



Brussels, 9 July 2026
(OR. en)

11755/26

**Interinstitutional File:
2025/0239 (COD)**

LIMITE

**COH 132
SOC 488
SAN 578
CADREFIN 332
POLGEN 192
CODEC 1427
PARLNAT**

COVER NOTE

From:	European Committee of the Regions
date of receipt:	9 July 2026
To:	General Secretariat of the Council

Subject:	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) [...] [NRPPlan] 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 - Opinion from the European Committee of the Regions
----------	---

Delegations will find enclosed the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on the above.



**European Committee
of the Regions**

SEDEC-VIII/011

172nd plenary session, 1-2 July 2026

DRAFT OPINION

European Social Fund 2028-2034

Rapporteur: **Tom Jungen (LU/PES)**
Mayor of the Municipality of Roeser

Deadline for tabling amendments:

15:00 (Brussels time) on 16 June 2026. Amendments must be submitted using the online tool for tabling amendments (available through the Members' Portal at <https://mportal.cor.europa.eu/>).

Number of signatures required: 6

Reference document:

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) [...] [NRPPan] 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

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AMENDMENTS

Recommendation for amendment 1

Recital 1

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
	<p><i>[Whereas:] (1) Article 162 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) establishes the European Social Fund (ESF) in order to improve employment opportunities for workers in the internal market, thereby helping to improve living standards, facilitating employment, increasing their geographic and occupational mobility within the Union and helping them to adapt to industrial transformations and changes in production systems, notably through vocational training and retraining.</i></p> <p><i>Article 174 TFEU states that the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion.</i></p>

Recommendation for amendment 2

Recital 1

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p>[...] In order to contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights the ESF should support investments in people and reforms of the systems in the policy areas of employment, education and social inclusion, thereby supporting economic, territorial and social cohesion in accordance with Article 174 of the Treaty.</p>	<p>[...] In order to contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights the ESF should support investments in people and reforms of the systems in the policy areas of employment, education and social inclusion, thereby supporting economic, territorial and social cohesion in accordance with Article 174 of the Treaty. <i>In order to tackle inequalities and geographically concentrated educational, training and cultural gaps, the ESF should guarantee a specific and significant allocation of resources for the integrated territorial strategies, including through territorial instruments such as ITI and CLLD, while at the same time maintaining the flexibility within the framework of the NRP Plan. This approach must not alter the planning</i></p>

	<i>framework set out in the NRP Plan Regulation, but must strengthen the ESF contribution to territorial cohesion. In addition, and taking into account the permanent structural constraints of the outermost regions referred to in Article 349 TFEU, as well as the specific challenges of regions facing demographic decline, the ESF should provide specific measures aimed at improving access to employment, professional mobility, education, skills and social inclusion in those regions.</i>
--	--

<i>Reason</i>
Poverty and exclusion require part of the ESF to be earmarked for place-based strategies, ensuring real impact without altering the NRP plans. Reintroducing Article 349 TFEU is key for cohesion and support for outermost regions.

Recommendation for amendment 3

Recital 3

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
At Union level, the European Semester of economic policy coordination is the framework to identify national reform priorities and monitor their implementation. Member States must submit annual progress reports on the implementation of their medium-term fiscal-structural plans. That framework should be the basis for the use of Union funding in a coherent manner, including with a view to maximise the added value of the financial support to be received.	At Union level, the European Semester of economic policy coordination is the framework to identify national reform priorities and monitor their implementation. <i>Under the Semester, the Social Convergence Framework assesses the risks and challenges to upward social convergence in the Member States with the aim of preserving social fairness and ensuring a cohesive society and an economy that delivers sustainable and inclusive growth.</i> Member States should submit annual progress reports on the implementation of their medium-term fiscal-structural plans. <i>Both elements of this</i> framework should be the basis for the use of Union funding in a coherent manner, including with a view to <i>maximising</i> the added value of the financial support to be received <i>and addressing the risks to social convergence.</i>

<i>Reason</i>
The Social Convergence Framework is the most concrete social element of the European Semester and should be the main link between the ESF and the Semester.

Recommendation for amendment 4

Recital 4

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
The Union is confronted with structural challenges arising from economic globalisation, vulnerable supply chains, the management of migration flows and the increased security threat, the clean energy transition, technological change and demographic change, an ageing workforce, lack of social housing, and growing skills and labour shortages in many sectors and regions.	The Union is confronted with structural challenges arising from economic globalisation, vulnerable supply chains, the management of migration flows and the increased security threat, the clean energy transition, technological change, <i>the development of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools</i> and demographic change, an ageing workforce, lack of social housing, and growing skills and labour shortages in many sectors and regions.

