



## **ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

7-9 Dimitrie D. Gerota Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Sector, 020027 Bucharest, Romania

Phone: +40 21.310.23.56, +40 21.316.31.34 Fax: +40 21.316.31.31

+40 21.310.23.57, +40 21.316.31.33

Fiscal Number: 10464660

E-mail: [ces@ces.ro](mailto:ces@ces.ro)

[www.ces.ro](http://www.ces.ro)

---

**Founding member of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS)**

**Member of the Union of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions of the Francophonie (UCESIF)**

---

“The Economic and Social Council shall be a consultative body of the Parliament and the Government in the specialized fields established by the organic law on its establishment, organization and functioning.” (*Art. 141 of the revised Constitution of Romania*)

## **OPINION**

### **on “The Role of Social and Economic Partners in Implementing the European Union’s Cohesion Policy”\***

---

\* This opinion was issued by the Economic and Social Council in accordance with the provisions of Article 2, paragraphs (3) and (4), of Law No. 248/2013, as republished, with subsequent amendments and additions.

# I. Context and Relevance. Cohesion Policy and the Principle of Partnership

The EU Cohesion Policy is the Union's main public investment instrument for reducing economic, social, and territorial disparities and promoting balanced and sustainable development in all regions. Through its funds, Cohesion Policy supports key objectives such as job creation, skills development, social inclusion, innovation, the green and digital transitions, and the strengthening of administrative capacity.

On July 16, 2025, the European Commission presented its proposal for the European Union's future long-term budget for the period 2028–2034, known as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with a total budget estimated at nearly €2 trillion. This budget aims to address the economic, social, demographic, and geopolitical challenges of the coming decade through a more flexible, simplified financial system tailored to the local and regional needs of Member States.

The main change in the budget structure is the introduction of **National and Regional Partnership Plans** (NRPPs), which will integrate resources dedicated to economic, social, and territorial cohesion, social support, agriculture, fisheries, internal security, and other areas into a single coordinated strategic plan, developed in **partnership with relevant stakeholders**.

This development underscores the importance of **co-decision-making and structured collaboration between the Commission, Member States, regions, local authorities, social partners, and civil society**, with a view to ensuring the effectiveness of interventions and strategic coherence in the implementation of European policies.

In the context of:

- the **2025-2026 European Semester cycle**,
- strengthening the link between **reforms, investments, and EU funds**,
- preparing for the transition to the **future Multiannual Financial Framework**,

the role of the social and economic partners—specifically the associations represented in the ESC Plenary—is essential to ensuring the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of Cohesion Policy.

One fundamental principle of this policy is partnership, as enshrined both in the regulations governing European funds and in the European Code of Conduct on Partnership (Regulation No. 240/2014).

The Code establishes the framework through which Member States must ensure the genuine, transparent, and continuous involvement of economic and social partners and civil society at all stages of the programming and implementation cycle for European funds.

Cohesion Policy can no longer be conceived exclusively as a financial mechanism, but rather as a strategic public policy instrument that requires robust participatory governance.

Within this framework, the principle of partnership becomes essential for ensuring the relevance, effectiveness, and democratic legitimacy of interventions financed by European funds.

## **II. The European Code of Conduct on Partnership (ECCP) – mandatory framework for participatory governance**

### **II.1. Legislative basis**

The principle of partnership is enshrined in EU law through:

- Article 8 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060, which requires Member States to establish partnerships with competent authorities, economic and social partners, and representative bodies of civil society;
- Delegated Regulation (EU) No. 240/2014 – The European Code of Conduct on Partnership, which details the practical application of this principle.

The ECCP is not a guideline but a binding regulatory instrument designed to ensure the effective implementation of the partnership.

### **II.2. ECCP Content and Requirements**

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership defines partnership as a **structured process** that involves:

- involving partners from the **very beginning of the strategic planning process**;
- their participation in **implementation, monitoring, and evaluation**;
- adherence to the principles of **transparency, representativeness, non-discrimination, and institutional capacity**;
- strengthening the role of economic and social partners by **supporting the development of their administrative and technical capacity**.

In this context, the social and economic partners are not passive beneficiaries, but rather co-authors of public policies, playing an active role in defining priorities and ensuring the relevance of interventions funded by European funds.

According to the ECCP, the partnership must be:

- early – partners must be involved from the very beginning of the analysis and design phase of strategic documents;
- ongoing – dialogue must be maintained throughout the entire program lifecycle;
- meaningful – partners’ contributions must be able to influence content and decisions;
- representative and balanced – involving all relevant stakeholders;
- transparent – with real access to relevant information;
- supported by strengthening partners’ capacity.

