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THE EESC AND THE STRATEGIC AUTONOMY OF THE EU

During its February Plenary Session, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted an interesting Opinion – CCMI/250 – on the potential of the sodium battery manufacturing sector to strengthen the European Union’s strategic autonomy and develop a more environmentally and water-friendly economy. The EESC considers sodium batteries to be a strategic complement to lithium batteries and calls for decisive and coordinated action at EU level to create a sovereign and competitive sodium battery manufacturing industry as part of a forward-looking industrial policy. With circular value chains – design for recycling, reduction of embodied carbon and less dependence on critical raw materials – sodium batteries support not only the objecti-

ves of the European Green Deal and the EU’s strategic autonomy, but also the aims of the European Blue Deal, which addresses water resilience and freshwater scarcity. Desalination is key to this effort, but it generates a surplus of sodium that often remains unused and can threaten biodiversity. Sodium batteries could offer a sustainable use for this by-product. In Europe, the development of sodium ions is fragmented, although it is gaining increasing support, with several pilot projects in various Member

States. Sodium batteries are advancing worldwide, but Europe risks seeing the gap widen if it does not invest more in the sector to remain competitive. «The creation of gigafactories for sodium batteries would stimulate competitiveness - said Councillor Ulgiati - and create jobs throughout the value chain. Strategically located plants could revitalise regions with high unemployment rates - he added - while local access to raw materials and markets would reduce transport costs and environmental impact».

Finally, the EESC representative pointed out that the spread of sodium batteries must take into account not only the social and regional impact, but also the impact on health and safety at work, due to the chemical, thermal and mechanical risks associated with manufacturing and recycling.



EU: THE EUROPEAN COURT OF AUDITORS REJECTS THE 2028-2034 BUDGET



The European Union’s draft budget for the period 2028-2034, presented by the European Commission in 2025, after opposition from the EU Council and the European Parliament, has been rejected once again, this time by the European Court of Auditors, which, in a recently published Report, highlighted the «multiple risks to sound financial management» of resources. In two Opinions published last week, the EU’s financial control Institution responded

to requests from the two EU co-legislators (the EU Council and the European Parliament) to provide an opinion, as an independent expert, on the proposals presented by the Commission for the new European Fund. This innovative financing instrument, which is the largest and most controversial element of the €2 trillion EU budget for 2028-2034, would bring together historically separate spending lines, such as agriculture and cohesion, with new priorities, such as defence, under 27 so-called National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). The Luxembourg auditors argue that because these proposals radically change the way EU spending is planned, managed and controlled, stronger safeguards are needed. As part of the reform, the EU Executive intends to simplify spending and link payments to the achievement of certain targets and objectives by

Member States. However, the proposed total amount of €894 billion, of which €865 billion is specifically earmarked for NRPPs, has been heavily criticised by both EU legislators and the Regions. Furthermore, the “cash-for-reform” model is inspired by the EU’s post-Covid Recovery Fund (RRF), which has already been criticised by the Court in the past for its limited oversight in terms of results and spending, along with unclear payment conditions and weak controls. In its Report, the EU Court of Auditors warned that «differences in the design, ambition and interpretation» of the objectives could make it difficult to compare Countries and the way in which the targets are achieved. The structure of the next seven-year budget, as designed and organised by the European Commission, therefore seems to require urgent corrections and well-founded rethinking.