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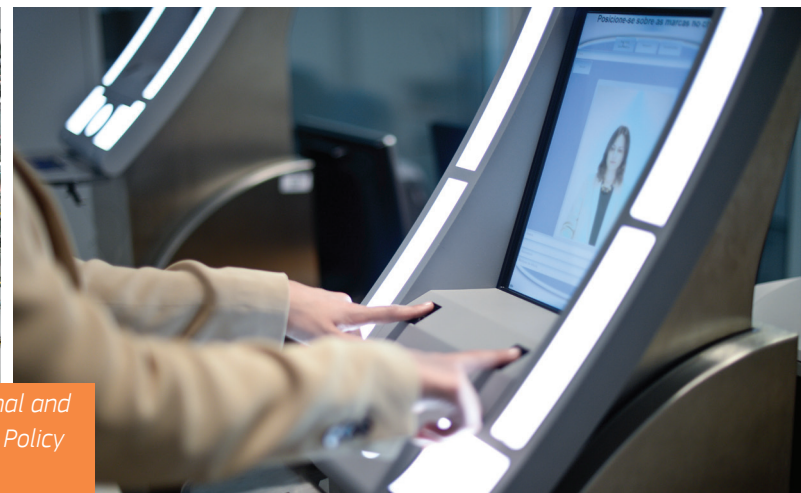


## COMMUNICATING OPERATIONS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE IN 2021-2027

A practical toolbox



Regional and  
Urban Policy





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# Communicating Operations of Strategic Importance in 2021-2027

The regulatory framework for the 2021-2027 programming period introduces a new feature for programmes across the EU, the so-called 'operations of strategic importance'. With thousands of Cohesion policy projects funded each year across Europe, new CPR provisions aim to **highlight key and emblematic operations**, and set the stage for them to **tell the programme's story and Cohesion policy's contribution**.

It is up to Member States and managing authorities to set out the operations of strategic importance. In the implementation phase, Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries shall communicate and ensure visibility of EU support. The Commission aims to capitalize on operations of strategic importance's visibility in communication campaigns.

The purpose of this document is to **inspire Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries** when communicating about operations of strategic importance. It is a follow-up of discussions and questions raised in September 2021 as part of the Technical Seminar about Operations of Strategic Importance and in December 2021 as part of the Inform EU Expert Group on Communication.

**Disclaimer:**

This document was prepared by the Commission services and does not commit the European Commission. Only the Court of Justice of the European Union is competent to authoritatively interpret Union law. This document aims at providing inspiration on communication and implementation of operations of strategic importance for programme authorities and Member States.



# PROGRAMMING OPERATIONS OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

Setting out the framework for 2021-2027

01

### **What is an operation of strategic importance?**

Operation of strategic importance means an operation which provides a significant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a programme and which is subject to particular monitoring and communication measures, as defined in **Article 2(5)** CPR<sup>1</sup>. The same definition applies for Interreg programmes, although specific provisions are laid down in the Interreg regulation<sup>2</sup>.

### **Why should an operation of strategic importance be chosen?**

The aim of operations of strategic importance provisions is to ensure higher visibility of EU support by capitalizing on the communication potential of emblematic projects supported by programmes. Therefore, communicating about operations of strategic importance seeks to tell the story of the programme in a symbolic way and bring policy achievements closer to citizens' understanding.

Achieving higher visibility of projects is at the same time an opportunity for more awareness about benefits of the EU to people's lives. In this light, communicating operations of strategic importance should also tell the story of basic values of the Union and horizontal principles of Cohesion policy, as expressed in **Article 2** of the Treaty on European Union and in **Article 9** CPR. These refer to the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men, gender mainstreaming, the integration of a gender perspective, accessibility for persons with disabilities, promoting sustainable development and the "do no significant harm" principle.

### **Who chooses the operations to be included under the list?**

It is up to the **Member States** to map out operations that significantly contribute to the achievement of programme objectives.

### **For which Funds should operations of strategic importance be chosen?**

For the **ERDF**, the **Cohesion Fund**, the **ESF+**, the **JTF** and the **EMFAF**, the programme shall be accompanied for information purposes by a list of planned operations of strategic importance, with a timetable (**Article 22 (3)** CPR).

### **What types of projects can operations of strategic importance be?**

An operation of strategic importance can be an (type of) individual project, a group of projects, or an action / measure.