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership remains a fundamental reference framework for the sound governance of EU funds, ensuring that partnership is not merely a formal exercise, but a **continuous, structural process with a real impact at all stages of the decision-making cycle**: programming, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation.

In the context of the **National and Regional Partnership Plans** under the MFF 2028–2034, the implementation of the ECCP is all the more important given that the role of social partners and civil society is essential for:

- **developing integrated investment and reform strategies** based on the actual needs of local and regional communities;
- **monitoring the implementation and adaptation of plans** to changes in the economic and social context;
- **assessing the socio-economic impact**, including in areas such as employment, social inclusion, health, education, and the green and digital transitions;
- **improving transparency and public accountability** in the allocation and use of EU resources.

### **III. The Role of Social and Economic Partners in Implementing the Cohesion Policy**

#### **III.1. Strategic role in planning and coordination with the European Semester**

The social and economic partners play a key role in the programming phase, contributing to:

- analyzing the actual socio-economic context; identifying the real needs of the labor market, the business environment, and vulnerable groups;
- identifying structural and territorial disparities; formulating investment priorities that are relevant and tailored to the national and regional context;
- defining investment priorities in line with the needs of the labor market and communities; ensuring coherence between Cohesion Policy objectives and national strategies (e.g., education, employment, social economy, green transition);
- defining the **strategic priorities** of the National and Regional Partnership Plans.

#### **What needs to be done:**

- Co-creating national and regional priorities
- Aligning funds with actual needs (territorial, social, economic)

In the context of the European Semester, this contribution is crucial for:

- aligning cohesion funds with the Country-Specific Recommendations (CSRs);
- supporting structural reforms through appropriate investments;
- avoiding fragmentation of interventions and overlaps.

#### **Practical examples:**

NGOs and labor unions can highlight the lack of social services in rural areas → inclusion of dedicated priorities (e.g., community services, social economy)

Employers' associations can point out skills gaps → investments in relevant vocational training

*Without this input, programs risk funding infrastructure that is not actually used.*

Partner involvement ensures that investments are grounded in economic and social realities, not just macroeconomic objectives.

In this regard, the involvement of the ESC and representative organizations contributes to **increasing the legitimacy and effectiveness of programming documents.**

### **III.2. Active role in implementation and governance**

During the implementation phase, economic and social partners must be active participants in program governance by:

- effectively participating in the monitoring committees of operational programs;
- contributing to decision-making regarding program adjustments; developing decision-making mechanisms for financial reallocations and the adjustment of interventions;
- identifying implementation issues and administrative barriers;
- formulating proposals to simplify procedures;
- promoting and disseminating funding opportunities to potential beneficiaries;

- facilitating access for small beneficiaries (NGOs, social enterprises).

Active participation in the management of available funds is important, as economic and social partners are in many cases beneficiaries or project partners in initiatives aimed at vocational training, improving employment opportunities (aligning and updating skills with employers' needs), as well as social inclusion, gender equality, and equal opportunities.

### **Practical examples:**

NGOs can point out overly bureaucratic guidelines → simplification of criteria

Social partners (employers' associations and labor unions) can propose calls for proposals focused on the social economy or supporting entrepreneurship.

*Excluding them leads to a concentration of funds among large actors, with limited social impact.*

Through their practical expertise, partners can identify **administrative bottlenecks** and dysfunctions in implementation mechanisms and contribute to **simplifying procedures**.

This involvement enables:

- increased efficiency and quality of implementation;
- programs to be tailored to beneficiaries; programs to be focused on results and impact, not solely on absorption.
- reduced risks of inefficient use of funds.

### **III.3. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Impact-Driven Approach**

Economic and social partners play a key role in:

- monitoring program progress;
- monitoring results, not just absorption;
- reporting delays, bottlenecks, and deviations;
- assessing economic, social, and territorial impacts;
- identifying unintended effects or underserved groups;
- assessing the socio-economic impact of funded programs;
- formulating recommendations to improve the efficiency and targeting of interventions;
- ensuring an approach focused on results and impact, not exclusively on financial absorption;
- supporting the inclusion of vulnerable people in the labor market;
- providing social services that complement public interventions;
- facilitating territorial solidarity and community development;
- contributing to the assessment of social impact and the provision of **continuous feedback** to decision-makers.

