



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC-VII/024

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OPINION

EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- welcomes the European Commission's EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027;
- endorses the strategic framework's three cross-cutting objectives set by the European Commission for the next five years, namely anticipating and managing change in the post-pandemic world of work during the digital, green and demographic transitions, improving the prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses, and increasing preparedness for potential future health crises;
- recommends, furthermore, that the Commission lose no time in designing and implementing, in cooperation with the social partners, an EU-wide initiative on mental health at work to assess the emerging issues in this area;
- recommends that employers incorporate occupational risk prevention into their business through internal management models, appointing designated workers and in-house prevention services, and that training in prevention be promoted among workers;
- emphasises that the EU Strategic Framework 2021-2027 – with its Vision Zero approach – will require local and regional authorities to address the problems in this area and implement the objectives of the framework directly on the ground;
- considers that by overseeing the implementation of OSH legislation and the process of delivering the OSH objectives, the regions and cities can play a key role in achieving the ambitious goals of the strategy;
- welcomes Vision Zero and its target of zero work-related deaths by 2030; would argue, however, that Vision Zero should also cover workplace accidents and illnesses;
- expects Member States to comply with the ILO recommendation of one labour inspector per 10 000 workers; further stresses the need to strengthen the sanctioning system and the collection and dissemination of data; calls for the Artificial Intelligence Act to include OSH.

Rapporteur

Sergio Caci (IT/EPP), Mayor of Montalto di Castro

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 – Occupational safety and health in a changing world of work
COM(2021) 323 final

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions –
EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027**

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. welcomes the European Commission's EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 (the new EU Strategic Framework), which aims to protect workers' health and reduce work-related deaths by 2030 (the "Vision Zero" approach), while seeking to ensure a safer working environment that is in line with the new needs that are arising particularly (but not only) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considers by the same token that a strategy, and not a strategic framework, would give a stronger political signal with regard to the envisaged goals and proposed actions to attain them;
2. believes that the EU's policy framework on occupational safety and health (OSH) has, to date, undoubtedly led to major improvements in raising OSH standards across the EU. Together with the Vision Zero approach, the framework underlines that the EU's objectives here are heading in the right direction, albeit with a need for greater inclusion of all categories of workers, which is lacking in this proposal;
3. emphasises that the EU does need to play a role here in providing unified strategic direction. This need has been clearly demonstrated both by the studies carried out and by the tangible results achieved over the last few decades. What emerges most clearly from the OSH legislation is that action taken by the EU and the Member States, in conjunction with other players (such as the social partners and various stakeholders at different levels of governance) can have a positive and direct impact on working life when it comes to both health and safety;
4. wholeheartedly endorses the strategic framework's three cross-cutting objectives set by the European Commission for the next five years, namely anticipating and managing change in the post-pandemic world of work during the digital, green and demographic transitions, improving the prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses, and increasing preparedness for potential future health crises;
5. is pleased that in order to achieve its objectives, the Commission intends to revise the Workplace Directive and the Directive on display screen equipment, as well as to update EU rules on hazardous substances in order to combat cancer and reproductive and respiratory diseases, and to update the protection limits for asbestos and lead;
6. recommends, furthermore, that the Commission lose no time in designing and implementing, in cooperation with the social partners, an EU-wide initiative on mental health at work to assess the emerging issues in this area. The initiative must be able to provide inspiration where needed in individual Member States/sectors/workplaces;
7. with regard to the two points above, firmly believes that these measures should apply to all categories of workers, including those currently excluded from the policy framework;

8. highlights the challenge posed by an ageing workforce for health and safety at work. The principle of workplaces adapting to people needs to be respected so that progress can be made towards inclusive working lives for workers of all ages;
9. welcomes the fact that, learning from the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission intends to develop emergency procedures and guidance for rapidly deploying, implementing and monitoring measures in potential future health crises, in close cooperation with public health professionals;
10. regrets that, although all Member States have so far at least partially integrated the letter and spirit of the EU policy framework into their national systems, none of them is actually adhering to it in its entirety. This is due to the fact that some countries failed to review and update their national OSH strategies to fully align them with the EU strategic framework for 2014-2020 owing to poor planning or poor performance on achieving the key objectives, as highlighted by the EU-OSHA, with regard, for example, to the ageing workforce, the simplification of procedures, and more effective and timely enforcement of legislation.

