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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations
Subject: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Programme for agile and rapid defence innovation (AGILE)
- *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee*

Delegations will find attached the EESC Opinion on the AGILE proposal. The Opinion, including other linguistic versions, is also available on the following website:

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OPINION

European Economic and Social Committee

Programme for Agile and Rapid Defence Innovation

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the
Programme for agile and rapid defence innovation (AGILE)

(mandatory referral)

(COM(2026) 135 final)

CCMI/266

Rapporteur-general: **Monika SITÁROVÁ**

Co-rapporteur-general: **Srita HEIDE**

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Advisor	Eric BRUNE (to the Gr. II rapporteur)
Referral	European Parliament, 7/4/2026
Legal basis	Article 173(3) and 294 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Consultative Commission of Industrial Change
Adopted at plenary session	29/4/2026
Plenary session No	605
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	193/1/1

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

- 1.1 supports efforts to improve the speed, responsiveness and innovation capacity of the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB) in light of the evolving security environment, and therefore welcomes the Commission's proposed AGILE defence framework, setting out clear objectives and timelines, as well as simplified, accelerated and more agile procurement and funding procedures. This programme will strengthen EU's competitiveness and strategic autonomy;
- 1.2 welcomes AGILE as a platform for SMEs, start-ups, civil-tech firms and entrepreneurs to deliver high-quality, rapid solutions to EU defence readiness. The EESC underlines the important role of new defence players in the transformation of the EU defence industry and calls for a stronger cooperation within the EDTIB;
- 1.3 underlines that acceleration must not come at the expense of transparency, accountability and democratic scrutiny, which remain essential for the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU action. The EESC is particularly concerned about the potential undermining of the role of national parliaments. It is necessary to ensure a proper balance between speed and democratic governance of decision-making processes, which is a fundamental element of the Treaties;
- 1.4 calls for AGILE funds to be additional to existing EU defence programmes. The EESC recommends to substantially increase the budget of this instrument in the next MFF period based on the outcome of the evaluation of the pilot programme;
- 1.5 recommends inserting provisions to ensure that AGILE outreach, selection and evaluation processes proactively involve innovative SMEs, start-ups and single companies from all Member States and sectors, with a view to strengthening geographical balance and inclusiveness across the Union. Particular attention should be given to ensuring broad visibility and awareness of the project throughout the European Union;
- 1.6 recommends the introduction of robust and enforceable measures to ensure effective compliance with Article 9(5) on eligibility. In order to safeguard the Union's strategic autonomy and security interests, this article should explicitly clarify and tighten exclusion criteria;
- 1.7 recommends that AGILE projects should be firmly driven by clearly identified defence capability requirements and closely aligned with end-user needs; stresses that AGILE projects should have access to real-world testing environments, including military exercises and testing grounds, in order to validate solutions under operational conditions and accelerate their uptake;
- 1.8 recommends that AGILE allow the participation of both individual companies and small-scale consortia, in order to maximise accessibility and flexibility for innovative defence actors. In addition, the EESC recommends the explicit inclusion of Research and Technology Organisations (RTOs) as eligible participants in the AGILE programme, notably in a supporting or enabling role to new defence entrants. Incubation centres and start-up initiatives based in technical universities

across the European Union should be integrated into the pilot project, thereby enabling start-ups to contribute effectively from early development stages;

- 1.9 recommends that AGILE also support the continuous development and upgrading of existing innovative solutions through iterative cycles and incremental improvements, alongside its current focus on breakthrough defence technologies;
- 1.10 recommends that respect for EU labour, social and environmental legislation be explicitly embedded in the implementation of AGILE. The EESC underlines that participation in the AGILE programme should be conditioned on commitments to skills development, quality employment and full respect for workers' rights, in line with the European social model. In its implementation, AGILE should reflect the major transformations affecting European society, in particular the digital, climate, economic and social transitions. The EESC underlines the need for a human-centric approach to artificial intelligence, in particularly when applied to defence related activities;
- 1.11 recommends that AGILE fully considers and integrates the perspectives of employers, workers, and society as a whole.