Given their direct involvement in monitoring the progress of operational program implementation, the role of economic and social partners in Monitoring Committees is vital to ensuring the predictability, sustainability, and transparency of the process for accessing European funds. At the same time, consideration could be given to increasing the weight of the votes allocated to economic and social partners in these Committees.

#### **III.4. Social dialogue and capacity building. Legitimacy and transparency**

The social partners facilitate dialogue between employers, trade unions, and public authorities, which is a key factor in the success of cohesion policies, particularly in convergence regions; and by involving these partners, the results of cohesion policy on the ground become more visible, making EU interventions more tangible for citizens.

##### **Practical examples:**

The ESC may issue annual opinions on the social impact of the funds.

*Absorption without impact ≠ cohesion*

This function contributes to:

- the continuous improvement of interventions;
- the orientation of policies toward results and impact;
- the strengthening of public accountability.

This **institutionalized feedback** function is crucial for the continuous adaptation of cohesion policies to realities on the ground and is particularly important in the context of the shift from an absorption-centered approach to one **centered on impact and European added value**.

## **IV. The Role of Economic and Social Partners in Implementing the EU Cohesion Policy (Fiscal Perspective)**

Cohesion Policy is not just about spending, but about the state's ability to translate investments into productivity and tax compliance. Without the genuine involvement of economic and social partners, the likelihood of the following increases:

- poorly designed projects (low economic return → a tax base that does not grow),
- high administrative costs,
- financial corrections/irregularities (including regarding VAT or procurement),
- lack of social “ownership” (resistance to reforms).

**Partnership** is presented in Commission documents as a **fundamental principle** of Cohesion Policy and as a mechanism that ensures **legitimacy, transparency, and better absorption** (through improved project selection and outreach to potential beneficiaries).

In practice, economic and social partners (employers' associations, trade unions, relevant NGOs, professional bodies) play a key role in five areas where the greatest fiscal risks arise:

**1. Planning and Prioritization (ex-ante)**

- They can assess the realism of economic assumptions (demand, costs, supply chains).
- They can identify unintended consequences: “We are subsidizing sectors that remain dependent” vs. “We are investing in sectors that expand the tax base.”

**2. Instrument design (grant vs. financial instrument)**

- From a fiscal perspective, well-designed financial instruments reduce moral hazard and increase project discipline (cash flow, co-financing, *due diligence*).

**3. Implementation and compliance (VAT, procurement, state aid)**

- The most common vulnerabilities in projects are VAT treatment, public procurement, eligibility of expenses, and state aid. A partnership that includes tax expertise reduces “design flaws” before they become issues requiring correction.

**4. Monitoring and evaluation (real KPIs, not formal ones)**

- Partners can request outcome indicators that matter from a fiscal perspective: productivity, formalization, growth in declared wages, attracted private investment, and reduction of the informal economy in regions.

**5. Integrity / anti-fraud and social acceptance**

- Partners can serve as an “early warning system” for abusive schemes and can increase public trust in the use of funds.

**Partnership is a risk management tool** (including fiscal and correction risks). If we want sustainable cohesion, we must link investment to the **expansion of the tax base and the formalization of the economy** – and this is achieved by involving partners in the design and monitoring of these efforts.

## **V. The Role of the Economic and Social Council as a Representative Economic and Social Partner**

The member organizations of the ESC are key players in Cohesion Policy, particularly in areas such as:

- social inclusion;
- employment;
- poverty reduction ;
- economic development;
- community development.

These organizations:

- have direct access to the needs of communities;
- develop innovative solutions;
- are key players in implementing the social objectives of Cohesion Policy;
- contribute to the labor market inclusion of vulnerable groups;
- provide innovative services and solutions tailored to the needs of communities;
- facilitate the link between public policies and local realities;
- contribute to the implementation of the objectives of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

According to the ECCP, their involvement is essential for a cohesion policy that is inclusive, equitable, community-oriented, and focused on sustainable social impact.

## **VI. The Role of the Economic and Social Council of Romania in Implementing the EU Cohesion Policy**

As a tripartite consultative body, the Economic and Social Council of Romania serves as:

- an institutional platform for structured dialogue;
- a guarantor of the application of the partnership principle;
- a mechanism for aligning national policies with European objectives.