<i>Reason</i>
Progress needs to be made in studying and assessing the impact of the development of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools and the difficulties this poses when it comes to education, employment and the lives of EU citizens.

Recommendation for amendment 5

Recital 6

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
Between now and 2040, the Union labour market will comprise approximately 1 million fewer persons each year. Furthermore, in addition to a shrinking workforce, some regions are affected by a small and stagnant share of the population with tertiary education, making it difficult to compensate for the loss of labour through higher labour productivity. This will increase pressure on the social welfare model of the Union, putting its sustainability and adequacy under pressure. It will also increase labour and skills shortages in the labour market, putting strain on economic growth and competitiveness. For some sectors this will <i>lead to</i> labour cost pressures. This is why the ESF needs to support an increase in participation in the labour market, especially of women and young people, persons with disabilities, Roma communities and to support employers in finding the right people for available jobs, empower older workers with appropriate labour market and workplace measures, ensure a skilled workforce able to tackle major societal challenges, and	Between now and 2040, the Union labour market will comprise approximately 1 million fewer persons each year. Furthermore, in addition to a shrinking workforce, some regions are affected by a small and stagnant share of the population with tertiary education, making it difficult to compensate for the loss of labour through higher labour productivity, <i>not to mention the impact of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools on training cycles and the labour market.</i> This will increase pressure on the social welfare model of the Union, putting its sustainability and adequacy under pressure. It will also increase labour and skills shortages in the labour market, putting strain on economic growth and competitiveness. For some sectors this will <i>generate</i> labour cost pressures. This is why the ESF needs to support an increase in participation in the labour market, especially of women and young people, persons with disabilities, Roma communities and to support employers in finding the right people for available jobs, empower older workers with appropriate

support a healthy work life balance <i>including</i> by ensuring access to quality childcare.	labour market and workplace measures, ensure a skilled workforce able to tackle major societal challenges, and support a healthy work life balance, <i>particularly</i> by ensuring access to quality childcare.
---	--

<i>Reason</i>
Progress needs to be made in studying and assessing the impact of the development of new artificial intelligence (AI) tools and the difficulties this poses, in particular when it comes to education, employment, vocational training and the lives of EU citizens.

Recommendation for amendment 6

Recital 11

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
Efficient and effective implementation of actions supported by the <i>NRP Plan</i> , including the ESF, depends on good governance and partnership between all actors at the relevant territorial levels and the socio-economic actors, in particular the social partners and civil society organisations.	Efficient and effective implementation of actions supported by the <i>national recovery and resilience plans</i> , including the ESF, depends on good <i>multilevel</i> governance <i>that includes regions and local authorities</i> and partnership between all actors at the relevant territorial levels and the socio-economic actors, in particular the social partners and civil society organisations. <i>The effective involvement of regional and local representatives and the social partners and civil society organisations is essential for ensuring the quality of ESF measures. To this end, their role should be given greater prominence in the relevant ESF committees under the terms of this Regulation, without prejudice to the partnership rules of the NRP Plans.</i>

<i>Reason</i>
The amendment highlights the need for multilevel governance when it comes to the crucial involvement of regions and local authorities, while respecting the partnership principle and emphasising the social partners and civil society organisations.

Recommendation for amendment 7

Recital 15

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
[...] The ESF <i>should</i> also contribute to the modernisation of social protection systems with a view in particular to promoting their accessibility.	[...] The ESF <i>must</i> also contribute to the modernisation of social protection systems with a view in particular to promoting their accessibility.

	<i>The ESF should also support timely and equal access to affordable, sustainable and quality essential services, including housing, care, healthcare and education, with a particular focus on minors and their families and disadvantaged groups.</i>
--	---

Reason
The new Regulation weakens the explicit reference to essential services, in particular housing and childcare, that are in the 2021-2027 ESF+ Regulation.

Recommendation for amendment 8

Recital 16

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
[...] Support to social innovation <i>plays an important role in achieving these objectives and should therefore be promoted.</i>	[...] Support to social innovation <i>and transnational cooperation has proven to deliver high European added value. A specific channel should be set up within the ESF to ensure the continuity of the work of the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) in experimentation and scaling up solutions, including local models aimed at eliminating long-term unemployment, without changing the functions or implementation methods laid down in the NRP Plan Regulation. Similarly, the macro-regional strategies (MRSs) constitute important frameworks that strengthen transnational cooperation and cohesion within the EU, thus also creating the conditions for multilevel development.</i>

Reason
Social innovation and transnational cooperation, long-standing areas of EaSI's activities, are key for scaling up effective solutions. Creating a social innovation strand within the ESF managed by the Commission would maintain the NRPP framework and ensure the continuity of best practices.

