



Framing competitiveness

Research-based recommendations for
communicating at the EU level

Imprint

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Introduction

Our most adaptive strategy is one that holds a place for competition without sacrificing the value of collaboration.

- Tim Jackson¹

The start of a new five-year institutional cycle at EU level in 2024 came with the ascendance of competitiveness framing.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen made competitiveness one of the priorities of the incoming 2024-2029 Commission, and the new term began with a major report on 'The Future of European Competitiveness' by former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi.

Competitiveness is 'the new game in town' – the dominant frame being used by the European Commission, which organisations active on EU policy subsequently feel they need to speak to if they want to be relevant now and in the years ahead.

For ZOE Institute, this presented us with a dilemma. On the one hand, we were concerned that the narrative of competitiveness would shift attention away from long-term societal goals. We saw a significant danger that competitiveness objectives could undermine other economic, social, and environmental goals and shift focus from long-term outcomes to short-term profits. We feared that pursuing competitiveness could be in tension with encouraging collaboration and cooperation in the face of global challenges.

At the same time, it was important for us – like many other organisations – to keep our work relevant within new political priorities. We understand that competitiveness can – under certain conditions – be a tool to help achieve long-term societal goals. Embracing the right competitiveness framing could better enable us to have dialogue with policymakers across the institutions and the political spectrum.

We were not alone in this dilemma. The European Environmental Agency had already produced an overview of risks and opportunities in its 2024 report 'Europe's sustainability transitions outlook – Short-term action, long-term thinking'².

¹ Tim Jackson (2021). Economics as Storytelling, from *Post Growth: Life after Capitalism*.

² European Environmental Agency (2024). *Europe's sustainability transitions outlook – Short-term action, long-term thinking*, p.28: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/europes-sustainability-transitions-outlook>

Engaging with competitiveness framing presents opportunities and risks

Competitiveness	Risks (summary)	Opportunities (summary)
	Pursuing climate objectives alongside competitiveness and growth could occur at the expense of other environmental objectives and may lead to widespread environmental degradation and long-term economic losses. Pursuing competitiveness and growth at all costs could escalate international tensions, disrupt markets and erode trust in the EU, exacerbating social and distributional conflicts. This would undermine solidarity and democracy. Sharp polarisation of society and erosion of trust pose significant risks to societal wellbeing and political legitimacy.	A successful EU economic model emphasising climate-neutrality and inclusivity may boost diplomatic influence. Technological advancements could make green solutions cheaper and less reliant on behavioural changes, garnering support from businesses and promoting a thriving green economy. This scenario, embracing sustainability incrementally, could lead to a smoother transition and a re-evaluation of competitiveness and economic welfare.

Figure 1: Risks and opportunities of the competitiveness agenda (EEA 2024, p.28)

Faced with this dilemma, we set out to find helpful, consensus-building ways to talk about competitiveness in the EU context.

Our approach

This report is the result of a research process to test different competitiveness framings.

At the heart of our testing was the framing task:

*How can we effectively frame competitiveness at the EU level in ways that build consensus around the idea that: **Only an economy that is delivering on environmental and social goals is competitive long term.***

We developed frames and elements that we found potentially helpful to this task then tested them in 24 interviews with opinion leaders and shapers at EU level. The interviews were conducted in February and March 2025. You can read about our methodology on page 20.

We distilled the findings of the interviews into seven recommendations for people wanting to engage in competitiveness discourse in ways that are helpful for long-term societal goals.

Given the risks of engaging competitiveness frames – particularly on a values level – we recommend foregrounding, or ‘pre-framing’, competitiveness messages in an intrinsically motivated positive vision of the future.

Whilst using competitiveness frames might feel unavoidable in this period for EU policy communications, doing so risks weakening other values that are crucial to build compassionate, resilient societies in the long run. We think that these risks can be mitigated by promoting an overarching vision based on intrinsic values such as solidarity, cooperation and mutual aid.

Note: We are very grateful to all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this research. The interviewee quotations throughout this report are taken directly from the interview transcripts but have been anonymised.

Why now? The rise of competitiveness framing at the EU level

Our competitiveness needs a major boost.
- Ursula von der Leyen, July 2024³

The question of competitiveness was catapulted to the top of the EU agenda in 2024 when Ursula von der Leyen put it at the centre of her bid to stay on for a second term as President of the European Commission.

Setting out her vision for the next five years, she made ‘prosperity and competitiveness’ the first priority of the incoming Commission. This vision, set out in her Political Guidelines⁴, succeeded to seal the support of a majority of the European Parliament for her second term.