The ESC can contribute by:

- issuing well-founded opinions;

- monitoring compliance with the partnership principle;
- facilitating structured dialogue between public authorities, social partners, and civil society;
- formulating well-founded opinions and viewpoints relevant to public policies;
- monitoring compliance with the partnership principle in the implementation of European funds;
- promoting European best practices in participatory governance.

### **1. The representativeness of the ESC lends legitimacy to the partnership process**

The Economic and Social Council is the only institutional platform for social and civic dialogue that brings together, in a balanced manner, the three components of the socio-economic partnership: the social partners (employers' organizations and trade unions) and civil society organizations.

Through this tripartite structure, the ESC ensures:

- pluralistic representation of economic and social interests;
- integration of the perspectives of the business community, employees, and civil society;
- the democratic legitimacy of the public policy consultation process.

In this regard, the ESC's involvement in the implementation of Cohesion Policy contributes to strengthening the principle of partnership as set forth in European legislation and the European Code of Conduct on Partnership.

### **2. Consultation with the ESC must become a structural mechanism of European fund governance**

Given its representative role, the ESC should be systematically and structurally involved in the major stages of the Cohesion Policy implementation process, including: programming interventions; monitoring implementation; and assessing the socioeconomic impact of programs.

This involvement allows for the utilization of the expertise and experience of socio-economic partners and contributes to increasing the relevance and efficiency of investments financed by European funds.

### **3. A balance between public and private voting is essential for the effective application of the partnership principle**

The partnership principle entails not only consulting relevant stakeholders but also their effective participation in the decision-making process.

In this regard, within the Monitoring Committees and the program governance structures, a voting balance of 50% for the public sector and 50% for the private sector must be maintained.

Maintaining this balance is essential for:

- avoiding the concentration of decision-making exclusively at the administrative level;
- ensuring a balanced perspective on investment priorities;
- strengthening transparency and accountability in the use of European funds.

#### **4. The participation of socio-economic partners must be meaningful and influential**

For the principle of partnership to be effectively applied, the participation of socio-economic partners in monitoring structures must be informed; active; and supported by genuine access to information and the decision-making process.

Respecting the principle of equitable public-private voting helps prevent the participation of partners from becoming a mere formality with no real impact on decisions.

#### **5. The ESC can help strengthen participatory governance of European funds**

Through its tripartite nature and its constitutional advisory role, the ESC can contribute to:

- strengthening dialogue between authorities and socio-economic partners;
- promoting the consistent application of the partnership principle;
- ensuring a genuine balance between public, economic, and social interests in the implementation of Cohesion Policy.

#### **6. National Partnership Platform**

The ESC can be recognized as a permanent institutional mechanism for implementing the European Code of Conduct on Partnership, playing a central role in consulting with economic and social partners.

#### **7. Mandatory involvement in programming**

The ESC can be consulted ex ante during the drafting of the Partnership Agreement and programs, and its opinions should be incorporated and justified in the final documents.

#### **8. Contribution to the European Semester**

The ESC can be involved in analyzing and formulating the national position on the Country-Specific Recommendations and aligning them with investments from cohesion funds.

### **9. Monitoring of socio-economic impact**

The ESC can monitor not only the absorption of funds, but also the actual impact on employment, social inclusion, and territorial cohesion.

### **10. Coherent representation within Monitoring Committees**

The ESC can ensure coordinated participation with a clear mandate in all Monitoring Committees for programs funded by EU funds.

### **11. Simplifying access for NGOs and the social economy**

The ESC can be involved in evaluating and improving applicant guidelines to eliminate excessive administrative barriers.

### **12. Early warning mechanism**

The ESC can serve as a mechanism for the rapid reporting of bottlenecks and malfunctions in program implementation.

### **13. Institutional link with the EESC**

The ESC can act as the national liaison point with the EESC for Cohesion Policy and the European Semester, actively contributing to European opinions.

## **VII. The Role of the ESC in the Implementation of International Agreements and EU Programs\***

In accordance with Article 9 of Law No. 248/2013, the Economic and Social Council is responsible for analyzing and proposing measures to improve the implementation of international agreements and conventions, as well as assistance programs initiated by international organizations.

In the context of the European Union's Cohesion Policy, this mandate can be translated into the following specific roles:

- 1. Verification of the application of the partnership principle.** The ESC can assess whether European provisions on partnership (including the *European Code of Conduct on Partnership*) are effectively applied in Romania. The ESC can evaluate how socio-economic partners are involved in programming and in Monitoring Committees and can highlight cases of formal consultation that have no real impact.