2. **EXPLANATORY NOTES**

Arguments in support of recommendation 1

- 2.1 In the current geopolitical context, the present model – often fragmented, slow, and overly bureaucratic – is no longer fit for purpose. A new paradigm for agile and rapid defence is therefore essential to ensure Europe's security, resilience and strategic autonomy.
- 2.2 Agile and rapid defence innovation requires a continuous, flexible, and innovation-driven approach to capability development, decision-making and deployment. It requires:
 - shortened planning and procurement cycles;
 - rapid integration of emerging technologies (particularly in areas such as AI, cyber and space);
 - enhanced real-time coordination between civilian and defence actors.

Arguments in support of recommendation 2

- 2.3 Europe's defence capabilities rely on complex supply chains that incorporate large firms and highly specialised SMEs.

Arguments in support of recommendation 3

- 2.4 While the Committee agrees on the need to guarantee aspects such as speed, flexibility and reduced administrative burden, this must not come at the expense of transparency and democratic accountability. AGILE must remain anchored in EU values, democratic oversight and the rule of law.

Arguments in support of recommendation 4

- 2.5 Funding for this pilot programme is currently sourced entirely from internal reallocations within the existing EU budget for programmes related to the defence industry and space, specifically the EDF, EDIP and the EU Space Programme. The EESC therefore stresses that new defence initiatives must not cannibalise current programmes or other horizontal EU priorities.

Arguments in support of recommendation 5

- 2.6 Given the need for an inclusive European defence ecosystem, the EESC recommends promoting inclusivity for SMEs from all Member States. Smaller Member States have historically lagged behind in EU defence R&D. In addition, not all Member States have mechanisms to support rapid defence innovation, leaving innovative companies in some countries without access to funding opportunities.

Arguments in support of recommendation 6

- 2.7 AGILE will contribute to boosting EU's comprehensive defence market and its strategic autonomy. The Programme has an explicit objective of reducing strategic dependencies and reliance on third-country defence systems and solutions. Therefore, entities under third-country influence should be prevented from accessing EU defence programmes. The EESC recommends taking all necessary measures to prevent attempts by third countries to bypass established eligibility criteria for EU defence funding and to take direct or indirect advantage of EU defence funding programmes, including AGILE. It should be ensured that companies and entrepreneurs benefiting from funding under this project commit to directing the resulting products and solutions exclusively towards the EU defence sector and the Member States.

Arguments in support of recommendation 7

- 2.8 Given that one of the objectives is to bridge the gap between development and operational deployment AGILE should enable direct testing with end users and provide feedback throughout the development cycle. Defence requirements should be at the centre of the process with a view to accelerating the translation of innovation into capabilities for the armed forces. AGILE projects should be grounded in clearly identified defence needs, informed by recent battlefield developments.

Arguments in support of recommendation 8

- 2.9 Allowing small-scale consortia in the AGILE programme would give participants greater flexibility to choose between cooperation with other entities and the agility of single-entity applications.
- 2.10 Access to the testing, validation and demonstration capacities of RTOs is essential to ensure that innovative solutions can mature into credible defence-relevant solutions.

Arguments in support of recommendation 9

- 2.11 In areas characterised by rapid technological change, innovation can rapidly become obsolete. The approach of continuous improvement through iterative cycles is therefore consistent with the broader objective of promoting adaptable, upgradable and modular equipment.

Arguments in support of recommendation 10

- 2.12 Agility requires not only new tools, but also a cultural shift. Defence innovation must be accompanied by sustained investment in skills, training and quality jobs across Europe's industrial base. Public funding should include clear social conditionality, ensuring respect for collective bargaining, worker participation and occupational health and safety. Fast-track funding must not lead to precarious employment models or the erosion of labour standards under the pretext of agility. Compliance with EU social, labour and environmental legislation should constitute an eligibility filter.

Arguments in support of recommendation 11

- 2.13 Social partners are relevant stakeholders and should be involved in the implementation of AGILE projects. Their views and expertise should be reflected in the evaluation and in the communication and dissemination activities.

3. PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO THE LEGISLATIVE PROPOSAL OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Amendment 1

linked to recommendation 1.3

Recital (30)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
<p>Given the urgent need to support crucial investments in defence capabilities and particularly in defence innovation in the context of pressing geopolitical challenges it is appropriate to provide for an exception to the eight-week period referred to in Article 4 of Protocol No 1 on the role of national Parliaments in the European Union, annexed to the TEU, to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and to the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community. On the same basis, this Regulation should enter into force on the day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.</p>	<p>Given the urgent need to support crucial investments in defence capabilities and particularly in defence innovation in the context of pressing geopolitical challenges it is appropriate to provide for an exception to the eight-week period referred to in Article 4 of Protocol No 1 on the role of national Parliaments in the European Union, annexed to the TEU, to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and to the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community. <i>In order to ensure transparency, accountability and full respect for Union values, including democratic oversight and fundamental rights, Member States should ensure that national parliaments are duly informed without delay and may exercise ex-post scrutiny within a reasonable timeframe. The Commission should regularly report to the European Parliament and to national parliaments on the implementation of the Programme, including information on selected projects, beneficiaries and their contribution to Union defence objectives.</i> On the same basis, this Regulation should enter into force on the day following that of its publication in the Official Journal of the European Union.</p>

