



Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee

Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the European Fund for Regional Development including for European Territorial Cooperation (Interreg) and the Cohesion Fund as part of the Fund set out in Regulation (EU) [...] [NRP] and establishing conditions for the implementation of the Union support to regional development from 2028 to 2034

(COM(2025) 552 final – 2025/0238(COD))

(C/2026/875)

Rapporteur: **David SVENTEK**

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Referral	Council of the European Union, 16.9.2025 European Parliament, 12.11.2025
Legal basis	Articles 174, 176, 177, 178, 304, 340 and 349 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Section responsible	Economic and Monetary Union and Economic and Social Cohesion
Adopted in section	20.11.2025
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Plenary session No	601
Outcome of vote (for/against/abstentions)	167/0/1

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) stresses that the need to reduce regional and territorial disparities remains one of the key priorities of EU integration and that the use of traditional, proven and effective cohesion policy instruments is the right way forward to support sustainable prosperity across all regions of the EU.

1.2. The EESC recommends clarifying the role of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund within the National Regional Partnership Fund (NRPF), not only through general and specific objectives, but also through specific elaboration in the regulation. The EESC would welcome it if the draft regulation to which this opinion relates were to be elaborated and supplemented at least by an annex offering guidance on how to effectively integrate the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund into the NRPF.

1.3. The EESC insists that the new arrangements should not lead to a reduction in the importance and mission of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, particularly in supporting the development of lagging regions and the transformation of industrial areas. The EESC emphasises the importance of the partnership principle in the design of future programmes.

1.4. The EESC agrees with the content and thematic focus of the future Interreg programme and its synergies with the Global Europe programme in the specific cases proposed.

1.5. The EESC generally agrees with the innovative approach of the proposal regarding the future of the established Interreg programme, particularly in terms of accepting the implementation structure at the level of the individual chapters of the Interreg Plan.

1.6. The EESC draws attention to the risk of the relevant actors at regional cross-border level not being able to reach an agreement, given that the draft regulation is not very detailed. The EESC recommends adopting the implementing act immediately after the regulation is adopted.

1.7. The EESC recommends ensuring that the interpretation and implementation of the funds at Member State level are comparable and that there are no significant differences between Member States.

1.8. The EESC supports the simplification of implementation and administrative processes for more efficient use of funds.

1.9. The EESC appreciates that the proposal for a Regulation on the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund also provides for the possibility of supporting sustainable urban development and, within that framework, integrated urban and territorial development strategies focused on sustainable development and addressing challenges in the areas of the environment, energy and climate, fair transition to a clean, climate-neutral and resilient economy, with particular attention to affordable housing ⁽¹⁾, poverty, cultural heritage and the use of the potential of digital technologies for innovation and energy efficiency, support for the development of functional urban areas and support for links between cities and rural areas.

2. Commission proposal and context

2.1. As the title of the legislative document to which this opinion relates suggests, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund are intended to be part of the implementation structure covered by the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPP) at the level of each Member State in the European Commission's proposal for the future multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2028-2034. The ERDF and the Cohesion Fund are thus effectively a subset of the European fund for economic, social and territorial cohesion, agriculture and rural areas, fisheries and maritime affairs, prosperity and security (National and Regional Partnership Fund: NRPF). The NRPF Regulation explicitly states that its content is compatible with the ERDF and Cohesion Fund Regulation; in this context, it is desirable to view both documents together.

2.2. It is the NRPF Regulation that regulates, in its general and specific objectives, the key areas of focus of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, primarily towards reducing regional disparities in the EU and the backwardness of the least developed regions (general objective). It further specifies, for example, support for sustainable prosperity across all regions of the EU (including integrated urban and rural development, strengthening competitiveness in strategically important sectors, just transition and key infrastructure) and support for the EU's defence capabilities and security at regional level.

2.3. The ERDF and the Cohesion Fund are thus primarily subject to the common rules defined in the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR), while the text of the CPR does not contain any further specific passages for the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, nor for the other funds it covers.

2.4. An exception to the description in the previous paragraphs is the European Territorial Cooperation Programme (Interreg), which was proposed outside the NRPP system and has a separate financial allocation of EUR 10,3 billion for the future financial perspective for the purposes of cross-border, interregional and transnational projects and cooperation between the outermost regions.

2.5. The Interreg Plan is proposed as the management tool for the Interreg programme. The proposed legislative standard defines the requirements of the Interreg Plan, which is divided into chapters. Each chapter represents the regulation of cooperation in a given geographical area and represents the basic unit of the Interreg Plan; it must meet the prescribed requirements and is the basis for the implementation and management of the programme, with the managing authorities operating at the level of individual chapters.

⁽¹⁾ Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee – Affordable housing: What can cohesion policy, the Urban Agenda and civil society do to ensure housing is affordable for everyone? (own-initiative opinion) (OJ C, C/2025/5153, 28.10.2025, ELI: <https://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/5153/oj>).

2.6. The scope of the Interreg programme is defined by the need to ensure cooperation between adjacent regions, cooperation within larger transnational territories (such as macro-regional strategies, although the draft regulation does not use this term), cooperation to strengthen the effectiveness of cohesion policy through the exchange of experience, innovative approaches and capacity building, or cooperation between the outermost regions and adjacent territories in synergy with the Global Europe programme.

2.7. From a thematic perspective, all specific objectives that correspond to the ERDF area as defined in the CPR (reducing interregional disparities) are relevant to the Interreg programme. Furthermore, the ERDF and Cohesion Fund Regulation also adds specific objectives for social areas as relevant to the Interreg programme (specific objective 3 under the CPR: Strengthening social cohesion by supporting people and strengthening communities in the EU and the EU social model). The scope of Interreg should also include the protection and strengthening of democracy and the promotion of EU values (specific objective 5 of the CPR).