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<sup>1</sup>[Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy.](#)




<sup>2</sup>[Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1059 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on specific provisions for the European territorial cooperation goal \(Interreg\) supported by the European Regional Development Fund and external financing instruments.](#)

### What makes an operation strategically important?

Operations should be chosen based on their 'significant contribution'. Defining a 'significant contribution' varies from programme to programme, country to country, and could be based on relevant challenges, development needs, national or regional plans and actions to be taken in the country and programme concerned. Here are selected examples of what could be considered as strategically important elements of a project:

- **A systemic nature of an operation:** without this operation, the specific objective(s) might not be achieved and/or seriously affected. E.g.: e-health system, common ticketing system for public transport...
- **Innovative character:** an operation which brings a new policy or project framework.
- **Importance for national, regional and local economy:** an operation is perceived by the society as important. E.g. regional R&D centre, capital city ring-road...
- **Special character of an operation:** due to specificities and local conditions, there cannot be too many projects of that type. E.g. regional transport hub.
- **The large number of final recipients impacted** (e.g. SMEs) **and/or their nature** (e.g. youth).
- **Financial size:** relatively significant resources provided from the priority.

### Illustrative examples of operations of strategic importance

Programme:	A greener region 	Competitive SMEs 	Regions of culture 
<b>Specific objective:</b>	Developing smart energy systems, grids and storage outside the Trans-European Energy Network (TEN-E)	Developing and enhancing research and innovation capacities and the uptake of advanced technologies	Enhancing the role of culture and sustainable tourism in economic development, social inclusion and social innovation
<b>Operation of strategic importance:</b>	Create and mainstream a state-of-the-art framework for managing renewable energy sources investments in a region	Establish a regional centre for entrepreneurship, and set up a scheme for awarding grants to SMEs	Renovate and improve accessibility of 7 cultural heritage locations in the region and boost the number of yearly visitors
<b>Strategical importance:</b>	Inovativness: setting up a unique RES management framework	Special character: a unique regional center; financial size	Key significance for regional economy, namely tourism
<b>Budget:</b>	Total: 250.000,00 EUR. EU co-funding: 212.500,00 EUR	Total: 45.000.000,00 EUR EU co-funding: 25.000.000,00 EUR	Total: 12.000.000,00 EUR EU co-financing rate: 85%
<b>Timeline:</b>	January 2023 to January 2025 (provisional)	Planned start in Q1 2023, expected finish in Q2 2027	2022 - 2027

Please note that examples mentioned above are purely illustrative. Actual operations of strategic importance refer to operations which provide 'a significant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a programme'.

### ***Where and when should this information be provided?***

The list of planned operations of strategic importance shall be included in **Appendix 3** within the programme, together with a timetable (**Article 22 (3)** CPR), and transmitted via SFC2021 at the time of programme submission. In addition to the timetable, it is suggested to include the following elements, if possible and if already known:

- A brief description of operation(s) of strategic importance or at least planned types of operation(s) of strategic importance,
- Possible budget (including EU and total part),
- Expected start and end date and
- Any other relevant element of the operation.

The character limit of Appendix 3 is 2.000, so the information needs to be clear and concise.

### ***Are operations of strategic importance mandatory?***

The operations of strategic importance are required by **Article 22 (3)** CPR and therefore each programme funded by the **ERDF**, the **Cohesion Fund**, the **ESF+**, the **JTF** and the **EMFAF** shall set out at least one (in the programme). Ideally, it is considered that at least one operation of strategic importance could be outlined for each specific objective of a programme. It is up to the programme to find a balance in exact numbers of operations of strategic importance.

### ***How can I choose operations of strategic importance before they are selected?***

Based on CPR provisions concerning **programming**, it is required to provide a list of planned operations at the time of programme submission via SFC2021. Setting up a list of planned operations does not prejudice a proper selection procedure during **implementation**. Eventually, not all planned operations may be selected for funding, or others can be selected instead. The list of planned operations may be modified but in any case the Commission will be informed (**Article 73(5)** CPR) and progress on operations of strategic importance should be examined by the monitoring committee (**Article 40(1)(g)** CPR) so modification of the programme for this aspect only is not necessary.

Concerning **selection**, the rules, criteria and procedures for selecting operations as provided in **Article 73** CPR - which are non-discriminatory, transparent, ensure accessibility to persons with disabilities and gender equality, take account of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the principle of sustainable development and of the Union policy on the environment in accordance with **Article 11** and **Article 191(1)** of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union - should apply.