The creation of an Executive Vice President portfolio for the ‘Clean, Just and Competitive Transition’ was the next signifier of the importance of competitiveness for the upcoming term.

In September came a major report on ‘The Future of European Competitiveness’⁵, authored by former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi at von der Leyen’s request. Draghi asserted that Europe’s democracy, freedom, peace, equity and prosperity were at risk. Europe needs to change course and regain competitiveness, he urged.

The Draghi report mentions that the core focus of a competitiveness agenda should be productivity growth but also that a European approach must ensure that productivity, decarbonisation and social inclusion go hand-in-hand.

The Draghi report was followed by a ‘Competitiveness Compass’⁶ to steer the Commission’s work. Informed by the Draghi report, the three pillars of the Compass are: closing the innovation gap, decarbonising our economy, and reducing dependencies.

In 2025 more initiatives to operationalise the Compass have followed, including proposals for a Competitiveness Fund, a Single Market Strategy and the Single Market and Competitiveness Scoreboard.

³ European Commission (2024). *Statement at the European Parliament Plenary by President Ursula von der Leyen, candidate for a second mandate 2024-2029*: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_3871

⁴ European Commission (2024). *Political Guidelines 2024-2029*: https://commission.europa.eu/document/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en

⁵ European Commission (2024). *The future of European competitiveness: Report by Mario Draghi*: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en

⁶ European Commission (2025). *Competitiveness Compass*: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/competitiveness-compass_en

Competitiveness is up the agenda and likely to stay there

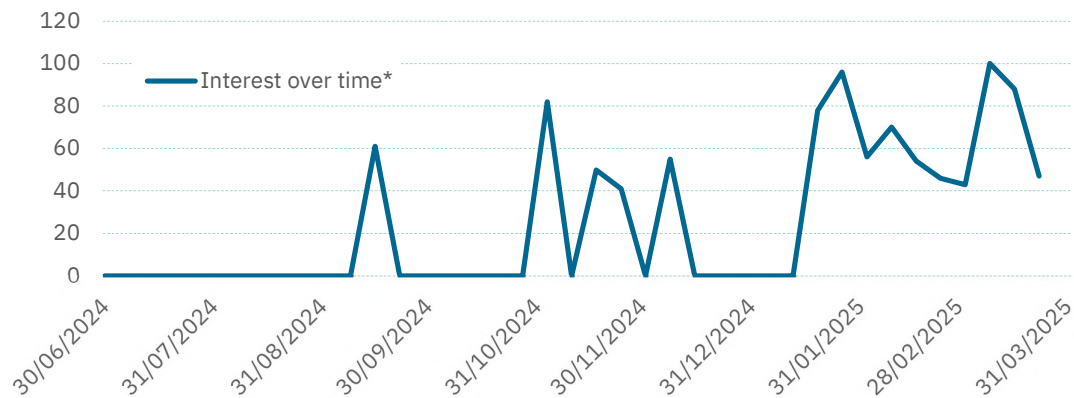


Figure 2: Interest over time for the term 'competitiveness' in Belgium between June 2024 and March 2025, according to Google Trends

*"Numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given region and time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term. A value of 50 means that the term is half as popular. A score of 0 means that there was not enough data for this term." (Source: trends.google.com).

In this policy context, it is understandable that there is heightened interest in competitiveness amongst EU policymakers and shapers, and we expect interest to remain high for the coming years. It is against this backdrop that we conducted our research.

Please note: This research is focused on framing. It does not aim to, nor claim to, address policy proposals.

Recommendations at a glance

- 1. Define it.** Don't communicate something you can't define.
- 2. Always make it long term.** Don't allow space for risky short-term competitiveness-oriented policies. Always be clear it's the long term that matters.
- 3. Use clear, positive qualifiers.** 'Long-term', 'sustainable' and 'fair' are popular descriptors of competitiveness and useful for building consensus.
- 4. Be cautious with European leadership framing.** Calling for specific forms of leadership can be helpful. But calling for leadership more generally is not always credible or well-received.
- 5. Team sports imagery works.** Competitiveness lends itself to sports-related imagery and metaphors. Focus on teamwork and shared success.
- 6. Centre women.** Women are under-represented on this topic. Using women's voices and faces can help re-frame traditional masculine 'the strongest will prevail' ideas.
- 7. Respect others' past work and knowledge.** This topic might feel 'new' to you but to many policymakers it is not.