2.8. The ERDF and Cohesion Fund Regulation also proposes a new mechanism for synergies between Interreg activities in remote areas and the Global Europe programme for the Interreg programme.

2.9. The ERDF and Cohesion Fund Regulation also specifies the need to direct both funds towards measures supporting the sustainable development of future generations (targeting young people in all types of territories and disadvantaged areas).

2.10. Last but not least, projects focused on rural areas, areas affected by industrial change, regions significantly and permanently disadvantaged by natural or demographic conditions, and the outermost regions are also a way of reducing regional and territorial disparities. The proposal also includes areas bordering Russia, Belarus and Ukraine among the disadvantaged areas.

3. General comments

3.1. The EESC shares the view that the need to reduce regional and territorial disparities and inequalities remains one of the key priorities of EU integration, despite the relatively convincing progress made, particularly in the case of the least developed Member States and their territories and regions. At the same time, policies aimed at this objective continue to meet the criterion of EU added value.

3.2. The EESC understands the rationale behind the NRPP concept; nevertheless, it believes that the NRPF Regulation should define the boundaries of the scope of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund much more clearly, not only through alignment with the general and specific objectives. At the same time, the EESC understands that the final choice of measures supported by the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund will remain a matter for Member States to decide, as the result of a consensual discussion with territorial and sectoral stakeholders.

3.3. The EESC also broadly agrees with the innovative approach of the proposal regarding the future of the established Interreg programme, particularly in terms of accepting the implementation structure at the level of the individual chapters of the Interreg Plan. The EESC therefore draws attention to the risk of the relevant actors at regional cross-border level not being able to reach an agreement and the ability to adapt to the new rules, which may cause delays in putting the Interreg programme into practice.

3.4. The Committee welcomes the analytical and information support provided by ESPON for the programming phase with a unique set of common indicators allowing for coherent basis for further socio-economic analyses of each territory.

3.5. The EESC also agrees with the content and thematic focus of the future Interreg programme and its synergies with the Global Europe programme in the specific cases proposed.

3.6. The EESC points to what it considers to be an insufficient definition of the role of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund in the future NRPF. The actual proposal for a Regulation on the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund only touches on the main areas of use of both funds in a very marginal way and mostly refers to the text of the proposal for a Regulation on the NRPF. The proposal for a Regulation on the NRPF regulates the areas of activity of both funds only by means of a thematic list of areas within the general and specific objectives, with the European Commission shifting the key role here to the level of the Member States. There is therefore a risk that interpretations at Member State level will differ and that interventions from both funds will then be incomparable. Another risk may be delays in launching the NRPF, as it will be difficult to assign specific thematic areas to individual funds.

3.7. At the same time, the EESC welcomes the fact that, despite the relatively significant reduction in the volume of guaranteed national envelopes, the need to continue with the traditional instruments of cohesion policy – the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund – is still being emphasised. The EESC also welcomes the fact that some new elements of cohesion policy for the period 2021-2027, such as the just transition process, are still included in the proposal, albeit without the support of a specific fund earmarked for this purpose.

3.8. The EESC respects the fact that the new approach, where the choice between specific objectives will be much more a matter for Member States than before, will open up opportunities for exploiting hitherto untapped synergies between policies and programmes.

3.9. The EESC hopes that the new arrangements will not diminish the importance and mission of the two traditional cohesion policy funds (the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund). The ERDF should continue to play its irreplaceable role in supporting the development and structural change of regions, especially those lagging behind, and the conversion of industrial areas threatened by or facing decline, thereby helping to eliminate fundamental regional disparities in the EU. At the same time, there can be no doubt about the usefulness of the Cohesion Fund in supporting projects in the field of the environment, adaptation to climate change and the development of transport infrastructure, particularly from the perspective of the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T).

3.10. The EESC welcomes the fact that the ex-post evaluations carried out have demonstrated the legitimacy of the continued existence of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund in the future. Efforts to simplify implementation and administrative processes should also be viewed positively.

3.11. The EESC appreciates that the proposal for a Regulation on the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund also provides for the possibility of supporting sustainable urban development and, within this framework, integrated urban development strategies focused on sustainable development and addressing challenges in the areas of the environment, energy and climate and a fair transition to a clean, climate-neutral and resilient economy, with particular attention to housing, poverty, cultural heritage and the use of digital technologies for innovation and energy efficiency, support for the development of functional urban areas and support for links between cities and rural areas.

4. Specific comments

4.1. The EESC would welcome it if the draft regulation to which this opinion relates were to be expanded and supplemented with at least an annex offering guidance on how to effectively integrate the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund into the NRPF and describe more funding eligibility and affiliation to individual funds.

4.2. At the same time, the EESC wonders why the draft regulation with this title devotes very little attention to the actual implementation of the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, which could create considerable uncertainty at Member State level and lead to different practical approaches being taken by individual Member States, with the Interreg programme being the main focus of the proposal in most cases.

4.3. Despite its criticism of the insufficient attention paid in the draft regulation to the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund, the EESC acknowledges that the traditional instruments for reducing regional and territorial disparities within the EU – the ERDF and the Cohesion Fund – are proposed for the next period in the form of a comprehensive approach to the issue, together with the instruments supporting the common agricultural policy, rural policy, fisheries and security. The issue of reducing disparities will thus be much more closely linked to these policies, albeit with a significantly lower budget, under the shared management mechanism.

4.4. Furthermore, the EESC notes that the initial information and guidelines for drawing up the Interreg Plan and its chapters are sufficient to ensure that the programme fulfils its purpose and function, even under the new concept and regime. However, in order to facilitate preparation and agreement between Member States, it is desirable to prepare an implementing act that will provide the necessary methodological support.

Brussels, 3 December 2025.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Séamus BOLAND