### ***Our programme doesn't have large-scale projects...***






Operations of strategic importance do not necessarily need to correspond with financially large projects, or projects involving significant infrastructural interventions. Projects seen as essential for the programme and which provide 'a significant contribution to the achievement of the objectives of a programme' should be chosen as strategically important.

### What else concerns operations of strategic importance?

**Role of the monitoring committee:** in line with the monitoring committee's role to keep track of the programme's implementation, the CPR provisions also require keeping an eye on operations of strategic importance. The monitoring committee will examine *progress in implementing operations of strategic importance* (**Article 40(1)(g)** CPR), i.e. the operations of strategic importance are expected to be a recurrent topic on monitoring committee meetings. The same information will be provided during the annual performance review (based on **Article 41(3)** CPR).

**Selecting operations of strategic importance:** **Article 73** CPR applies for the selection as for all other operations and **Article 73(5)** CPR provides specifically that: *when the managing authority selects an operation of strategic importance, it shall inform the Commission within one month and shall provide all relevant information to the Commission about that operation.* No prescribed format is envisaged, but it is suggested to indicate elements which need to be provided in any case under **Article 49(3)** CPR in the list of operations selected for support by the Funds.

#### Different stages of implementing operations of strategic importance, including main requirements, actors, timeline and legal basis

	 <b>Programming</b>	 <b>Selection</b>	 <b>Monitoring</b>	 <b>Communication and visibility</b>	
<b>What?</b>	The list of planned operations of strategic importance & a timetable	Selecting operations of strategic importance & informing the Commission	Monitoring progress in implementation Providing info for annual reviews	Ensuring visibility of support, in particular of operations of strategic importance	Organising a communication event/activity
<b>Who?</b>	Member State	Managing authority	Monitoring committee Member State and relevant MA	Member State	Beneficiary
<b>When?</b>	At the time of programme submission	Within one month of selection	MC: at least once a year AR: once a year	Throughout 2021-2027	During project implementation
<b>CPR article</b>	Article 22(3) Appendix 3	Article 73(5)	Article 38 (3), 40 (1,g), 41(3)	Article 46(a)	Article 50(1,e)

*Please note that specific articles of the Interreg regulation apply for Interreg, as outlined in previous parts of this document.*



# COMMUNICATION IS A KEY FEATURE

Making operations of  
strategic importance visible

02



### **Which communication and visibility requirements Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries of operations of strategic importance need to follow?**

**Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries** shall acknowledge support from the EU Funds, ensure higher visibility and communicate about operations of strategic importance and their achievements. In line with these aims, the EU emblem and (co-)funding statement are key visibility elements. These requirements are outlined in the *Visibility, transparency and communication* chapter of the CPR (**Articles 46-50**) and in **Annex IX**.

### **What is the role of Member States and managing authorities?**

**Article 46(a)** CPR:

*Each Member State shall ensure:*

- (a) *the visibility of support in all activities relating to operations supported by the Funds with particular attention to operations of strategic importance;*

For these efforts, the **managing authority** holds an important position, as cooperation between different levels in a **Member State** allows supporting dedicated communication actions and amplifying messages. At the same time, the managing authority is seen as a natural communication partner to projects – working closely with beneficiaries helps in achieving higher visibility.

To kick-start cooperation, **managing authorities** may invite beneficiaries to programme, institution and external events; involve operations of strategic importance in day-to-day communication via programme channels; feature operations of strategic importance in programme's social media channels; coordinate their presence on the single website portal; or set up other activities to promote their achievements.

In addition, the **managing authority** shall ensure that communication and visibility material including at the level of beneficiaries is made available to the Commission upon request and without nevertheless leading to significant additional costs or a significant administrative burden for the beneficiaries or for the managing authority, under conditions set out in **Article 49(6)** CPR.

### **What is the role of beneficiaries?**

According to **Article 50 (1)(e)** CPR:

*1. Beneficiaries and bodies implementing financial instruments shall acknowledge support from the Funds, including resources reused in accordance with Article 62, to the operation by:*

*(e) for operations of strategic importance and operations the total cost of which exceeds EUR 10 000 000, organising a communication event or activity, as appropriate, and involving the Commission and the responsible managing authority in a timely manner.*

The event or activity should serve as an opportunity to make the project's work visible to the public and showcase the positive changes for the country and region, namely the project's importance for achievements of the specific objective of the programme.