Reason
<p>Derogation from national parliamentary scrutiny limits normal democratic oversight. Minimum safeguards should be introduced to preserve essential democratic control.</p>

Amendment 2

linked to recommendation 1.10

Article 3(1)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
<p>The general objective of the Programme is to support the rapid innovation capacity of SMEs, including innovative start-ups and scaleups, with a view to supporting the rapid delivery of emerging and disruptive products and technologies for defence address the most recent and fast evolving challenges faced by Member States' armed forces, in particular those stemming from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, with a focus on cost-efficiency. The Programme shall thereby foster the competitiveness of the <i>European Defence Technological and Industrial Base</i> (EDTIB) and contribute to strengthening the Union's defence readiness, while reducing strategic dependencies on non-associated third countries.</p>	<p>The general objective of the Programme is to support the rapid innovation capacity of SMEs, including innovative start-ups and scaleups, with a view to supporting the rapid delivery of emerging and disruptive products and technologies for defence address the most recent and fast evolving challenges faced by Member States' armed forces, in particular those stemming from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, with a focus on cost-efficiency. <i>This objective should not come at the expenses of social resilience, quality standards and economic prosperity. In its implementation, AGILE should consider the major transformations affecting European society, in particular the digital, climate, and social transitions, and should take into account the perspectives of employers, workers, and society as a whole.</i> The Programme shall thereby foster the competitiveness of the EDTIB and contribute to strengthening the Union's defence readiness, while reducing strategic dependencies on non-associated third countries.</p>

Reason
<p>This programme will have a direct impact on economic and working conditions especially when implementation should be rapid.</p>

Amendment 3

linked to recommendation 1.5

Article 3(2)(a)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
<p>to significantly accelerate innovation cycles of emerging and disruptive products and technologies for defence developed across the Union by SMEs, including start-ups, taking into account the urgent needs of Member States and tapping into the innovation potential of the Union's industry as a whole.</p>	<p>to significantly accelerate innovation cycles of emerging and disruptive products and technologies for defence developed across the Union by SMEs, including start-ups, taking into account the urgent <i>asymmetric</i> needs of Member States, <i>balancing the geographical distribution of funds</i> and tapping into</p>

	the innovation potential of the Union's industry as a whole.
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Reason
The proposal does not reflect asymmetries in the EU defence industry and risks benefiting only certain countries. It also overlooks territorial balance, potentially deepening inequalities in defence capabilities and failing to consider proximity to conflict and geopolitical factors.

Amendment 4

linked to recommendation 1.10

Article 9 – new paragraph 10

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
	<i>(10) Beneficiaries shall comply with applicable Union and national labour and social legislation, including provisions on workers' rights, collective bargaining, workers' participation and occupational health and safety.</i>

Reason
Introduces social conditionality. Acceleration must not lead to deregulation.

Amendment 5

linked to recommendation 1.5

Article 9(6)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
The infrastructure, facilities, assets and resources of the recipients of Union funding which are used for the purposes of the funded action shall be located on the territory of a Member State or of an associated third country for the entire duration of the action.	The infrastructure, facilities, assets and resources of the recipients of Union funding which are used for the purposes of the funded action shall be located on the territory of a Member State or of an associated third country for the entire duration of the action. <i>The distribution of the beneficiaries should take into account geographical balance across all Member States.</i>

Reason
The proposal aims at ensuring that all Member States can benefit from AGILE and at maximising synergies.

Amendment 6

linked to recommendation 1.10

Article 10(1)(d)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
supporting action necessary for the effective implementation of actions under points (a) and (b), including but not limited to qualification, certification, access to infrastructure, access to innovative manufacturing capacities and processes, skills development, procurement of studies and ecosystem building and strengthening activities.	supporting action necessary for the effective implementation of actions under points (a) and (b), including but not limited to qualification, certification, access to infrastructure, access to innovative manufacturing capacities and processes, skills development, <i>training, upskilling and reskilling aimed at supporting quality employment in the European defence industrial base</i> , procurement of studies and ecosystem building and strengthening activities <i>that will include building economic and social resilience</i> .