OSH and a culture of prevention

11. points out that the number of accidents at work has decreased over the last forty years as a result of three factors: scientific and technological improvements, OSH legislation and OSH management systems. Accordingly emphasises that throughout the process of designing, adopting and implementing the strategy, the European and national legislator – in cooperation with the social partners – need to refer to a solid culture of prevention as the primary method for achieving the Vision Zero and other objectives, in the common interest of workers and businesses; stresses the importance of social dialogue and the involvement and cooperation of all stakeholders, governments and administrations at European, national, regional and local level, and of employers and workers, in prevention policies;
12. points to a study of the International Social Security Association (ISSA)¹, which finds that investing in a good OSH strategy and in workplace risk prevention can deliver a return for companies of EUR 2.2 for every EUR 1 spent per employee per year - and this is without factoring in the immeasurable loss of working hours, reduced morale in the workplace and the consequent impact on businesses' productivity and competitiveness;
13. agrees with the European Commission that poor adherence to prevention principles also leads to bad publicity for companies affected by workplace accidents, with serious consequences for their reputation and employees' job prospects;

¹ *The return on prevention: Calculating the costs and benefits of investments in occupational safety and health in companies*, ISSA, Geneva, 2011.

14. recommends that employers incorporate occupational risk prevention into their business through internal management models, appointing designated workers and in-house prevention services, and that training in prevention be promoted among workers.

OSH and the green, digital and demographic transition

15. considers that advances in technology are constantly changing the landscape of the workplace. It is therefore a good thing that the EU is putting forward proposals that are in step with technology in the workplace, as set out in the Commission's first objective for the new EU policy framework;
16. considers that while the proposal to establish harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (AI) is a positive move, it should also address the problems that may arise in connection with health and safety in the workplace;
17. agrees with the point made in the White Paper on AI² that workers and employers will be directly affected by the design and use of AI systems in the workplace, and that the involvement of the social partners will be a crucial factor in ensuring a human-centred approach to AI at work;
18. reiterates here a relevant point on OSH made in the CoR's opinion on the *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence – A European Approach to Excellence and Trust*³, that the use of AI technologies is of considerable significance when it comes to working conditions and workers' well-being. In this regard, it echoes the European social partners' call for "data minimisation and transparency along with clear rules on the processing of personal data to limit the risk of intrusive monitoring and misuse of personal data", in order to ensure respect for human dignity;
19. the Committee also reiterates the vital importance of "enabling workers' representatives to address issues related to data, consent, privacy protection and surveillance, linking the collection of data to a concrete and transparent purpose and ensuring transparency when AI systems are used in human-resource procedures"⁴;
20. draws attention to the challenge posed by demographic change for health and safety at work. Policies to promote age management in businesses and organisations and innovative processes to adapt jobs to this situation are needed, taking into account the variety of age groups and the fact that older workers are not a homogeneous group.

² COM(2020) 65 final

³ COR-2020-02014

⁴ Ibid.

Regional and local relevance of the strategy

21. emphasises that the EU Strategic Framework 2021-2027 – with its Vision Zero approach – will require local and regional authorities to address the problems in this area and implement the objectives of the framework directly on the ground, and that they should do this through oversight, training and building a culture of prevention and worker protection, and by working together through the exchange of experience and good practices, and further identifying problems and assessing the solutions best suited to resolving them, followed up by feedback;
22. considers that by overseeing the implementation of OSH legislation and the process of delivering the OSH objectives, the regions and cities can play a key role in achieving the ambitious goals of the strategy;
23. considers that the regions and cities should continue to encourage and provide training and education for labour inspectors, employers and workers to help them adapt to the major work-related changes brought about by the green and digital transition, as well as by the new conditions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ageing workforce;
24. believes that the closest possible cooperation between regional and local authorities and the EU and the relevant national authorities, as well as other cities and regions, coupled with the exchange of experience and good practices will drive progress on OSH and help build a culture of prevention;
25. highlights the importance of research and the sharing of knowledge and best practices at European, national, regional and local level in order to detect and assess new risks and prevent them, on the basis of public authorities working together to develop advanced policies in this area;
26. stresses that proper involvement of regions and cities is needed to further develop the OSH strategy. It is thus essential that they are actively involved in workplace OSH assessments. They must also be able to send feedback to the EU in order to help the EU to establish a clear picture of the situation on the ground for the purposes of putting right issues that arise in the course of the current framework period and helping to shape the next post-2030 strategy;
27. to this end, calls on the Commission to create a dedicated digital tool (e.g. a portal) that complements the EU-OSHA's European survey of enterprises on new and emerging risks (ESENER), to which regions and cities can refer when they consider it appropriate or necessary to provide guidance to the European legislator on health and safety at work.

