of the Internal Market has evolved considerably. The Internal Market has now become a tool for ensuring Europe’s competitiveness, economic security and resilience. In turn, this has meant that the EU has increasingly employed cross-sectoral political initiatives that transcend Internal Market policies and also relate to trade policy, industrial policy or economic security.

Against this backdrop, in July 2023 the EFTA Standing Committee established a Task Force on Files with Distinctive Horizontal Dimensions, which in July 2024 adopted a [report](#) on “Cross-sectoral EU initiatives: The way ahead for the EEA”. The report considers it essential “that the EEA EFTA States develop a *common understanding* of how to approach files with distinctive horizontal dimensions” and that “holistic assessments” should be carried out of the “economic and political consequences for the EEA EFTA States of non-participation or non-incorporation of the relevant initiatives”.² It provides a set of recommendations both to the EEA EFTA States and to the EFTA institutions, including actively monitoring the development of the Internal Market within the EU from an early stage, and conducting broad-based assessments of the implications of both incorporation and non-incorporation of cross-sectoral acts.

The EFTA CC has already been following a range of files with a horizontal dimension, including the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDD) and the Forced Labour Regulation. Given its expertise on the social and economic aspects of the EEA and its role as an EFTA advisory body to ensure the democratic accountability and legitimacy of the EEA, the EFTA CC considers that – together with the EFTA PC – it should be closely consulted on the further development and implementation of the recommendations made in the report, and that it should play a central role in providing a truly “horizontal assessment” of cross-sectoral acts. This is also in line with the report itself, which recommends “facilitating discussions and assessment among relevant decision makers and *stakeholders* on strategic questions”.

The EFTA CC will therefore monitor the implementation of the report and actively engage in discussions with members of the Task Force and decision makers of the EEA EFTA States. It will also continue to follow specific cross-sectoral acts closely, such as CBAM, the CSDD and the Forced Labour Regulation. Depending on developments in the report’s recommendations, it reserves the option of writing an EFTA CC opinion.

Swift incorporation of EU legal acts into the EEA Agreement

In its [resolution](#) on “30 years of EEA cooperation” the EEA Consultative Committee “urges the EEA EFTA States to reduce their backlog of legal acts awaiting incorporation into the EEA Agreement, in order to ensure legal certainty for economic operators and citizens and homogeneity across the entire EEA”. Keeping pace with evolving EU regulations and directives poses a constant challenge. The EEA EFTA States should do all in their power to keep up with

² [Cross-sectoral EU initiatives: The way ahead for the EEA](#), Report by the Task Force on Files with Distinctive Horizontal Dimensions, p. 3.

legislative developments in the EU by lowering the number of legal acts awaiting incorporation into the Agreement.

With new EU leadership coming into office, new legislative proposals are expected. One priority for 2025 will be to monitor new proposals for legislative acts, in order to identify the EEA EFTA States' interests at an early stage. The aim should be to contribute to their national debates and avoid unnecessary delays at a later stage, after the EU acts have been adopted.

b. Trade relations / third-country relations

Monitoring of ongoing third-country processes

Together with the EFTA PC, the EFTA CC actively monitors and scrutinises the EFTA countries' activities/ progress in relation to various ongoing processes with current and potential future trade partners. In 2025, priority will be given to:

- *Third-country relations in Asia and the Pacific:* The EFTA CC will closely follow ongoing processes / the finalisation of negotiations with Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam (provided they have not already been concluded in 2024). Among other activities, the EFTA CC Chair and Vice Chair in 2025 will accompany the EFTA PC on a third-country visit to Malaysia in April 2025. The objective of the visit will be to lend support to the ongoing negotiations, to better understand the political realities and economic dynamics of Malaysia, and to get acquainted with the opportunities and challenges of a future FTA. EFTA CC observers will aim to meet with trade unions, business representatives and civil society to be able to examine all aspects and implications of a future FTA.
- *Third-country relations with the Americas:* The EFTA CC will follow prospects for concluding negotiations with Mercosur following the finalisation of negotiations between the EU and Mercosur. It will closely monitor cooperation with the United States following the November 2024 elections and the impact of the new US leadership on trade relations, including the announcement to raise tariffs on European imports and the EU's reaction to this. Given the finalisation of the modernisation of the EU–Mexico Global Agreement, as well as the June 2024 elections in Mexico, the EFTA CC also has a strong interest in a potential relaunch of the modernisation process of the EFTA–Mexico FTA.
- *Third-country relations in Europe:* The EFTA CC will follow and push for the swift entry into force of the renegotiated FTA with Ukraine.