Recommendations in detail

1. Define it. Don't communicate something you can't define.

*If you put competitiveness so high on the agenda, **you have to define it**. You have to say what it is.
- think tank interviewee*

Our research found widespread divergence about what people understand as competitiveness. Based on our sample, we observe that people in Brussels are largely talking at cross purposes right now.

When asked to spontaneously define competitiveness in the EU policy context, our 24 interviewees gave widely diverging answers; there was very little in common between the answers we heard. For some people we spoke to it is simply as a buzzword, not something meaningful.

Without a common understanding of what is meant by competitiveness it will be very difficult to have constructive dialogue or build consensus about policy options. If you are engaging in the debate, you are unlikely to be able to make convincing arguments if you don't first establish what you mean by it.

The absence of a shared definition of competitiveness in the EU policy context in turn means there is little consensus on how to measure it. Our interviewees also gave a wide range of different answers when asked how EU economic competitiveness can be measured. This suggests there is potential to put forward indicators and metrics for holistic, long-term competitiveness in the EU policy sphere.

There is huge disparity in how people define EU economic competitiveness



Figure 3: Word cloud generated from interviewees' spontaneous definitions of competitiveness

*There's competitiveness and competitiveness and competitiveness. If you ask ten people you get ten different definitions of what it is. And that's always the risk we are facing with these issues – that **the terms are not even defined** in a way in which we can have the conversation we need to happen on the topic.*

- NGO interviewee

*The Commission is very divided. This is a bit worrying because it's like talking about **something that hasn't been defined**, and I think some organisation should press the stop button and stop and reflect.*

- trade union interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** be ready to substantiate and measure what competitiveness looks like to you or your organisation.
- **Do** put forward holistic ways to measure what matters for long-term competitiveness, beyond GDP.
- **Don't** use competitiveness simply as a buzzword.
- **Don't** shy away from having difficult conversations to clarify what you mean by competitiveness.

2. Always make it long term. Don't allow space for risky short-term competitiveness-oriented policies. Always be clear it's the long term that matters.

*I think it would be great if in Europe we moved away from panicking about fading competitiveness now and started to think a bit more where we would like to be in 2040, 2050. I think the more we can move to **long-term thinking**, the better.*

- think tank interviewee

We found consensus that competitiveness should not be a short-term goal – and in fact cannot be achieved in the short run. However, a timeframe is rarely attached to it. When no timeframe is specified and the long-term nature of the challenge is not made explicit, this opens the door to short-term, non-sustainable policy options.

Interviewees agreed that short-term competitiveness gains are not what matters. They also spoke about the risks of pursuing short-term competitiveness. Several interviewees said that short-term fixes could backfire.

People we talked to said Europe's long-term competitive advantage lies in its quality products and welfare state – not its ability to compete on wages.

Couple long-term competitiveness with care for future generations

Data clearly shows that protecting the planet for the next generation is a message that moves people⁷.

While policy and political leaders often focus on messages like green jobs and economic benefits, research shows there is a better message to grow support for climate action.

A survey of 60,000 people across 23 countries to answer the question ‘How can we motivate the public to accelerate progress on climate?’ found that across every country, love for the next generation was the dominant reason for action on climate change. The message of generational urgency moved people across age groups, levels of education, income, political affiliation, and family status. This reason was 12 times more popular than creating jobs.

*We need to look at the **long-term** perspective and fixing the structural problems which cannot be addressed by quick fixes and splashing 10 billion here, 10 billion there – that's not what is going to fix our **long-term** competitiveness.*
- NGO interviewee

*It implies to me that maybe **the solution will be slower**, let's say, to fully implement, but it implies better quality of it.*
- think tank interviewee

*We want **future generations** to be competitive as well and we don't want to deplete the resources or over-pollute at the same time.*
- European Commission interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** always be explicit that long-term competitiveness is the only kind that matters.
- **Do** frame competitiveness as a project that takes time.
- **Do** say the economy is a product of human design and can, therefore, be re-designed⁸.
- **Do** combine long-term competitiveness framing with care for future generations.
- **Don't** leave ‘quick fixes’ unchallenged. Communicate the dangers of short-term, competitiveness-driven policies — for hard-won social rights and protections, for quality standards, for the environment, etc.