Recommendation for amendment 9

Add to Recital 16

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
	<i>Mentoring is a proven lever for social inclusion, access to employment and skills development. In view of the available evidence of its impact and its</i>

	<i>alignment with the Union’s priorities, it should be integrated into the Union’s funding instruments – in particular the European Social Fund (ESF) and national and regional partnership plans – so as to enable its deployment on a large scale.</i>
--	--

Recommendation for amendment 10

Recital 18

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
[...] In this context, Member States should also be encouraged to use the ESF to supports targeted actions to promote horizontal principles such as the promotion of gender equality and ensuring the accessibility of services for people with disabilities and to enable people with disabilities to actively participate.	[...] In this context, Member States must also be encouraged to use the ESF to supports targeted actions to promote horizontal principles such as the promotion of gender equality and to ensure the accessibility of services for people with disabilities and to enable them to actively participate. <i>The ESF will ensure that gender equality, gender mainstreaming and the cross-cutting integration of the gender dimension are taken into account and promoted at all stages of its implementation. It will also help to increase women’s participation in employment, combat the feminisation of poverty and promote work-life balance. The ESF should also ensure respect for the principle of equal opportunities and non-discrimination, including accessibility for people with disabilities and support for the transition from institutional models to community- and family-based services.</i>

<i>Reason</i>
The new Regulation weakens gender equality. A strong clause similar to that in the 2021-2027 ESF+ Regulation should be introduced, and accessibility, non-discrimination and deinstitutionalisation guarantees from the previous framework maintained.

Recommendation for amendment 11

Recital 19

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
To ensure that the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights is duly put forward and that a sufficient amount of resources is targeting those most in need, Member States should allocate resources of the ESF to fostering social inclusion.	To guarantee that a sufficient quantity of ESF resources is directed towards those who need it most, and that the social dimension of Europe as set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights is effectively put forward, the ESF must ensure a strong and visible focus on child and gender

	<i>poverty and social exclusion, fair and decent employment, education, training and culture, housing and efforts to address material deprivation, complementing the horizontal provisions of the NRPP Regulation. These priorities must be supported using a specific allocation of resources under the ESF, while at the same time allowing managing authorities sufficient flexibility in the design and application of measures to address these priorities in line with the needs identified on the ground.</i>
--	--

Reason
A minimum ESF allocation is needed: 20 million children remain at risk of poverty, with this number increasing and threatening social cohesion. Eradicating child poverty must be cross-cutting and must be a priority in order to meet the EU's 2030 target of reducing it by 5 million cases.

Recommendation for amendment 12

Recital 20

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<i>Due to the particular need to support children in poverty Member States should also programme resources of the ESF to address the measures under the Child Guarantee.</i>	<i>Given the need to support children and contribute to the European Child Guarantee, the ESF should ensure that there is a strong and specific focus on tackling child poverty and social exclusion in all Member States, regions and local authorities, taking account of the different levels of need and guaranteeing that support goes to where it is most required. This support should be provided using an appropriate and specific allocation of ESF resources, while preserving flexibility in implementation under the NRP Plan.</i>

Reason
A minimum allocation under the ESF is needed to combat child poverty and should be applied in all Member States, reflecting the EU's commitment to the European Pillar of Social Rights. To this end, realistic and comparable indicators by country are essential.

Recommendation for amendment 13

Article 2

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<i>Article 2 ESF support</i>	<i>Article 2 ESF support</i>

(1) The European Social Fund (ESF) shall support the specific objectives set out in Article 3 of Regulation XX [NRP Plan Regulation].

(2) For the purpose of paragraph 1, Member States use of the ESF shall, for the purposes of Article 2, point (b) of Regulation XX [NRP Plan], be based on the guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, as provided for in Article 148 (2) of the Treaty, set out in the Decision (EU) xxxx [Employment guidelines adopted by the Council at the latest by 1 January 2027].