Reason
Strengthens the workforce dimension. Defence preparedness should include economic and social resilience.

Amendment 7

linked to recommendations 1.10

Article 10(1) – new point (d)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
	<i>(d) Actions involving artificial intelligence, autonomous technologies or other emerging technologies shall comply with applicable ethics, legal and international frameworks, including international humanitarian law, and shall ensure meaningful human control over critical decision-making processes.</i>

Reason
Addresses AI governance and ethical concerns that are not covered in the Regulation.

Amendment 8

linked to recommendation 1.1 and 1.2

Article 3 – new paragraph (3)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
	<i>The Commission shall ensure that the implementation of the Programme contributes to</i>

	<i>long-term industrial capacity and does not solely focus on short-term pilot actions.</i>
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Reason
Ensures long-term impact beyond the period of the pilot.

Amendment 9

linked to recommendation 1.3
Article 8 – new paragraph (6)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
	<i>The Commission shall establish a monitoring and evaluation framework assessing the Programme’s impact on innovation, industrial capacity, employment and social conditions, and shall report to the European Parliament and the Council.</i>

Reason
Ensures accountability and evaluation.

Amendment 10

linked to recommendation 1.1, 1.5 and 1.10
Article 11(1), point (c)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
the impact in the defence domain, considering the needs of Member States and associated third countries, including with regard to cost-efficiency, speed of delivery, and readiness for operational use.	the impact in the defence domain, considering the <i>asymmetric</i> needs of Member States and associated third countries, including with regard to cost-efficiency, <i>social and economic impact</i> , speed of delivery, and readiness for operational use.

Reason
Makes the award criteria more complete.

Amendment 11

linked to recommendation 1.5 and 1.6
Article 12(2), point (a)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
Limitation of the requirements for the award decision and signature of legal commitments to a preliminary evaluation of award and exclusion criteria; the award decision may be taken based	Limitation of the requirements for the award decision and signature of legal commitments to a preliminary evaluation of award and exclusion criteria; the award decision may be taken based

solely on a self-declaration of applicants and tenderers on selection and eligibility criteria, especially regarding control, without request for corresponding supporting documents during the preliminary evaluation. The Commission shall finalise the final evaluation without undue delay.	solely on a self-declaration of applicants and tenderers on selection and eligibility criteria, especially regarding control, without request for corresponding supporting documents during the preliminary evaluation. The Commission shall finalise the final evaluation without undue delay. <i>The Commission shall also ensure the publication, without delay, of a summary of awarded projects and beneficiaries, including confirmation of compliance with eligibility and control requirements.</i>
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Reason
Ensures transparency and democratic accountability.

Amendment 12

linked to recommendation 1.11

Article 21(1)

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
Recipients of Union funding shall acknowledge the origin of the funds and ensure the visibility of that funding, including when promoting the actions and their results, by providing coherent, effective and proportionate targeted information to multiple audiences, including the media and the public.	Recipients of Union funding shall acknowledge the origin of the funds and ensure the visibility of that funding, including when promoting the actions and their results, by providing coherent, effective and proportionate targeted information to multiple audiences, including the media and the public. <i>Social partners and relevant stakeholders may contribute to the communication dissemination activities of the programme.</i>

Reason
Social partners and relevant stakeholders have an important role in implementation and can contribute to the dissemination and communication activities.

Brussels, 29 April 2026.

The President of the European Economic and Social Committee
 Séamus BOLAND

APPENDIX to the OPINION

LEGISLATIVE FOOTPRINT

LIST OF INTEREST REPRESENTATIVES FROM WHOM THE RAPPORTEUR HAS RECEIVED INPUT

The following list is drawn up on a purely voluntary basis under the exclusive responsibility of the rapporteur. The rapporteur has received input from the following interest representatives (organisations and/or self-employed individuals) in the preparation of CCMI/266 – Programme for Agile and Rapid Defence Innovation – AGILE:

<i>Organisations and/or self-employed individuals</i>
<i>industriALL European Trade Union</i>
<i>Ana Beramendi</i>
<i>Dr. Horst Heitz</i>