⁷ Potential Energy Coalition (2024). *Later is Too Late: A comprehensive analysis of the messaging that accelerates climate action in the G20 and beyond*: <https://potentialenergycoalition.org/guides-and-reports/global-report/>

⁸ NEON, NEF, FrameWorks Institute and Public Interest Research Centre (2018). *Framing the Economy: How to win the case for a better system*: <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/Framing-the-Economy-NEON-NEF-FrameWorks-PIRC.pdf>

3. Use clear, positive qualifiers. ‘Long-term’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘fair’ are popular descriptors of competitiveness and useful for building consensus.

*Just as competitiveness should be sustainable, it should also be **distributionally fair**.*

[...] These are non-negotiables, I guess.

- think tank interviewee

To communicate that competitiveness is not a goal in itself, we tested various ‘qualifiers’ — descriptors of the type of competitiveness that is desirable.

Long-term, sustainable and fair are popular descriptors of competitiveness

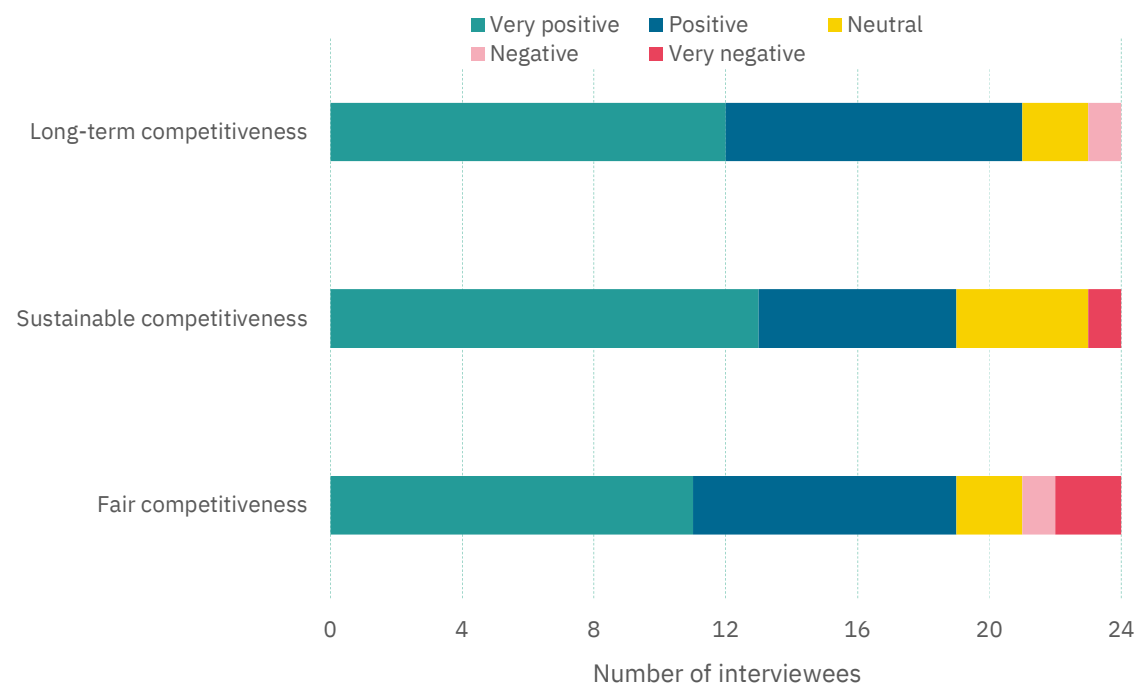


Figure 4: Number of interviewees who felt positive and negative to different qualifiers

We found the strongest support for ‘long-term’ and ‘sustainable’ competitiveness. Interviewees felt ‘positively’ and ‘very positively’ about these qualifiers.

‘Fair’ was also a qualifier that prompted lots of positive responses. ‘Fair’ competitiveness was very helpful for opening conversations about Europe’s social model, including quality jobs, labour standards and worker protections.

‘Fair’ seems to be effective in undermining short-term competitiveness ‘fixes’, like cutting wages or loosening standards and environmental and social protections.

Sustainable, long-term and fair were also the qualifiers that were most ‘sticky’: These were cited most frequently when we asked interviewees at the end of our interviews which of the qualifiers they remembered from the ones we had tested.

We did not specifically test ‘rules-based’ as a qualifier, however, we think that it is also promising and related to the idea of fair competition.

We tested statements about rules governing decent work and fair wages, and rules regarding environmental protection and the limits of the planet. Interviewees expressed strong opinions that rules should not be sacrificed for the sake of competitiveness.

‘Playing by the rules’ in terms of providing decent work and fair wages had the most positive responses from our interviewees. ‘Playing by the rules’ in terms of respecting the limits of the planet was also received positively by most – but less than decent work and fair wages. We think that emphasising the importance of rules and fair play is another potentially helpful frame for qualifying the kind of competitiveness that is desirable.

