



Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Social Fund as part of the National and Regional Partnership Plan set out in Regulation (EU) [...] [NRPPPlan] establishing conditions for the implementation of the Union support to quality employment, skills and social inclusion for the period from 2028 to 2034

(COM(2025) 558 final – 2025/0239 (COD))

(C/2026/1977)

Rapporteur: **Nicoletta MERLO**

Advisor	Luigi VELTRO (to the rapporteur, Group II)
Legislative procedure	EU Law Tracker
Referral	European Parliament, 12.11.2025 Council, 16.9.2025
Legal basis	Articles 164, 174 and 175 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
European Commission documents	COM(2025) 558 final
Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	SDG 1 – No poverty SDG 2 – Zero hunger SDG 3 – Good health and well-being SDG 4 – Quality education SDG 5 – Gender equality SDG 8 – Decent work and economic growth SDG10 – Reduced inequalities
Section responsible	Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship
Adopted in section	26.11.2025
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Plenary session No	602
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	185/0/2

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC):

Governance and partnership

1.1. recommends that the European Social Fund (ESF) be bolstered, as a way of strengthening the EU's social dimension. It therefore calls for an increase from 14 % to 20 % in social spending in the NRPPs, earmarking at least 14 % for the ESF. What constitutes social expenditure needs to be more clearly defined in the next programming period;

1.2. believes it essential to safeguard the distinctive and specific characteristics of the ESF and strengthen its role, particularly in the light of the new social challenges related to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, by making national and regional ESF programmes mandatory in order to ensure that the regions, social partners and civil society can play a strong role within a multi-level governance context;

1.3. suggests simplifying administrative procedures for access to ESF funding;

1.4. recommends consulting the economic and social partners and civil society organisations in a structured, formal process at European, national and local level during the implementation of the ESF, and that their involvement be ensured at every stage of the programming process, from assessing the employment and social impact, to design, management, implementation and co-creation, and monitoring and evaluations, in line with the principles of the European code of conduct on partnership;

1.5. believes that the monitoring committees of all national and regional ESF programmes should be maintained and that the right for the social partners and civil society organisations to vote within them should be safeguarded, ensuring they are given a significant level of participation. In line with the national rules and industrial relations practices of the Member State concerned, the representativeness of the organisations as well as the specific role of social partners shall be taken into account;

1.6. stresses the importance of upholding the principle of gender equality and ensuring compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union when implementing all funds;

1.7. recommends that all ESF-funded programmes allocate adequate resources – at least 1 % for all countries – towards improving capacity development among social partners and civil society organisations, both at regional and national level;

The social and territorial dimension

1.8. recommends safeguarding the principle of multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance, and that regional programmes therefore continue to maintain a direct link with the European Commission;

1.9. reiterates the importance of allocating ESF resources in accordance with the established categories of regions ('less developed regions', 'transition regions' and 'more developed regions').

Complementarity and administrative capacity

1.10. recommends that the ESF be further integrated and made more complementary with other programmes, and that a multi-fund approach be applied between the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF);

1.11. reiterates the need to preserve the principles of additionality and complementarity with regard to ordinary national funding for ESF interventions;

1.12. recommends allocating a portion of ESF resources to improving public administration capacity and providing better quality training for public administrations to enable ESF resources to be used effectively.

Work, education and training

1.13. recommends increasing investments in inclusive, high-quality education and training systems – in particular for women, young people and vulnerable people – that address skills mismatches, underemployment and inactivity, while ensuring high-quality training and refresher training for trainers as key elements for improving productivity and competitiveness;

1.14. calls for ESF resources to be reinforced to implement measures to support skills development for the lifelong learning of workers, including through public-private partnerships, in order to address labour and skills shortages. At least 15 % of these resources should take the shape of targeted financial incentives for employers;

1.15. highlights the need to reach the EU target for 2030 on adult participation in lifelong learning. State aid ceilings should therefore be adjusted for these purposes;

1.16. suggests focusing more on STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), green and digital skills and strengthening the role that social dialogue plays in designing and co-designing employment transition and re-skilling pathways;

1.17. calls for more decisive actions to strengthen the role of women in STEM and promote an approach that combines science, technology and creativity. Urges that priority be given to gender equality in education and training;

1.18. recommends measures to support entrepreneurship and self-employment and to develop the social economy;

1.19. calls for a share of at least 20 % of ESF resources to be allocated to financing the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee and to support quality youth employment.