It is at the same time an excellent opportunity to show the link between the project's aim, its relevance for national development and contribution to EU priorities. In the end, organising communication events or activities offers citizens a glimpse of how projects on the ground make Europe more competitive, greener, connected, social and closer to citizens.

## Why does Article 50 (1)(e) mention projects whose total cost exceeds EUR 10 000 000? Is there a difference?

**Article 50 (1)(e)** CPR lays out requirements for two types of projects: operations of strategic importance and operations whose total cost exceed EUR 10 000 000.

As mentioned before, operations of strategic importance can be defined regarding their financial size, but not necessarily or exclusively (e.g. an operation of strategic importance can be a project worth EUR 250 000 which provides a significant contribution to the programme objectives due to its' innovative character, but also a project worth EUR 12 500 000).

As for the second type, it refers to all projects whose budgets exceed EUR 10 000 000, and EUR 5 000 000 for Interreg. For these, a communication event or activity is also required, but communication and visibility requirements go even further for operations of strategic importance.

## How do communication officers and communication coordinators fit the picture?

The **communication officer** of the programme shall set up targeted activities to raise visibility of operations of strategic importance and allow citizens to understand what the EU is doing for them. In line with the overall approach to programme's communication set out in communication chapters, the communication officer may recognize additional audiences and communication tools, communication objectives, formats, budget, to find the best way of communicating operations of strategic importance.

It is strongly suggested that the national **communication coordinator** works closely with the communication officers, aiming to amplify messages and coordinate communication across Funds.

## What could a communication event or activity look like?

To ensure higher visibility, operations of strategic importance are required to organise a **communication event or activity**, under conditions outlined in **Article 50 (1)(e)** CPR. The event and activity can take many forms. This may include:

-  Dedicated **campaigns** revolving around the operation.
-  Events fostering **higher engagement** and involving end users or target audiences, such as competitions, guided tours, workshops, etc.
-  **Inauguration or closing events**, such as opening of a centre, finishing construction works, etc.
-  Specific events offering a **unique project experience**, such as exhibitions, storytelling shows, theatre plays, fashion shows, etc.
-  Events ensuring **strong media coverage**, such as press conferences, journalists' visits to projects and other formats.
-  Any other format of a **communication event or activity** that acknowledges support from the Funds and involves the EC and MA.
-  Activities showcasing **projects' achievements**, e.g. visits to laboratories and renovated facilities, field trips, project open doors, fairs, etc.

Please note that these examples are illustrative.

### How to make sure that operation of strategic importance's events or activities make a splash?

When organising the event or activity, beneficiaries should build on communication approaches that work well in the country and concerned programme area, and tailor them to the specific project in question. Careful planning is needed and acknowledging the EU support is key - beneficiaries need to use the emblem and (co-)funding statement (**Article 47** CPR and **Annex IX**) throughout the event or activity. For a higher outreach and visibility of the event or activity, the following practices could be taken in consideration:

- **A sound communication approach** is key for prominent visibility. Successful events or activities don't stop at organising – it requires a 360° approach to communication.
- Projects should communicate about their **achievements**, namely by 'translating' the policy into concrete outcomes and illustrating how these outcomes impact citizens' quality of life.
- Engaging managing authorities, Commission **representatives** and other high profile or well-known representative will boost media interest.
- Working with **journalists** and creating media and press opportunities around the event or activity will boost visibility.
- Reaching **audiences** of the project is important, but in line with the significance of these projects, the event or activity should reach broader audiences that are usually not aware of EU projects.
- **Social media** is essential before, during and after the event or activity. Make sure beneficiaries use different platforms and acquire photo, video and audio materials for dissemination and more visibility.
- Managing authorities' **support to beneficiaries** in communication is a well-working and proven method that makes communication more effective.

### How could managing authorities support operations of strategic importance in communication?

In addition to ensuring that **beneficiaries** acknowledge support from EU Funds, supporting projects in following visibility and communication requirements helps in organising impactful events and activities. In this sense, **Member States** and **managing authorities** could:

#1

**Introduce** beneficiaries to their responsibilities and commitments before implementation starts. E.g. set up kick-off meetings.

#5

**Engage** external communication specialists or agencies to provide tailored support to communication of operations of strategic importance. E.g. social media or event management experts.

#2

**Suggest** tailored communication events or activities for beneficiaries to choose from, based on previous experiences with large-scale or similar projects and formats that work well.