---

\* In accordance with Article 9 of Law No. 248/2013.

2. **Proposing corrective measures for program implementation.** Formulating concrete recommendations to national authorities to improve the implementation of European funds.
3. **Assessing the coherence between European commitments and national implementation.** The ESC can analyze whether programs funded by EU funds reflect the objectives set at the European level; Country-Specific Recommendations; and actual social and economic priorities.
4. **Monitoring the impact of assistance programs.** Contributing to the assessment of the socioeconomic impact of European funds from the perspective of beneficiaries and communities: analyzing the effects of projects on employment and inclusion; identifying discrepancies between reported indicators and the reality on the ground, etc.
5. **Acting as an interface between the national and European levels.** The ESC can communicate to European bodies (including the EESC): implementation issues; best practices; proposals for improving the European framework.

### **Operational conclusion**

The application of Article 9 of Law No. 248/2013 allows the ESC to go beyond its formal advisory role and become an active player in monitoring, correcting, and improving the implementation of Cohesion Policy, in line with Romania’s European commitments.

## **VIII. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Ensuring adequate funding mechanisms, including dedicated funds, to strengthen the administrative capacity of the social partners, as well as maintaining a balanced voting structure by establishing an equal weighting of 50% for the public sector and 50% for the private sector.
The success of European fund utilization depends on shifting from a model based on absorption to one focused on impact, fiscal sustainability, and economic efficiency. Investments must be directed toward increasing productivity, strengthening the tax base, and ensuring long-term competitiveness.
Social and economic partnership is an essential tool for risk management, including fiscal risk management, helping to improve project selection, reduce implementation errors, and increase transparency. At the same time, strengthening institutional capacity and using financial instruments that mobilize private capital enhance the multiplier effect of European funds.
A collaborative approach involving civil society and the private sector will promote accountability and help improve the overall framework for public investment management.
Directing funds toward investments with a high multiplier effect and measurable economic

impact. Integrating EU funds into the medium-term fiscal framework and applying the principle of lifecycle costing.
Integrating EU funds into the medium-term fiscal framework and applying the principle of lifecycle costing.
The introduction of cost standards, ex-ante and ex-post evaluations, and performance-based reallocations.
Strengthening the role of social and economic partners in planning, implementation, and evaluation.
Building institutional capacity by professionalizing project management and digitizing the project cycle.
A gradual shift from grants to financial instruments that mobilize private capital.
Promovarea transparenței prin publicarea datelor privind proiectele, indicatorii și performanța.
Avoiding regressive tax measures and carefully assessing their impact on competitiveness and fiscal sustainability.
The effective implementation of Cohesion Policy under the 2028–2034 MFF depends on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the consistent application of ECCP principles in the development and implementation of National and Regional Partnership Plans;</li> <li>• the genuine and ongoing involvement of economic and social partners and civil society;</li> <li>• recognizing the role of the social economy and civic organizations in creating innovative solutions to social, economic, and territorial challenges.</li> </ul>

In this context, the **Economic and Social Council of Romania** can play a strategic role as a platform for dialogue, consultation, and evaluation to ensure the participatory, transparent, and impact-oriented implementation of European funds.

Cohesion Policy cannot be effective without a genuine, functional, and institutionalized partnership. The European Code of Conduct on Partnership provides the necessary framework for transforming economic and social partners into genuine actors in European governance.

In the context of the European Semester 2025-2026 and future developments in Cohesion Policy, strengthening the role of the economic and social partners and the Romanian ESC is essential for:

- better-informed public policies;
- investments with real impact;
- a more cohesive and equitable European Union.

The European Code of Conduct on Partnership establishes partnership as an **operational** – not merely declarative – **principle** of Cohesion Policy. The effective involvement of economic and social partners:

- improves the quality and relevance of programs;
- strengthens the legitimacy of public decisions;
- contributes to achieving the objectives of economic, social, and territorial cohesion.

In this context, **strengthening the role of the Romanian ESC** and fully respecting the principles of the ECCP are essential conditions for the effective, participatory, and impact-oriented implementation of European funds in Romania.

### **KEY (Operational) Proposals**

Mandatory in the 2028-2034 MFF: **evidence of partner involvement** (processes, not attendance lists); dedicated resources for their participation; a strengthened role for the ESC in monitoring.

Concrete mechanisms: permanent thematic working groups; early consultations, not just post-factum: social impact indicators, not just financial ones.

**Rapporteur,**  
**Dragoş-Florin Pufulete**