Social inclusion

1.20. hopes that the ESF will include targeted measures that contribute to social inclusion programmes and investments to improve access to social services by making them sustainable, high quality and accessible to the most vulnerable. The ESF should help promote physical and mental health and disease prevention. Efforts should also be targeted towards reducing poverty. Therefore, calls for ESF resources allocated to social inclusion to be increased from 25 % to 30 %;

1.21. suggests that ESF programmes contribute towards strengthening services that support work-life balance by fostering local welfare networks, social infrastructure and active inclusion pathways. It is important that it be mandatory to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in the development, implementation and evaluation of ESF policies and policy choices;

1.22. calls for support to be provided to help dependent older people and persons with disabilities retain their autonomy through measures aimed at deinstitutionalisation and improving home-based services, giving them greater autonomy and the opportunity to participate more in social life;

1.23. encourages the Member States to use ESF resources to support co-financing of affordable housing plans.

Communication

1.24. calls on the Commission to improve communication and training on opportunities to access the ESF, including by adopting a more targeted approach to social media use.

2. EXPLANATORY NOTES

2.1. For the new EU long term budget after 2027, the multiannual financial framework, the Commission is proposing to merge the strategies on agricultural policy and cohesion policy under one single fund, replacing the 14 funds currently dedicated to these sectors. This strategy would be implemented through the NRPPs.

2.2. Under the new NRPPs, the ESF will support quality employment, skills and social inclusion. The NRPPs should also help promote equal opportunities, combat poverty and homelessness and foster intergenerational solidarity.

2.3. The distribution of resources under the NRPPs will tie in with structural reform objectives and implementation. The EESC feels that these reforms should be fair and sustainable, that the right balance must be struck between using ESF funds for the EU's challenges on the one hand, and its priorities on the other (European Semester, fiscal plans, national energy and climate plans, etc.), and that competitiveness, productivity, job quality and participation in the labour market should be improved.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.1

2.4. The ESF was the first EU funding instrument to render the employment of workers easier and to increase their geographical and occupational mobility and to facilitate their adaptation to industrial changes and to changes in production systems, in particular through vocational training and retraining. The EESC recommends that the ESF be bolstered, as a way of strengthening the EU's social dimension.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.2

2.5. The EESC believes it essential to safeguard the distinctive and specific characteristics of the ESF and strengthen its role, particularly in the light of the new social challenges predicted for the future and related to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, identified by the Commission itself. The funds current setup, based on regional and national programmes, must be maintained.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.3

2.6. Flexible and simplified mechanisms focused on investing in people should be established in order to ensure that people are equipped with the right skills and are covered by modern social protection adapted to the new forms of work, and in order to show solidarity to those who need it most. Administrative procedures for access to ESF funding should be simplified.

Arguments in support of recommendations 1.4, 1.5, 1.6 and 1.7

2.7. The EESC recommends that the economic and social partners and civil society organisations be consulted in a structured, formal process at European, national and local levels during the implementation of the ESF. A culture of close cooperation should be established among public authorities, social partners and civil society organisations at every stage of the programming process and of the assessment of employment and social impacts, from design and management to implementation, co-creation, monitoring and evaluations, and including the exchange of good practices and transnational experiences.

2.8. Partnership is a founding value of cohesion policy. To this end, the participation of social partners and civil society organisations should be based on the principles of the European code of conduct on partnership, which should, in turn, better distinguish the role of the social partners and civil society organisations from that assigned to institutional partnerships. ESF programme monitoring committees for all national and regional programmes should be maintained, and the right for social partners and civil society organisations to vote within them safeguarded.

2.9. All ESF-funded programmes must allocate a greater percentage of resources towards helping social partners and civil society organisations build the skills they need to use EU funds effectively.

Arguments in support of recommendations 1.8 and 1.9

2.10. The territorial dimension needs to be preserved through the partnership principle and multi-level and multi-stakeholder governance, thus maintaining a place-based approach. Complementarity with other programmes is important. The EESC reiterates the importance of allocating ESF resources in accordance with the established categories of regions ('less developed regions', 'transition regions' and 'more developed regions').