We tested some other phrases that were less helpful. For example, ‘competitive prosperity’ and ‘mission-driven competitiveness’ did not have clear meanings for many of our interviewees.

*Any kind of **fair distribution** or social dimension or equitable policymaking is in my perception right now highly underdeveloped when it comes to people talking about competitiveness.*

- think tank interviewee

*Competition is only possible when you are **playing by the rules**. Because otherwise it's not competition. Then it's a Wild West economy. It's like playing football without a referee. It's not true competition.*

- think tank interviewee

*Anything but **fair competition** is maybe not competition.*

- industry association interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** qualify the kind of competitiveness that is desirable. Of the terms we tested, ‘long-term’, ‘sustainable’, and ‘fair’ had the most support.
- **Do** use clear, easy-to-understand qualifiers.
- **Do** be careful with other terms which may be open to (mis-)interpretation.
- **Do** stress the importance of rules. It is generally accepted that competitiveness should not come at the cost of decent wages or weaker social protections.
- **Don't** introduce other buzzwords that simply increase unclarity.

4. Be cautious with European leadership framing. Calling for specific forms of leadership can be helpful. But calling for leadership more generally is not always credible or well-received.

We don't need to lead, we need to survive.

- trade union interviewee

We tested frames positioning Europe as a global leader. We wanted to know if calling on Europe to show leadership, be a frontrunner and step-up to tackle global challenges was helpful and consensus-building.

We also tested the concepts 'Europe's brand of competitiveness' and 'competitiveness on Europe's terms' to see if it was helpful to talk about Europe deciding for itself how to approach competitiveness.

The results here were mixed. Whilst these frames worked for some respondents, others expressed reservations about them for different reasons. Some of the problems with leadership framing included:

- Some interviewees found it unconvincing, far-fetched or wishful thinking.
- Some interviewees thought it was out of touch with reality in a world in which other major and emerging economies are out-competing Europe.
- For some interviewees this had neo-colonial overtones. Some people equated global leadership with imposing Europe's economic model on other regions.

Having said this, we found some forms of leadership to be popular. Our interviewees largely supported European leadership in the form of upholding EU values and democracy, labour standards and worker protections. So, European leadership when used in the sense of avoiding 'a race to the bottom' can work as a framing.

We also think leadership can be evoked helpfully *within* particular sectors. Interviewees who were working on innovation and future technologies were happy to talk about European leadership in these fields. But we still advise to be cautious using this framing beyond your sector.

I don't think we are leaders. We have India, we have China. I think we are cooperating. I don't believe we are leading.

- European Commission interviewee

*EU competitiveness relies a lot on exploitation and **neo-colonial practices**, especially concerning the global South.*

- think tank interviewee

It is that very tired discourse that the EU or Europe has to be the leader and set an example that everyone else will have to follow. It's EU supremacism.

That's why I don't like it.

- think tank interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** avoid framing Europe as a leader or a front-runner in a general sense.
- **Do** be specific what leadership should look like in the future. Call for specific types of leadership, e.g. on decent jobs, sustainable technologies or climate action.
- **Don't** assume your audience views Europe as a leader – either now or in the future.

5. Team sports imagery works. Competitiveness lends itself to sports-related imagery and metaphors. But focus on teamwork and shared success.

*It doesn't matter who scored the goal at the end of the day ...
we all celebrate together.
- think tank interviewee*

Putting people in pictures generally helps shift attention from purely economic interests to the wellbeing of people⁹. For this reason, all the images we tested featured people.

Race imagery and metaphors lend themselves to the topic of competitiveness and are already part of the discourse, e.g. 'the global clean tech race'. But our testing found that race imagery can be unhelpful. Sprint imagery especially should be avoided.

Problems with racing and sprinting images include:

- It can suggest the race is over or almost over, whereas in reality it is just beginning.
- It can be associated with 'a race to the bottom', i.e. lowering of standards.
- It can suggest there can only be one winner.
- Some interviewees associated sprinting with doping or cheating.
- It usually suggests *individual* prowess and strength. It doesn't show the team behind the athlete (coaches, nutritionists, psychologists, family...).

We found imagery of success in team sports to be helpful when it communicates collective effort, synchronisation, and a team harnessing their collective talents.