(1) The European Social Fund (ESF) shall support the specific objectives set out in Article 3 of Regulation XX [NRP Plan Regulation] ***with an allocation of at least EUR 110 billion (2025 prices), which will be complemented, where appropriate, with corresponding amounts in current prices and adjusted for inflation.***

(1a) Gaps in the specific objectives of the ESF+ compared to previous references shall also be addressed. In particular, the ESF+ shall support the implementation of the Youth Guarantee; efforts to modernise labour market institutions and services, including anticipating skills needs; the balanced participation of women and men in the labour market and equal working conditions; the adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change; equitable access to quality and inclusive education and training, ensuring these are completed; and the socioeconomic integration of third-country nationals, including migrants and marginalised communities, such as the Roma community.

(2) For the purpose of paragraph 1, Member States use of the ESF shall, for the purposes of Article 2, point (b) of Regulation XX [NRP Plan], be based on the guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States, as provided for in Article 148 (2) of the Treaty, set out in the Decision (EU) xxxx [Employment guidelines adopted by the Council at the latest by 1 January 2027].

(3) The ESF specific objectives shall be set out in this Regulation in order to ensure legal certainty, political visibility and consistency in the implementation of the fund, while remaining aligned with the NRP Plan Regulation.

(4) The Commission shall, by means of implementing acts, establish ESF indicators to measure: a) poverty and child poverty reduction; b) access to essential services; c) quality employment; d) housing; e) material deprivation; and f) the local and regional dimension at least at NUTS 3 level, in accordance with this Regulation. These indicators shall be consistent with the Performance Framework Regulation and, where appropriate, take into account the

	<p><i>European Semester, in particular the country-specific recommendations addressed to the Member States, as well as the Social Convergence Framework.</i></p> <p><i>(5) The implementation of the ESF shall avoid disproportionately concentrating resources in capital regions or in other higher-income areas, ensuring that areas with the greatest needs are effectively targeted. To this end, Member States shall establish objective place-based criteria and indicators at least at NUTS 3 level, and report annually in accordance with Article 2(3).</i></p> <p><i>(6) Member States shall report annually on the local and regional implementation of the ESF at least at NUTS 3 level in order to avoid disproportionate geographical concentrations and to improve efforts to target areas with greater needs.</i></p>
--	--

<i>Reason</i>
The ESF should remain a social investment tool (Articles 162 to 164 TFEU) with minimum allocations for inclusion, child poverty and NEETs, earmark funds for place-based strategies and use disaggregated NUTS 3 indicators to ensure local inequalities are not hidden.

Recommendation for amendment 14

New Article 3

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
	<p><i>The European Social Fund shall contribute towards:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>a) reaching high levels of employment and quality employment, with fair and decent wages commensurate with the cost of living;</i> <i>b) promoting fair and sufficient social protection;</i> <i>c) developing a skilled and resilient workforce that is prepared for the future;</i> <i>d) fostering inclusive and cohesive societies;</i> <i>e) reducing and eradicating poverty;</i> <i>f) applying the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights.</i>

<i>Reason</i>
The new Regulation removes the general objectives of the ESF, undermining its identity. Reintroducing these objectives is key to preserving the Regulation's strategic direction.

Recommendation for amendment 15

Article 4

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 4</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Social innovation</i></p> <p>(1) Social innovation shall <i>be supported</i> in the areas falling within the scope of the ESF, in particular with the aim of testing, evaluating and scaling up innovative solutions, including at the local or regional level, in order to address social needs in partnership with the relevant partners and, in particular, social partners.</p> <p>(2) The Commission shall use technical assistance at its own initiative, in accordance with Article 12 of Regulation (EU) [NRP Plan Regulation] to facilitate capacity building for social innovation, in particular through supporting mutual learning, transnational cooperation, establishing networks, and disseminating and promoting good practices and methodologies.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 4</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Social innovation</i></p> <p>(1) Social innovation <i>and transnational cooperation</i> shall <i>receive specific support</i> in the areas falling within the scope of the ESF, in particular with the aim of testing, evaluating and scaling up innovative solutions <i>and experimentation</i>, including at the local or regional level, <i>and of transferring solutions, such as local ‘zero long-term unemployment’ models</i>, in order to address social needs <i>in particular, adopting innovative approaches for accessing culture</i> in partnership with the relevant partners and, in particular, social partners.</p> <p>(2) The Commission shall use technical assistance at its own initiative, in accordance with Article 12 of Regulation (EU) [NRP Plan Regulation] to facilitate capacity building for social innovation, <i>including in the field of culture</i>, in particular through supporting mutual learning, transnational cooperation, establishing networks, and disseminating and promoting good practices and methodologies.</p> <p><i>(3) The Commission may directly manage calls for proposals under the ESF social innovation strand that ensure the functional continuity of EaSI in: a) social innovation and experimentation; b) transnational cooperation; and c) support for local job guarantees and ‘zero long-term unemployment’ models, in full respect of the applicable financial and implementation rules.</i></p> <p><i>(4) Member States may support the scaling up and transfer of innovative approaches developed on a small scale, including those previously funded by EaSI or other Union programmes.</i></p> <p><i>(5) In the context of social innovation, the Commission shall support measures to develop mentoring programmes and deploy them on a</i></p>

