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

2025/0085(COD) - 19/09/2025 - Final act

PURPOSE: to address the social aspects of strategic challenges, redirect investments towards new critical priorities and simplify and accelerate the implementation of critical actions in the context of the mid-term review of EU cohesion policy.

LEGISLATIVE ACT: Regulation (EU) 2025/1913 of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) as regards specific measures to address strategic challenges.

CONTENT: as part of the mid-term review of EU's cohesion policy, this Regulation makes **targeted amendments to the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) Regulation** aimed at aligning investment priorities with the changing economic, societal and geopolitical context as well as with the EU's climate and environmental objectives.

Redirect resources to new emerging priorities

Member States will use the ESF+:

- **to support the objectives of the Strategic Technologies for Europe (STEP) platform,** including by supporting the development of skills in net-zero technologies, including those based on learning programmes created by European Skills Academies, as well as the training of young people and the skilling, upskilling and reskilling of workers in net-zero technologies;

- **to support the development of skills in civil preparedness, the defence industry**, including for dual-use capabilities, and cybersecurity under dedicated priorities, prioritising skills related to dual-use capabilities and civil preparedness;

- 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.

Incentives and flexibility

The new regulation introduces greater flexibility and incentives to facilitate the rapid deployment of existing resources and accelerate the implementation of programmes.

In order to quickly inject liquidity into the new priorities concerning support for skills in civil preparedness and the defence industry as well as support for adaptation linked to decarbonisation, the Commission will pay **20% of the allocation allocated to the specific priorities as an** exceptional one-off pre-financing, provided that the request for programme modification is submitted to the Commission by 31 December 2025. By way of derogation, the maximum co-financing rates for dedicated priorities will be increased by 10 percentage points above the co-financing rate applicable, not exceeding 100 %.

When selecting operations, Member States will have to give priority to **micro, small and medium-sized enterprises**, public employment services and the social economy.

Specific provisions

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 will 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 the 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.

ENTRY INTO FORCE: 20.9.2025.