Imagery of team sports was received more positively in our testing. Team sport imagery is more likely to communicate that:

- players have different roles to play, and need to be coordinated;
- players have differing talents and strengths to contribute;
- success is shared and has shared benefits.

We specifically tested an image of a rowing team. Interviewees told us they liked this because the team was synchronised and had a very clear direction.

⁹ NEON & Positive Money (2021). *Wellbeing Economy – A Messaging Guide*:
<https://www.neweconomyorganisers.org/work/support-resources/messaging-narrative>

We also found that centring humans rather than rowing equipment would have stimulated even more positive responses.

As an alternative to sports images, we also tested a picture of two people playing chess. This was not so popular with our interviewees. Drawbacks included:

- A two-player game is not representative of global competition.
- It was associated to war planning and military strategy.
- It evoked a friendly game more than a competitive one.
- Many people do not know the rules or associate negative memories with chess.

*For a competitive Europe, there need to be different **partners who are aligned** and working together in the same rhythm.*
- think tank interviewee

***If it's a race, it's rushed**, it's quick, and it doesn't have time to take all the standards and concerns it should into account.*
- think tank interviewee

*How it's now formulated on European level often is that it's **a race to the bottom** and we have to lower environmental standards to be competitive with other economic blocs.*
- NGO interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** use imagery of real people to make the topic less abstract and bring it back to people's lives.
- **Do** use imagery of team sports to convey coordination, players with different roles to play, and shared success.
- **Don't** use images or metaphors of individual sports, especially sprints, to represent global competition.
- **Don't** suggest there is a finish line.
- **Don't** suggest that only one competitor can win.

6. Centre women. Women are under-represented on this topic. Using women's voices and faces can help re-frame traditional masculine 'the strongest will prevail' ideas.

*Women in sports sometimes are **not represented enough**
and sometimes not really as winners.
- think tank interviewee*

Multiple interviewees commented that it was refreshing to see women in association to competitiveness and sporting victory.

Our interviewees were more likely to mention collaboration in connection with competitiveness after having been prompted with an image featuring women celebrating sporting success.

Centring women can help move the topic away from 'survival of the fittest', supremacist and oppositional thinking, towards cooperation, collaboration, unity and mutual support. For this reason, we recommend putting forward women spokespersons, amplifying women's voices and using imagery of women in connection with competitiveness.

Women are more likely to support one another in competitive environments

Our observation that women were more often associated with collaboration, unity, and team spirit is backed by research which shows that women tend to be less narcissistic and self-centred than men¹⁰ and on average more concerned for their teams and the environment¹¹. Women tend to be more emotionally intelligent than men, which makes them better equipped to support others in highly competitive environments, according to researchers¹². A heightened concern for others in women was also found by researchers Cassar & Rigdon¹³ who offered rewards to students for solving small problems and observed that more women than men opted out when asked to engage in a highly competitive game. However, this gap reversed when students were offered a chance to share their winnings.

*I think that in many sectors **collaboration** is more important than competition. For me
this shows the strength of collaboration.
- industry association interviewee*

¹⁰ Grijalva E, Newman DA, Tay L, Donnellan MB, Harms PD, Robins RW, Yan T. (2015) *Gender differences in narcissism: a meta-analytic review*: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25546498/>

¹¹ Hassan, Masood, Ayub, Arslan (2019). *Women's experience of perceived uncertainty: insights from emotional intelligence*: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333827219_Women%27s_experience_of_perceived_uncertainty_insights_from_emotional_intelligence

¹² Hassan, Masood, Ayub, Arslan (2019). *Women's experience of perceived uncertainty: insights from emotional intelligence*: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333827219_Women%27s_experience_of_perceived_uncertainty_insights_from_emotional_intelligence

¹³ Cassar, A., & Rigdon, M. L. (2021). *Option to cooperate increases women's competitiveness and closes the gender gap. Evolution and Human Behavior*: <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2021-59694-001>

*I feel very positive about it because, first of all, it's women, so there is some **gender aspect** in here. And it's **unity** to me. Unity is very important for competitiveness.*
- trade union interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** put forward credible women spokespersons from your organisation and amplify women's voices on this topic.
- **Do** pay attention to diversity and opt for images that feature women.
- **Don't** fall into the trap of equating competitiveness to 'the survival of the fittest' or 'the strongest will prevail' ideas. Communicate unity, collaboration and mutual support in relation to competitive success.