	<i>large scale, contributing to social inclusion, access to employment and skills development.</i>
--	--

<i>Reason</i>
Social innovation and transnational cooperation, long-standing areas of EaSI's activities, are key for scaling up effective solutions. Creating a social innovation strand within the ESF managed by the Commission would ensure the continuity of results and the transfer of best practices without altering the NRPPs.

Recommendation for amendment 16

Article 5

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 5</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Support for demographic transition</i></p> <p>Member States and regions shall, where appropriate, set out an integrated approach to addressing challenges stemming from the demographic transition in one or more dedicated chapters of the National Regional and Partnership Plan.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Article 5</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Support for demographic transition</i></p> <p>Member States and regions shall, where appropriate, set out an integrated approach to addressing challenges stemming from the demographic transition in one or more dedicated chapters of the National Regional and Partnership Plan. <i>This approach could include localising investments through integrated place-based strategies and place-based instruments (ITI, CLLD, etc.) aimed at improving both access to essential services and human and social capital, while enhancing the regions' attractiveness and living conditions. To this end, special attention could be paid to regions experiencing persistent demographic challenges, especially at NUTS 3, taking account of relevant indicators such as population loss, ageing populations or territorial imbalances.</i></p>

<i>Reason</i>
The CoR secured the first EU legal definition of depopulation as continuous demographic decline. The Commission has refined this definition and, through communications, such as presidential letters, has helped to highlight the CoR's contribution and the right to stay in specific areas.

Recommendation for amendment 17

Article 6

<i>Text proposed by the European Commission</i>	<i>CoR amendment</i>
(5) For the purposes of this Article, 'most deprived persons' means natural persons, whether individuals, families, households or groups of	(5) For the purposes of this Article, 'most deprived persons' means natural persons, whether individuals, families, households or groups of

persons, including children in vulnerable situations and homeless people, whose need for assistance has been established according to the objective criteria which are set by the national competent authorities in consultation with relevant stakeholders while avoiding conflicts of interest, and which may include elements that allow for the targeting of the most deprived persons in certain geographical areas.	persons, including children in vulnerable situations, older people and homeless people, whose need for assistance has been established according to the objective criteria which are set by the national competent authorities in consultation with relevant stakeholders while avoiding conflicts of interest, and which may include elements that allow for the targeting of the most deprived persons in certain geographical areas.
---	--

Reason
To include older people in the definition of ‘most deprived persons’, as, together with minors, they are considered to be one of the groups most in need of protection.

Recommendation for amendment 18

Article 7

Text proposed by the European Commission	CoR amendment
<i>Article 7</i> <i>Partnership</i>	<i>Article 7</i> <i>Partnership</i>
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 and educational 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].

Reason
Stressing the added value of including educational partners.

Recommendation for amendment 19

Article 8

Text proposed by the European Commission	CoR amendment
<i>Article 8</i> <i>Committee set up under Article 163 TFEU</i>	<i>Article 8</i> <i>Committee set up under Article 163 TFEU</i>
(1) The Commission shall be assisted by the Committee set up under Article 163 TFEU (‘the ESF Committee’) with regard to the support provided for the general objective referred to in Article 3(1), point (c) [specific objective – employment] of Regulation XX [NRP Plan].	(1) The Commission shall be assisted by the Committee set up under Article 163 TFEU (‘the ESF Committee’) with regard to the support provided for the general objective referred to in Article 3(1), point (c) [specific objective – employment] of Regulation XX [NRP Plan].