Final policy recommendations:

28. strongly believes that local and regional authorities, in their capacity as employers, should lead by example when it comes to the full implementation of the measures proposed in the Strategic Framework;

29. reiterates its belief that "public procurement can help prevent environmental and social dumping through the inclusion in the contract award criteria of qualitative, environmental and/or social aspects"⁵. Invites therefore local and regional authorities, when awarding public contracts, to pay particular attention to the working conditions, including health and safety at work, offered by contractors and their subcontracting chains;
30. welcomes Vision Zero and its target of zero work-related deaths by 2030; believes it is important to continue strengthening efforts in the workplace to prevent workplace accidents and illnesses; would argue, however, that Vision Zero should not be limited to deaths, but should also cover workplace accidents and illnesses, as well as risk prevention and elimination, in line with the principles of the Framework Directive⁶;
31. points out that work itself is an important factor in promoting health; takes the view that, in order to maximise the effectiveness of the OSH strategy, it is important to adopt a holistic approach, which addresses the link between a good working environment, mental and physical health, efficiency, quality and the usefulness of an activity; to this end, highlights the benefits of implementing health promotion policies in workplaces and of promoting safe and healthy lifestyles, including aspects such as nutrition and physical activity;
32. endorses the strategic reference framework on violence, harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and welcomes the attention paid to the gender perspective. However, the Committee would prefer the framework to be in line with ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work, which provides a comprehensive definition of violence and harassment and has a broader scope, covering workers and other persons in the world of work⁷;
33. reiterates its approval of the continued progress and three successive updates of the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive; supports the Commission's proposal to revise and expand the substances and exposure limits in the CMD, which have been developed through a well-established process and tripartite cooperation (workers, employers and government representatives) involving all Member States; notes that this tripartite cooperation takes place in the Commission's Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work (ACSH). With this in mind, the Committee eagerly awaits further work to set binding evidence-based and scientifically up-to-date occupational exposure limits covering all 50 priority carcinogens (compared to the current 27) and to include substances toxic to reproduction, and to hazardous medicinal products;
34. supports the inclusion of combined exposure to hazardous chemicals, endocrine disruptors and the revision of the BOELs for respirable crystalline silica in the chemical exposure section of the OSH policy framework;

⁵ COR-2020-02167

⁶ Council Directive of 12 June 1989 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work.

⁷ Articles 1 and 2 of C190 - Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190).

35. points to the need to provide guidance in relation to the European framework on the management of psychosocial risks that goes beyond an individualistic approach that fails to take into account the effects of work organisation on mental health; thus calls on the Commission to continue working with the Member States and regional and local authorities on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work and to explore the need for a communication on these risks in preparation for the presentation of a directive on this subject;
36. expects Member States to comply with the ILO recommendation of one labour inspector per 10 000 workers; further stresses the need to further strengthen the sanctioning system and the collection (by labour inspectorates) and dissemination of data;
37. calls for the Artificial Intelligence Act to include OSH since the studies carried out by individual Member States contain an in-depth assessment of work organisation, as well as physical and mental health and the safety of workers;
38. believes that the Strategic Framework for Health and Safety at work should cover everyone in the world of work; notes that the scope of application of the OSH strategic framework excludes self-employed workers (including atypical workers and platform workers) and believes that the EU initiative on improving the working conditions of platform workers could also include a reference to OSH;
39. stresses the need, therefore, for a thorough revision of this framework, and calls on the European legislator to raise the level of its ambition in this area and develop a longer-term vision;
40. urges the European Commission to review the working conditions for teleworking, covering physical and mental health as well as safety. This should be done in cooperation with the European social partners, who are currently involved in negotiations on digitalisation. This is a matter of urgency given the unprecedented rise of this form of work in "the new normal";
41. welcomes the European Commission's firm recommendation to the Member States to recognise COVID-19 as an occupational disease and reiterates the importance of employers' obligations to ensure decent living and working conditions for mobile and migrant workers, including seasonal workers;
42. welcomes the fact that, through its proposal, the Commission is anticipating the changes in the new world of work that are set to arise from the green transition, as well as the digital transition, but also, more generally, from the prevention of work-related illnesses.

Brussels, 26 January 2022

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Blížkovský

II. PROCEDURE

Title	EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027
Reference	COM(2021) 323 final SWD(2021) 148-28/06/2021 SWD(2021) 149-28/06/2021
Legal basis	Article 307 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Procedural basis	Own-initiative opinion (Rule 41(b)(i) RP)
Date of Council/EP referral Date of Commission letter	
Date of Bureau/President's decision	
Commission responsible	Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)
Rapporteur	Sergio CACI
Analysis	
Discussed in commission	13 December 2021
Date adopted by commission	13 December 2021
Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	Majority
Date adopted in plenary	26 January 2022
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work⁸ – An EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2014-2020⁹ – The European Pillar of Social Rights and Reflection Paper on the social dimension of Europe¹⁰ – A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions¹¹ – Future plan for care workers and care services – local and regional opportunities in the context of a European challenge¹²
Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation	

⁸ CDR 68/2007

⁹ CDR 4330/2014

¹⁰ CDR 3141/2017

¹¹ CDR 2167/2020

¹² CDR 5862/2020