7. Respect others' knowledge and past work. This topic might feel 'new' to you but to many policymakers it is not.

*Many people start now to talk about competitiveness who weren't before and it's good, but **they should not think that it's new.***
- European Commission interviewee

Some of our interviewees pointed out that this is not a new policy goal. There was a sense that many newcomers had entered the debate, and that they should not make the mistake of thinking this topic is new.

We asked our interviewees about the relevance of competitiveness in their professional context in the six months from September 2024 to March 2025, and prior to September 2024.

Competitiveness is more relevant in EU policy than it used to be

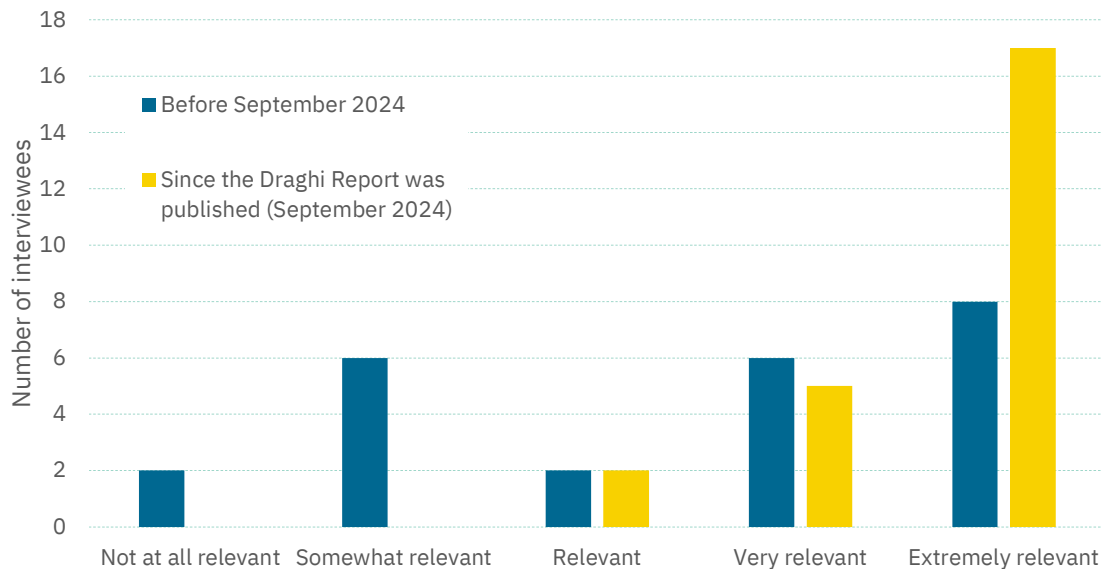


Figure 5: Interviewee responses when asked 'How relevant has competitiveness been to your work in the last six month and prior to the last six months?'

Most of our interviewees reported that competitiveness has become more relevant to their work. The number for whom the topic is ‘extremely relevant’ more than doubled since the publication of the Draghi report in September 2024.

However, for the majority of our interviewees, competitiveness was already high on their agenda before. All the interviewees from the European Commission reported no change in the relevance of the topic – it had been extremely relevant to them all along.

So, keep in mind: many policymakers have been working on competitiveness-related policy design for a long time. If you are a newcomer to the debate, we suggest you acknowledge their previous work and knowledge if you want to be listened to.

*Competitiveness has always been important. I think we should not now behave as if we are **reinventing something new**. I think we need to build up on what we have.*

- European Commission interviewee

Do's & Don'ts...

- **Do** enter the competitiveness debate respectfully. Acknowledge there is a large body of historic work in this policy area.
- **Don't** feel obliged to talk about competitiveness. If your organisation is more credible talking about your core topics and areas of expertise, stick to those.

Methodology

This research process and the resulting report took roughly six months. Here is an outline of the steps we took:

Agreeing on our research question: We observed the rise of competitiveness in the EU agenda in the summer of 2024. It presented us with dilemmas about how to engage with, and how to communicate to, EU-level audiences. We set out to develop and test competitiveness frames that can effectively build consensus that ‘Only an economy that is delivering on environmental and social goals is competitive long term’ to help us with this dilemma.

Reviewing existing research: Having decided on our overall research question, or our ‘framing task’, we started by looking for existing studies and literature to build on. As far as we could we made sure our work was informed by existing relevant research and testing.

Listening exercise: We analysed more than 60 sources (media reports, press releases, blogs) at EU level from a two-month period from September to October 2024 (following the publication of the Draghi report). We mapped elements (qualifiers, metaphors, images, messengers, numbers, case studies) that were already being used in the discourse around competitiveness. We sorted the elements according to whether we found them helpful or unhelpful to our framing task. This helped us identify different ‘narrative communities’ based on how different groups talk about competitiveness. We placed them on a spectrum depending on their relation to the framing task.