<p>(2) Each Member State shall appoint one government representative, one representative of the workers' organisations, one representative of the employers' organisations and one alternate for each member for a maximum period of seven years. In the absence of a member, the alternate shall be automatically entitled to take part in the proceedings. The Committee shall also include one representative from each of the organizations representing workers' organisations and employers' organisations at Union level.</p> <p>(3) The Committee may deliver opinions on any issues regarding the implementation of the ESF.</p>	<p>(2) Each Member State shall appoint one government representative, <i>one regional representative, one local representative</i>, one representative of the workers' organisations, one representative of the employers' organisations and <i>self-employed people and</i> one alternate for each member for a maximum period of seven years. In the absence of a member, the alternate shall be automatically entitled to take part in the proceedings. The Committee shall also include one representative from each of the organizations representing workers' organisations and employers' organisations at Union level. <i>The Committee shall also include one representative of civil society organisations at EU level, appointed in accordance with transparent representation rules.</i></p> <p>(3) <i>The Committee may make recommendations on ESF indicators and on the application of minimum allocations under Article 2.</i></p> <p>(4) The Committee may deliver opinions on any <i>other</i> issues regarding the implementation of the ESF.</p>
---	---

<i>Reason</i>
<p>Updating the ESF Committee to include civil society, with social action recognised at EU level, and allowing recommendations on indicators and minimum allocations, would strengthen legitimacy and technical oversight without affecting the governance of the NRP plans.</p>

II. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS (CoR):

1. welcomes the objective of a people-centred 2028-2034 ESF and reiterates that it should remain a dedicated fund with a guaranteed allocation of at least EUR 110 billion (2025 prices), which must be complemented with corresponding amounts in current prices and adjusted for inflation, and should be strengthened and kept separate from other funds included in the NRPPs, being the only EU fund dedicated as a priority to social policies. Social and geographical imbalances and inequalities prove this need. Social Europe is a distinctive feature of the EU's identity at global level;
2. points out that the ESF has been provided for in an EU Treaty (Title XI TFEU) since 1957. It is an integral part of the EU's unique identity at global level;

3. believes that creating one plan per Member State runs the risk of eroding subsidiarity, weakening multilevel governance and undermining the partnership principle, and may create uncertainties on the predictability of funding and hinder efforts to ensure funds reach those who need them most, particularly at regional and local levels; underlines, in this regard, the need for Member States to have sufficient flexibility in line with their national systems, while ensuring that regional and local authorities are properly involved;
4. calls for governance to remain under shared management, including the competent local and regional authorities and ensuring greater involvement for social partners and civil society under the partnership principle, due to their proximity to problems on the ground and associated needs. The CoR therefore supports the idea of a multilevel governance assessment and a subsidiarity clause, as proposed in its opinion on the NRP plans;
5. calls for a substantial increase in the ESF budget to EUR 110 billion (2025 constant prices) in order to achieve the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights, guaranteeing a strong and visible allocation for the ESF, and underlines the importance of prioritising investments in social inclusion, combating child poverty in all Member States (with greater efforts where child poverty exceeds the EU average), supporting young NEETs, where appropriate, and tackling material deprivation;
6. calls for maintaining support for transnational cooperation, in particular to promote mutual learning, the transfer of good practices and the scaling up of innovative solutions with European added value;
7. estimates that 94.6 million people – 21.4% of the EU population – were living in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion, with rates of 24.8% in the EU-27, proving that the EU is not on track to meet the objective of reducing this number by at least 15 million people by 2030;
8. points out that one in four people under the age of 18 in the EU is at risk of poverty or exclusion, and 48% of single mothers and 32% of single fathers also suffer this risk, and that therefore the ESF should intensify its priority actions on children, single-parent households and women. It should become the spearhead of the future European anti-poverty strategy, in line with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and advancing the social targets set for 2030 at the 2021 Porto Social Summit, as well as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with which the European Commission has explicitly aligned itself in its political guidelines for the 2024-2029 term of office;
9. reiterates that reprogramming during the 2021-2027 period and any extension into the 2028-2034 period must not undermine the ESF's social mission. Any flexibility should preserve its capacity to reduce inequalities, address poverty and support training, education, culture, quality jobs, access to housing and active social inclusion, avoiding the recurring use of the ESF as an instrument for emergencies (which require their own specific instruments), as this would undermine its predictability and structural impact;
10. stresses that implementing the 'right to stay' in practice would require safeguarding access to essential services (housing, care and healthcare, affordable transport, connectivity), and specific

affordable housing and homelessness metrics in line with those set out in the TFEU; calls for attention to be given to areas suffering structural disadvantages (depopulation, islands), in a manner consistent with principles 3 and 20 of the European Social Pillar and Articles 34(3), 35 and 36 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, measuring results with indicators at least at NUTS 3 level where local administrative unit (LAU) level is not feasible, using the urban-rural classification of Regulation (EU) 2017/2391;