Arguments in support of recommendations 1.10 and 1.11

2.11. In order to avoid duplication and overlaps between the various EU funds and programmes, the EESC recommends that ESF-funded programmes be further integrated and made more complementary with those financed by the ERDF, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Fisheries Fund (EFF), Erasmus+ and the European Progress Microfinance Facility. It would be preferable to apply a multi-fund approach between the ESF and the ERDF. Reiterates the need to preserve the principles of additionality and complementarity with regard to ordinary national funding for ESF interventions.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.12

2.12. Past programming experiences, particularly the delayed launch of the 2021-2027 programming period, have shown the limitations of EU fund spending capacity, largely stemming from limited administrative capacities. The EESC therefore recommends allocating a portion of ESF resources to improving public administrations' capacity to use ESF funds properly.

Argument in support of recommendations 1.13, 1.14, 1.15, 1.16 and 1.17

2.13. Investments are needed in order to address skills shortages and mismatches (which is a key element for improving productivity and competitiveness) by allocating more financial and human resources to support the creation of high-quality jobs, training, work-life balance measures and incentives to promote the employment of women and disadvantaged groups. Targeted funding should be provided to strengthen employment centres. It is essential that sufficient resources be invested in public early-childhood services for those aged 0-6 years and in long-term care services to make them more accessible, primarily to the most vulnerable households.

2.14. The EESC recommends increasing investments in an inclusive, high-quality education and training system that addresses skills mismatches, lifelong learning, underemployment and inactivity, and extending vocational training opportunities and equal working conditions to workers engaged in new forms of work. High-quality training and refresher training for trainers should be ensured. Guiding measures must be implemented to boost women's participation in STEM fields. Rules on State aid control must take sufficient account of the need to make training and further training of the European workforce a top priority.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.18

2.15. The EESC recommends using ESF resources to support young people in particular who are inclined towards self-employment, entrepreneurship and the social economy.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.19

2.16. Particular attention should be paid to youth unemployment. The ESF should continue to focus on youth unemployment and on young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) by preventing early school/training leaving and by structurally improving the transition from school to working life. Calls for ESF resources to be allocated to implementing the reinforced Youth Guarantee and to supporting quality youth employment by helping youth associations to be involved in a meaningful way.

Arguments in support of recommendations 1.20, 1.21, 1.22 and 1.23

2.17. The ESF should be used to promote equal opportunities for all, to support strong social safety nets, foster social inclusion and intergenerational fairness and fight poverty. The ESF should therefore contribute to social inclusion programmes and improve access to social services by making them affordable, sustainable and of high quality. Good health is fundamental. The ESF should therefore help to promote health and support disease prevention. Particular efforts should be made to reduce poverty through programmes aimed at alleviating food and material deprivation and promoting the social integration of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Resources allocated to these objectives should therefore be increased from 25 % to 30 %.

2.18. The European Commission has launched a public consultation to help Member States ensure affordable housing for more citizens. The affordable housing problem no longer affects only the most vulnerable sections of society, but an increasingly large part of the population. To address this crisis, the EESC encourages the Member States to use ESF resources to co-finance affordable housing plans.

Arguments in support of recommendation 1.24

2.19. Transparent communication is an integral part of ESF programming. The information and communication system should, however, be optimised by improving the language used and using fewer acronyms. The use of social media and AI could help to improve communication with EU citizens. A different approach is needed in the way we communicate and inform people about the opportunities that cohesion policies offer citizens and businesses.

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

Amendment 1

linked to recommendation 1.2

Preamble

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(12) In order to strengthen Europe's societies and Europe's Social Model, Member States should allocate a minimum amount of resources under their National and Regional Partnership Plans adopted in accordance with Regulation (EU) [NRP Plan Regulation] to the ESF.	(12) In order to strengthen Europe's societies and Europe's Social Model, Member States shall allocate 20 % of resources under their National and Regional Partnership Plans adopted in accordance with Regulation (EU) [NRP Plan Regulation] to the ESF.

