European Social Fund (ESF+): specific measures to address strategic challenges

2025/0085(COD) - 10/09/2025 - Text adopted by Parliament, 1st reading/single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 453 votes to 149, with 59 abstentions, a legislative resolution on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 establishing the European Social Fund + (ESF+) as regards specific measures to address strategic challenges.

The European Parliament adopted its position at first reading by amending the Commission's proposal as follows.

Reprogramming of ESF+ resources

The amended text clarifies that the main objectives of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) are to support Member States and regions to achieve social inclusion and social cohesion, to activate the labour market, and to deliver on the principles and the headline targets of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The reprogramming of resources under the ESF+ should not undermine its social approach, but should strengthen its capacity to combat inequality.

Specific provisions linked to the mid-term review and related flexibility of the ESF+ strand under shared management

The proposed regulation aims to address the social aspects of strategic challenges, redirect investments towards new critical priorities and simplify and accelerate the implementation of actions.

In 2026, the Commission shall pay 1.5 % of the total support from the ESF+ as additional one-off pre-financing, pursuant to the decision approving the programme amendment. That additional one-off pre-financing percentage in 2026 shall be increased to **9.5 %** for programmes covering one or more NUTS level 2 regions bordering Russia, Belarus or Ukraine, provided that the programme does not cover the entire territory of the Member State concerned.

The additional one-off pre-financing will apply only where reallocations of **at least 10 %** of the financial resources of the programme to one or more of the dedicated priorities established pursuant to this Regulation have been approved in the context of the mid-term review, provided that the request for the programme amendment is submitted to the Commission by 31 December 2025.

In particular, the following reallocations within the same programme will also count towards the 10% threshold: (i) reallocations from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or the Cohesion Fund to one or more of the specific priorities established for certain specific objectives of Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 in the context of the mid-term review; (ii) reallocations from the Just Transition Fund (JTF) to dedicated priorities established to support investments contributing to the objectives of the Strategic Technologies for Europe (STEP) platform or established to promote access to affordable housing.

Resources from the European Union's recovery instrument and additional funding for the outermost regions will not be taken into account.

The maximum co-financing rate for programme priorities covering one or more NUTS level 2 regions bordering Russia, Belarus or Ukraine will be increased by **ten percentage points** above the applicable co-financing rate, without exceeding 100%.

Where the Commission approves an amendment of a programme including one or more priorities dedicated to operations supported by the ESF+ contributing to the STEP objectives, the Commission will pay **exceptional pre-financing of 20 %** on the basis of the allocation to those priorities, provided that the request for the programme amendment is submitted to the Commission by 31 December 2025.

Where such dedicated priorities have been included in a request for a programme amendment submitted to the Commission by 31 March 2025, the Commission will pay **exceptional one-off pre-financing of 30 %** of the allocation to those priorities pursuant to the decision approving the programme amendment.

Support for the development of skills in civil preparedness, the defence industry, including for dual-use capabilities, and cybersecurity

According to the amended text, Member States will use the ESF+ to support the development of skills related to civil preparedness, the defence industry, including dual-use capabilities, and cybersecurity within the framework of specific priorities, giving priority to skills related to dual-use capabilities and civil preparedness.

Support for adaptation linked to decarbonisation

Member States may use the ESF+ to provide targeted support for training aiming at skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling with a view to adaptation of workers, enterprises and entrepreneurs to change contributing to the decarbonisation of production capacities under dedicated priorities, with the objective of maintaining competitiveness, sustainability and innovation during the green transition. Member States may support the promotion of cooperation between different organisations, such as educational institutions, to support skills development.

Selection of operations, pre-financing, co-financing rates

When selecting operations to support skills in civil preparedness and the defence industry and to support adaptation linked to decarbonisation, Member States will give priority to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, public employment services and the social economy.

To quickly inject liquidity into the new priorities, the Commission will pay **20%** of the allocation allocated to the dedicated priorities as an **exceptional one-off pre-financing**, provided that the request for a programme amendment is submitted to the Commission by 31 December 2025.

By way of derogation, the maximum co-financing rates for dedicated priorities should be increased by 10 percentage points above the co-financing rate applicable, not exceeding 100 %.