11. underlines that national and ethnic minority communities living in mountain, rural and peripheral areas face a specific combination of social risks that is not adequately captured by existing ESF categories; calls on the Commission and Member States to ensure that ESF-funded services – including employment support, skills training, healthcare, care services and social inclusion measures – are accessible in minority languages where this is necessary to guarantee equal and effective access; stresses that cultural and linguistic identity is a protective factor against social exclusion and depopulation and should therefore be supported as an integral part of place-based territorial development strategies financed by the ESF;
12. stresses that energy poverty in mountain and rural areas represents a specific form of social deprivation that is structurally different from urban energy poverty: harsh climatic conditions requiring significantly higher heating expenditure, limited access to district heating or renewable energy networks, and low incomes combine to produce a disproportionate energy cost burden for households; calls for the ESF to explicitly recognise energy poverty alleviation in structurally disadvantaged regions as an eligible and prioritised intervention area under social inclusion objectives, including through support for energy efficiency retrofitting combined with social support services for the most deprived households, in coordination with the ERDF and the Just Transition Fund;
13. calls for the ESF to specifically address the risk of demographic collapse in small-settlement structures (villages and hamlets with fewer than 500 inhabitants) in mountain, rural and peripheral areas, where the combination of outmigration of young people, ageing populations, school and service closures, and lack of economic opportunities creates self-reinforcing depopulation spirals; urges that ESF-supported territorial strategies for such areas include dedicated youth retention measures – including quality apprenticeships, local employment pathways, entrepreneurship support and access to digital skills – as well as measures to attract and retain healthcare and care workers; stresses that the preservation of settled communities in these territories is a precondition for maintaining biodiversity, cultural heritage and the territorial cohesion of the Union as a whole;
14. welcomes the introduction of Article 5 on supporting the demographic transition, which positions the ESF as a key instrument for addressing place-based demographic changes and ensuring the right to stay, taking up the CoR’s successful proposal for 2021-2027¹, but notes that it must be aligned with the definitions contained in the demographic toolbox and the Ninth Cohesion Report²

¹ COTER-VI/046.

² *Ninth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion*, 2024, European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, p. xxiii, https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/reports/cohesion9/9CR_Report_FINAL.pdf.
Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action (COM(2023) 577 final), 2023, European Commission, Publications Office of the European Union, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0577>.

for policies on ageing, depopulation and labour market transformation that require sustained investments in care, skills, talent attraction and community-based services;

15. believes, therefore, that the European Social Fund is a fundamental tool for creating catalogues of essential services in each Member State to cover each State's entire geographical area, as already identified by the Commission³ and by the CoR⁴ itself;
16. calls for a stronger place-based approach: maintaining and enhancing community-led local development (CLLD) and integrated territorial investment (ITI) tools; linking allocations to the proportion of the population experiencing social exclusion; and prioritising vulnerable areas (depopulated rural areas, intermediary cities and strained metropolitan areas in the case of housing), particularly by taking into account services leaving the areas and intra-regional inequalities as central allocation criteria⁵;
17. notes with concern that one in four children in the EU are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, confirming that the target of reducing the number of poor children by 5 million by 2030 is not progressing as planned, and that the youth unemployment rate is nearing 15%, proving the need to reinforce the Child Guarantee and the Youth Guarantee with dedicated budgets, place-based indicators and the involvement of specialised civil society organisations;
18. points out that 80% of long-term care in the EU is provided by informal carers, the majority of whom are women, and that the growing demand for care due to ageing requires structural investments; therefore reiterates that the ESF must contribute to rolling out the European care strategy, ensuring fair working conditions and supporting and enhancing quality community-based services;
19. believes that the EU is far from achieving its objective to end homelessness by 2030, given that affordable housing is disappearing in most Member States;
20. welcomes the announced European Affordable Housing Plan and backs plans for the ESF to support measures related to decent, affordable and sustainable access to housing (including 'housing first'), especially for families, young people and vulnerable communities, supporting the ERDF and the EIB in order to expand the supply of social housing;
21. stresses the need to expand the role of the ESF in access to affordable housing, including in efforts to prevent homelessness, in the 'housing first' approach and in supporting integrated social inclusion services;

The impact of demographic change – in a changing environment (SWD(2023) 21 final), 2023, Commission staff working document, European Commission, p. 8, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-01/the_impact_of_demographic_change_in_a_changing_environment_2023.PDF.

³ *Report on access to essential services in the EU*, 2024, European Commission, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2767/447353>.

⁴ COTER-VII/022.

⁵ *Analysis of EU policies around rural innovation*, RURACTIVE, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15227863>.

