



**Ms Ursula von der Leyen,
President European Commission**

Björn Seibert, Head of Cabinet
bjoern.seibert@ec.europa.eu

**Ms Jessika Roswall,
European Commissioner
Environment, Water Resilience and a Competitive Circular Economy**

Paulina.DEJMEK-HACK@ec.europa.eu

Brussels, 13 January 2025

Dear President Von der Leyen,

Dear Commissioner Roswall,

The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)¹ and the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour² are calling for an **EU Water Resilience Strategy that prioritises People and Planet**.

In 2024, Europe was faced with both extreme floods and rising water scarcity. With the climate crisis accelerating faster than originally thought, it is more urgent than ever to ensure that everyone in Europe and beyond has access to clean and affordable drinking water and sanitation. We welcome the intention of the European Commission to introduce a European Water Resilience Strategy to strengthen water security in Europe. This should build on the EU Blue Deal created by the European Economic and Social Committee, specifically the opinion [TEN/804](#) focusing on sustainable and resilient water infrastructures and distribution networks. In order to address the threat of water scarcity and to prevent potential conflicts over water use, we call for a Water Resilience Strategy that strengthens public services of general interest, ensures adequate financing of public water services, prioritises nature-based solutions, protects clean water, strengthens water efficiency and prevents end-of-pipe solutions.

1. Ensuring universal access to clean and affordable water and sanitation

Water is a human right. An EU Water Resilience Strategy must first and foremost guarantee universal access to clean and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation. In times of increased water scarcity and competing interests for water usage, it is clear that the priority must be for the public water supply for necessary human consumption. In order to achieve this across the EU in the face of ever-increasing water crises, public control and ownership of water resources, operators and infrastructures is essential. Unlike private operators, publicly owned water operators can respond to water crises in a way that prioritises the general interest, rather than being subjected to market mechanisms and the interests of private for-profit investors. The more public control, the greater the ability to publicly respond to water crises. The more control

¹ EU Transparency Register number: 04902121531-04

² EU Transparency Register number: 23869471911-54

governments give over to private investors and to markets, the less control they have to protect local water resources.

2. Preventing further liberalisation

Water services, especially drinking water supply and management of water resources, must therefore be excluded from further liberalisation, and excluded from internal market rules and mechanisms. The exemptions for water and wastewater in [Directive 2014/23/EU](#) on the award of concessions (Concessions Directive), which were granted following the successful European citizens' initiative Right2Water, must be maintained in any future legislative proposals. [Publicly owned water operators are committed to the common good rather than just to their shareholders and profit maximization](#) and can therefore offer fair prices, more citizen-friendly services and better working conditions than for-profit operators. Water resources need to be protected as a commons and a shared resource, regulated for the good of people and nature.

We are concerned by the number of references to potential liberalisation and privatisation in strategy and mission papers of the new European Commission and Council. The [Mission Letter](#) to Commissioner Roswall which calls for facilitating “public and private investment in technology and cross-border water infrastructure”, and the [Strategic Agenda 2024-2029](#) of the Council which also calls for ample investment in cross-border water infrastructure, are of particular concern. As the EU competition authority, the European Commission is required to enforce internal market rules wherever ‘market elements’, including private participants and cross-border activities, become apparent, even if initially unintended. Enforcing internal market rules for the water sector would contradict the exemptions in the Concessions Directive and the human right to water.

We highlight the dangers of further liberalisation of public goods and services being promoted by the Draghi report. Of particular concern are the recommendations for the EU to adopt a framework for the public sector to share risk with the private sector through [public-private partnerships](#), introduce models for de-risking private finance (which means placing the burden of risk on the public), and leveraging foreign capital while maintaining control of selected critical infrastructure. This narrow focus on competitiveness is incompatible with the need to ensure universal access to water, a fundamental human right, in times of increasing water scarcity.

3. Promoting public service and nature-based solutions

Of course, water distribution networks and infrastructure must be resilient and fit for purpose in the future to ensure a sustainable, efficient, and equitable water supply in Europe. But instead of focussing on the potential of private investment, the Water Resilience Strategy and related EU initiatives should strengthen the public sector by facilitating inter-municipal cooperation, expanding EU public procurement law tightening the new fiscal rules, in particular the debt sustainability analysis, and ensuring more flexibility for future public investments. There are [over one hundred documented examples](#) of successful remunicipalisation of water services which demonstrate the benefits of reclaiming public control, and a number of positive examples of public-public partnerships. And instead of promoting cross-border water infrastructure, the focus should be on [restoring the broken water cycle](#), ensuring sustainable land use (e.g. through [agriculture](#), sponge cities, wetlands, forests).

Reducing water loss and protecting and restoring ecosystems should be at the heart of the Water Resilience Initiative. To ensure this, nature-based solutions, which are often low-cost and win-win-win (climate and biodiversity protection, climate adaptation, protection against water

pollution, droughts and floods, health protection, good jobs, resilience, etc) must therefore be prioritised over costly technical solutions afterwards which require huge investments and lead to many conflicting goals. Another win-win-win solution is to protect water by [preventing pollution and rectifying the source of pollution](#), rather than unsustainable technical end-of-pipe solutions, especially in water works. However, where end-of-pipe solutions are unavoidable, we reiterate that the polluter pays principle, enshrined in the EU treaties ([Art. 191 Nr. 2 TFEU](#)), must be respected in future legislation in the field as already implemented in the revision of the [Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive](#).

4. Protecting workers in the water and wastewater sectors

Workers in the water and wastewater sectors play a fundamental role in Europe's climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies and in the transition towards a circular economy. However, faced with ever more frequent weather events and water scarcity, their role and the risks they face are rapidly developing. Trade Unions must be involved in the development and implementation of the EU Water Resilience Strategy, and the role of workers, respect for collective bargaining, and provisions for health and measures and training must be included.

5. Key demands

In light of the above, we call for an EU Water Resilience Strategy that:

- Prioritises clean and affordable drinking water and basic sanitation over other human uses.
- Maintains the exemptions for water and wastewater in the Concessions Directive.
- Prevents any further privatisation and liberalisation of water, wastewater, infrastructure and water resources which need to be protected as a commons, regulated for the good of people and nature
- Only grants financing via the European Investment Bank (EIB) to public operators.
- Applies social, environmental and tax conditionalities to public procurement.
- Safeguards the human right to water and sanitation and protects public water supplies that put the common good before economic interests.
- Prioritises clean water and prevents costly end-of-pipe solutions by rectifying the sources of pollution. Applies the Polluter Pays Principle for damage already done, especially for irretrievable pollution.
- Protects and restores ecosystems.
- Guarantees as much public control as possible to be able to publicly respond to water crises and avoid regrettable restrictions on the ability to act of governments and legislators. Involves trade unions and recognises the role of workers, the need for collective bargaining and includes provisions on health and safety and training.

Yours sincerely,



Jan Willem Goudriaan,
EPSU General Secretary



Renate Anderl,
President of Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour

EPSU Secretariat 40 rue Joseph II, box 5 – 1000 Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 2 250 10 80 Fax: +32 2 520 10 99 Mail: epsu@epsu.org www.epsu.org

European
Federation
of Public
Service
Unions

Federación
Sindical
Europea
de Servicios
Públicos

Fédération
Syndicale
Européenne
des Services
Publics

Europeiska
Federationen
för Offentlig-
anställdas
Förbund

Europäischer
Gewerkschafts-
verband für den
Öffentlichen
Dienst

Европейская
Федерация
Профсоюзов
Общественного
Обслуживания



EPSU is a member
federation of the ETUC
and represents
PSI in Europe