Reason

This proposal aims to bolster the ESF as the main means of strengthening both the EU's social dimension and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Amendment 2

linked to recommendation 1.14

Preamble

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(14) The ESF should enhance labour supply and improve education and training and lifelong acquisition of skills. In particular, the ESF should help progression within education and training and transition to work, support lifelong learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning that takes place at all stages in life and employability, and contribute to competitiveness and societal and economic innovation by supporting scalable and sustainable initiatives in these fields. This could be achieved for example through work-based learning and	(14) The ESF should enhance labour supply and improve education and training and lifelong acquisition of skills. In particular, the ESF should help progression within education and training and transition to work, support lifelong learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning that takes place at all stages in life and employability, and contribute to competitiveness and societal and economic innovation by supporting scalable and sustainable initiatives in these fields. This could be achieved for example through work-based learning and apprenticeships, lifelong guidance, skills anticipation

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
apprenticeships, lifelong guidance, skills anticipation in cooperation with industry, up-to-date training materials, forecasting and graduate tracking, training of educators, validation of learning outcomes and recognition of qualifications.	in cooperation with industry, up-to-date training materials, forecasting and graduate tracking, training of educators, validation of learning outcomes and recognition of qualifications. <i>There should be a reinforced allocation from the ESF to support skills development for the lifelong learning of workers. Within this reinforced allocation, at least 15 % should be dedicated to targeted financial incentives for employers.</i>

Reason

A reinforced allocation from the ESF must support workers' skills development and lifelong learning with at least 15 % of these resources earmarked for financial incentives for employers.

Amendment 3

linked to recommendation 1.16

Preamble

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(22) In light of persistently high levels of youth unemployment and inactivity in a number of Member States and regions, in particular affecting young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training, it is necessary that those Member States continue to invest sufficient resources of the ESF towards measures to promote youth employment, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. Member States should therefore allocate <i>an appropriate amount of resources</i> to this challenge. <i>Member States seriously affected by youth unemployment should allocate resources of the ESF to support youth employability.</i>	(22) In light of persistently high levels of youth unemployment and inactivity in a number of Member States and regions, in particular affecting young people who are neither in employment, nor in education or training, it is necessary that those Member States continue to invest sufficient resources of the ESF towards measures to promote youth employment, including through the implementation of the Youth Guarantee. Member States should therefore allocate <i>20 % of the ESF</i> to this challenge.

Reason

Young people are a priority for European and national policies. This is why it is important to invest in the potential of young people and ensure their future in the world of work.

Amendment 4

linked to recommendations 1.17 and 1.18

Preamble

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(19) To ensure that the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights is duly put forward and that <i>a sufficient amount of resources is targeting</i> those most in need, Member States should allocate resources of the ESF to fostering social inclusion.	(19) To ensure that the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights is duly put forward and that <i>30 % of the ESF is directed towards</i> those most in need, Member States should allocate resources of the ESF to fostering social inclusion.

Reason

Resources for a more social Europe need be strengthened if poverty is to be effectively combated, and the social and labour market integration of citizens needs to be ensured with a view to boosting social inclusion.

Amendment 5

linked to recommendation 1.6

Preamble

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
(23) Member States <i>that have received a country-specific recommendation in this area should</i> allocate resources <i>of the ESF</i> to promote the capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations.	(23) Member States <i>shall</i> allocate <i>1 % of ESF</i> resources to promote the capacity building of social partners and civil society organisations <i>while taking into account, in line with the national rules and industrial relations practices, the representativeness of the organisations as well as the specific role of social partners.</i>

Reason

The efficient and effective implementation of ESF actions depends on good governance and on partnership between all stakeholders. To this end, actions aimed at increasing the administrative capacities of the social partners and civil society constitute added value for ESF programming. It should also be specified that account shall be taken of, in line with the national rules and industrial relations practices of the Member State concerned, the representativeness of the organisations as well as to the specific role of social partners.

Amendment 6

linked to recommendation 1.5

Text proposed by the European Commission	EESC amendment
Article 7	Article 7
Partnership	Partnership
Member States shall ensure meaningful participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in the delivery of support for quality employment, education and skills and social inclusion policies in accordance with Article 6 of Regulation XX [NRP Plan].	Member States shall ensure meaningful participation of the social partners and civil society organisations in the delivery of support for quality employment, education and skills and social inclusion policies in accordance with Article 6 of Regulation XX [NRP Plan] <i>while taking into account the representativeness of the organisations as well as the specific role of social partners. Social partners and civil society organisations shall participate in monitoring committees, with the right to vote.</i>

Reason

As partnership is a fundamental value of cohesion policy, it is essential to ensure the full involvement of the social partners and civil society during all stages of ESF programming. It should also be specified that account shall be taken of, in line with the national rules and industrial relations practices of the Member State concerned, the representativeness of the organisations as well as to the specific role of social partners.

Brussels, 22 January 2026.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Séamus BOLAND