22. calls for measures on addressing energy poverty, the cost of living and affordable transport (transport poverty) to be systematically integrated, with synergies with the Social Climate Fund and national housing and energy policies, as well as those to address transport poverty;
23. recommends a roadmap for quality jobs linked to the ESF that is based on education and adequate training, promoting fair and decent wages; reducing in-work poverty; ensuring occupational health and safety, with a ‘zero deaths’ objective; upholding the right to disconnect; ensuring gender equality; and eliminating unfair contracts; and that promotes decent work and addresses in-work poverty and the just transition to stable employment in the green, digital and care sectors, while enabling access to culture as a fundamental basis for citizenship building;
24. advocates the strategic role of the social economy and integration enterprises as partners of the ESF in creating quality employment, boosting social innovation and supporting inclusive green and digital transitions, including support for local and cooperative models, micro-entrepreneurship and the provision of community-based services⁶;
25. points out that 42% of the EU population lacks basic digital skills and that more than 50 million workers need training to achieve the EU’s annual learning participation target, according to the Letta and Draghi reports; therefore calls for the ESF to step up support for vocational training, retraining and lifelong and dynamic learning, especially in sectors impacted by the digital and green transitions;
26. proposes improving implementation through real simplification without additional requirements (goldplating) at national level (simplified cost options, digitalisation with guaranteed offline access), reduced burdens for self-employed people and SMEs and NGOs, financial predictability that avoids using the ESF as an instrument for emergencies, and through clear language, fewer acronyms, and guidance for beneficiaries; stresses the need to ensure coherence and complementarity with national recovery and resilience plans;
27. believes that simplification efforts cannot justify recentralisation or reduced transparency/democratic controls, nor can it weaken dialogue with the social partners and civil society, as all simplification efforts should primarily benefit the end beneficiaries, not the central administration;
28. reiterates the need to ensure that civil society has real access to funding through adequate calls, proportionate co-financing and capacity building;
29. advocates efforts to ensure that links to the European Semester and the Social Convergence Framework serve to strengthen – not weaken – social objectives (quality employment, access to essential services, reduction in poverty), integrating more social indicators (as has been done with

⁶ Existing policy and governance frameworks for smart community-led innovation, 2025, FUTURAL, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15517550>.

the monitoring framework on access to care⁷) in the new MFF performance framework, without substituting social objectives for competitiveness metrics, and ensuring measurable social results;

30. calls for an ESF specific indicator framework, with common result and implementation indicators disaggregated by sex, age and geographical area that allow the fund's social impact to be clearly measured and that ensures its traceability;
31. supports the inclusion of cross-cutting social conditionalities so that all policies and budget headings automatically contribute to the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights and social mobility;
32. calls for the ESF to be monitored and evaluated, with data disaggregated by sex, age and geographical area, with measures to empower women that go beyond mere participation statistics (businesses created, leadership, access to services), and quality standards for deinstitutionalisation and community-based services, where adequate and comparable indicators and variables are essential;
33. calls for efforts to ensure that support for strategic capacities (for example in defence, cybersecurity, STEP) does not crowd out ESF social investment or change where these are concentrated; calls for effective social conditionality and strict respect for the rule of law; stresses that comparable indicators and variables are essential and should be integrated into the performance framework in order to ensure consistent monitoring and an effective evaluation of results;
34. calls for efforts to promote a multi-fund approach between the ESF and the ERDF and ensure complementarity with other programmes;
35. calls for communication to be improved through clear language, and for all available means to be used to reach beneficiaries;
36. calls on the EU legislator to continue to give visibility to the ESF in the MFF budget nomenclature, giving it a clear 'social label', avoiding uncertainties about minimum social spending and ensuring the traceability of resources.

Brussels,

⁷ *Monitoring Framework for the Council Recommendation on Access to Affordable High-Quality Long-Term Care, 2025*, European Commission.

III. PROCEDURE

Title	European Social Fund 2028-2034
Reference document	COM(2025) 558
Legal basis	Mandatory, Article 307, first paragraph, TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(a) of the Rules of Procedure
Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter	COM(2025) 558: Council (18/9/25), Parliament (12/11/25), Commission (17/7/25)
Date of President's/Bureau decision	13/10/2025
Commission responsible	SEDEC-VIII – 8th term of office – Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)
Rapporteur	Tom Jungen (LU/PES)
Discussed in commission	
Date adopted by commission	24/4/2026
Result of the vote in commission (majority/unanimity)	majority
Date adopted in plenary	1-2/7/2026
Previous Committee opinions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• European Social Fund Plus• Mid-term revision of the ESF preparing the post-2020 proposal• Proposal for a regulation on the European Social Fund (ESF)
Subsidiarity reference	