Competitiveness is seen and talked about differently by different communities

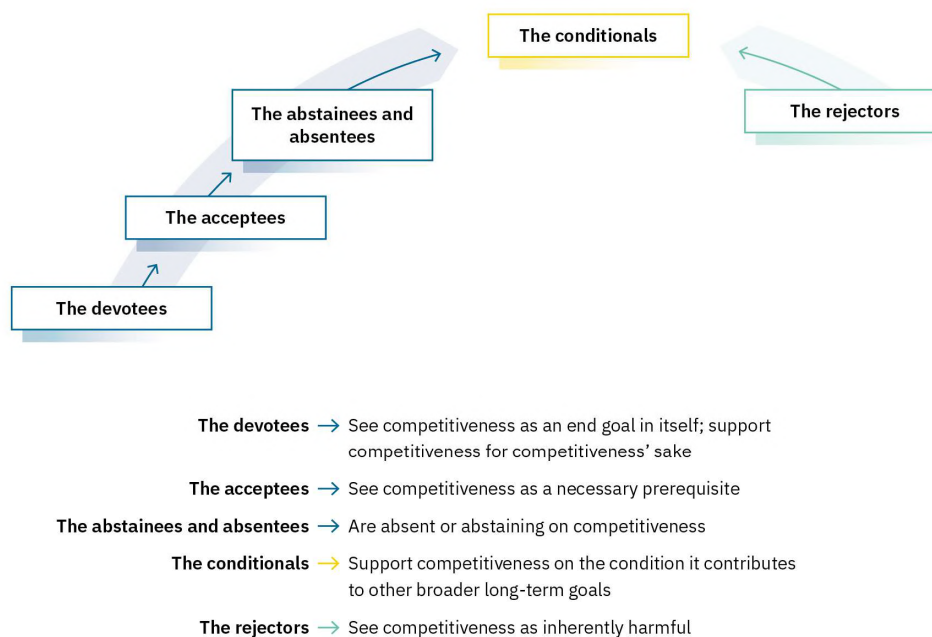


Figure 6: Illustration of ‘competitiveness narrative communities’ on a spectrum in relation to the framing task

Creating elements: We used the listening exercise analysis as the basis for a workshop with colleagues working on EU economic policy and long-term decision-making. In the workshop we critiqued and fine-tuned the helpful framing elements (messages, qualifiers, images, metaphors) we had identified, and developed new framing elements we found potentially helpful to the task. We selected those we thought had the most potential to put forward for testing.

Testing: We wrote an interview script covering the elements we wanted to test. It was composed of quantitative and qualitative questions. We reached out to members of the ‘narrative communities’ we wanted to build consensus among. These were all people active in shaping EU policy related to competitiveness – from the EU institutions, think tanks, trade unions, industry associations, public affairs consultancies and NGOs. We conducted 24 anonymised 30-minute interviews.

Synthesising: We analysed all the interview responses both quantitatively and qualitatively. We distilled seven key recommendations and compiled our key findings in this short report.

More resources

The following resources and organisations all informed our approach to this research:

The Culture Hack Curriculum: <https://www.culturehack.io/curriculum/curriculum/>

Framing the Economy – New Economics Foundation:
<https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/Framing-the-Economy-NEON-NEF-FrameWorks-PIRC.pdf>

How to Test Your Communications – Public Interest Research Centre:
<https://publicinterest.org.uk/TestingGuide.pdf>

The Values Map – Common Cause Foundation: <https://commoncausefoundation.org/resources/the-values-map/>

Nurturing New Frames on the Economy – Omidyar Network:
<https://omidyarnetwork.medium.com/nurturing-new-frames-on-the-economy-b6bf614bea11>

Framing Fundamentals – The Frameworks Institute: <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/framing-fundamentals/essential-resources/>

Europe's sustainability transitions outlook: Short-term action, long-term thinking – European Environment Agency: <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/publications/europes-sustainability-transitions-outlook>

NEON & Positive Money: Wellbeing Economy – A Messaging Guide:
<https://www.neweconomyorganisers.org/work/support-resources/messaging-narrative>

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ZOE Institute for Future-fit Economies is a non-profit and independent think & do tank. We are dedicated to research for a future-fit economy. At the interface of politics, science and civil society, we develop trend-setting impulses for the fundamental questions of economic development.

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