Trade and sustainability

The EFTA CC believes that openness to trade and access to international markets must go hand-in-hand with inclusiveness and high-standards for sustainable development. It therefore welcomes the fact that EFTA has in recent years put major emphasis on the issue of trade and sustainable development (TSD) and has itself played a major role in pushing this agenda forward – including through its involvement in the [TSD monitoring mechanism](#) established in 2020. In 2025, the EFTA CC wants to further deepen its focus on sustainability in trade by prioritising the following:

- *Inclusion and development of TSD chapters in EFTA's FTAs:* EFTA has developed model TSD provisions and systematically included these in its FTAs since 2010. The aim is that these provisions should help avoid any negative social or environmental impacts resulting from the FTAs, and to provide a basis to react to such issues should they occur. The EFTA CC will continue to push for comprehensive TSD chapters to be included in FTA negotiations and further developed where needed. The EFTA CC will also closely monitor the issue of UPOV19 / intellectual property rights on seeds in the negotiations with Malaysia.
- *Implementation of TSD chapters:* In 2021, EFTA established a dedicated mechanism for the systematic monitoring of the implementation of TSD provisions in its FTAs. As part of this mechanism, the EFTA advisory bodies have an explicit [mandate](#) to contribute to the so-called “input phase”, i.e. the phase where the Joint Committee established under the FTA collects information on the implementation. In 2025, the EFTA CC will continue to actively use the opportunity to monitor and scrutinise the implementation of TSD chapters in FTAs between EFTA and third countries.
- *Sustainability impact assessments as an effective tool in third-country relations:* On 26 September 2024, EFTA released a sustainability impact assessment (SIA) evaluating the potential sustainability effects of a future FTA with Thailand. Regarding social and environmental considerations, the SIA recommended incorporating comprehensive TSD provisions into the FTA to safeguard environmental standards, labour rights and other human rights in connection with increased trade and economic activity. The EFTA CC is of the opinion that such SIAs are a useful tool for evaluating the possible environmental and social impacts of FTAs and will push for this tool to be effectively used at the early stages of relevant FTA negotiations in the future.

New EU leadership: Linking trade and economic security

Geopolitical developments and new EU leadership are leading to changes in how the EU is conducting its trade policy. The [Mission Letter](#) from Commission President von der Leyen to Commissioner-designate Šefčovič states that while “free and fair trade must continue to drive our prosperity”, it must “also drive down our dependencies and help develop sustainable partnerships around the world for the benefit of consumers and businesses”. EU trade policy should therefore, according to the Mission Letter, focus on “the core objectives of competitiveness, security and sustainability”.³

This “new foreign economic policy” will inevitably also impact the EFTA States. Increasingly, the Internal Market – which the EEA EFTA States participate in through the EEA Agreement, and Switzerland partly through its bilateral agreements with the EU – is being used as a tool for the EU’s foreign economic policy. As mentioned above, the EU is increasingly adopting cross-sectoral political initiatives and packages that often include components relating to the

³ [Mission Letter to Commissioner-designate Maroš Šefčovič](#), p. 5.

Internal Market but also comprise elements of trade policy or economic security.⁴ The EFTA CC will continue to analyse and contribute to this subject from different angles, and will consider issuing an EFTA CC opinion on “the future of trade cooperation in a changed geopolitical context”.

III Implementation and follow-up

This Work Programme for 2025 will be implemented throughout the year, with guidance from the Chair of the EFTA CC and its Bureau. At the last meeting of the year, usually held in December, the Committee will review this document, looking at the progress that has been made throughout the year in addressing the objectives stated in the first chapter. A yearly review report will be drafted by the outgoing Chair with assistance from the EFTA Secretariat, and will be shared with the Committee and made public by the end of the year. The reasoning behind such a review is to further strengthen the execution of the work of the Committee; identify areas for future improvement; and help ensure continuity in the work of the Committee.

⁴ This is dealt with in more detail in the [report](#) by the EFTA Task Force on Files with Distinctive Horizontal Dimensions.



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ANNEX I

Ref. 24-1882

13 December 2024

Draft meeting schedule for 2025

Dates	Place	Meeting
28-29 January 2025	Geneva, Switzerland	EFTA advisory bodies trade seminar Joint meeting with the Committee on Third-Country Relations (TCC) Joint meeting with the EFTA Parliamentary Committee
1 April 2025	Brussels, Belgium	Meeting with the EFTA Standing Committee Seminar with EFTA Working Groups EFTA Consultative Committee meeting EFTA Consultative Committee Bureau
Spring/summer 2025 (tbc)	Tbc	EEA Consultative Committee EEA Consultative Committee Bureau
22-24 June 2025	Tromsø, Norway	<u>Meetings on the margins of the EFTA Ministerial:</u> Joint meeting with EFTA Ministers

		<p>Joint meetings with EFTA Parliamentary Committee</p> <p>EFTA Consultative Committee meeting</p> <p>EFTA Consultative Committee Bureau</p>
17 September 2025, 10.00-12.00	Videoconference	EFTA Consultative Committee
November 2025	Brussels, Belgium	<p><u>Meetings on the margins of the EEA Council:</u></p> <p>Meeting with EEA EFTA Foreign Affairs Ministers</p> <p>Meeting with EFTA Ministerial Chair</p> <p>Joint meeting with EFTA advisory bodies</p> <p>EFTA Consultative Committee meeting</p> <p>EFTA Consultative Committee Bureau</p>
11 December 2025, 10.00-12.00	Videoconference	EFTA Consultative Committee