#6

**Support** beneficiaries in media relations, e.g. by providing inputs for press releases, namely quotes (both from the MA and EC) and pointing out to relevant elements to highlight (e.g. EU budget).

#3

**Educate** and support beneficiaries regarding their obligations. E.g. publish guidance on communication and visibility rules, inform about good examples, provide tips & tricks on using the EU emblem and statement etc.

#7

**Work** with beneficiaries in communicating: team up and produce project videos, podcasts or other audio-visual materials, arrange paid (social) media promotions and ensure that visibility requirements are respected.

#4

**Organise** webinars and trainings for beneficiaries of operations of strategic importance, covering communication & visibility but other topics too.

#8

**Set out** any other support activity the programme sees fit.



### **What if the beneficiary fails to organise a communication event or activity and involve the Commission and managing authority?**

It is the responsibility of the beneficiary of operations of strategic importance to acknowledge support from the Funds by following specific provisions of CPR (**Article 50**). In cases where this is not so and *where remedial actions have not been put into place, the managing authority shall apply measures by cancelling up to 3% of the support from the Funds to the operation concerned (Article 50 (3) CPR)*. The corrections should be dealt with in the same manner as with any other financial correction applied in accordance with **Article 103** CPR.

### **How else to highlight operations of strategic importance?**

With the aim of disseminating messages about operations of strategic importance to different audiences and across different channels, Member States and managing authorities are suggested to build synergies between the communication approach they have taken for operations of strategic importance and other CPR visibility requirements. In line with this aim, Member States and managing authorities could:

- Feature operations of strategic importance on **single website portals** and **programme websites** (e.g. a specific section for operations of strategic importance and their achievements).
- Strengthen message across funds, programmes and networks, and make stakeholders aware, with the **communication coordinator** taking the lead.
- Multiply messages and foster cooperation with new actors through the **national networks** (e.g. EDICs, other networks of communicators, universities...).
- Include information about operations of strategic importance in the **list of operations** in a standardised format (e.g. use a prefix 'OSI' before the operation unique code as stated in **Article 49(3)** CPR, or add a specific column about operations of strategic importance in the list of operations). This information will help in highlighting their appearance in the Kohesio map and database. In addition, Member States, managing authorities and beneficiaries are encouraged to provide additional visibility materials such as photos and videos that will ultimately enrich Kohesio.

### **How should the beneficiaries involve the Commission and managing authority representatives?**

The requirement asks for **beneficiaries** to organise a communication event or activity, and involve the Commission and managing authority, but it also offers the beneficiaries an opportunity to make their work visible. For this aim, beneficiaries are encouraged to work closely with the **managing authority** and ensure that the **Commission** is timely informed about the communication event or activity.

For the **Commission**, it is suggested that the invitation includes details concerning basic project information, time, venue, nature of the event or activity, format, expected role of the Commission representative in the event/activity (an active role is desired, e.g. a speech) and expected inputs. Ideally, the invitation should be sent two or three months in advance.

As for the involvement of the **managing authority**, it is suggested that beneficiaries work closely with the managing authority to pick the best way.

It is considered **a good practice** that managing authorities inform the Commission about upcoming communication events or activities of operations of strategic importance via the Visibility, transparency and communication module of [SFC2021](#). Managing authorities can follow this practice to support timely exchange of information and act as liaison between the operation (of strategic importance) and the Commission. Please note that the responsibility to involve the Commission and the managing authority remains with the beneficiary.

## Can another name be used to communicate about operations of strategic importance?

When communicating towards citizens and other audiences, it is important to highlight two dimensions of operations of strategic importance:

1. **The strategic dimension**, i.e. the significance of a particular operation of strategic importance and its achievements for addressing the programme and country's challenges and needs and
2. **The EU dimension**, i.e. acknowledging the role of operations of strategic importance as Cohesion policy flagships in all Member States and regions.

The Commission suggests a tailored approach based on these two dimensions – a term such as “**strategic EU projects**” could take into account both dimensions.

## How about other Member State and managing authorities' examples and practices in communicating operations of strategic importance?

There is a variety of communication approaches that Member States and managing authorities are setting up for operations of strategic importance and similar types of projects, as well as a number of proven actions that are suggested for communication. Here are a couple of examples that could be used when communicating operations of strategic importance:



## Get involved in our campaigns

### Europe in my region – umbrella campaign

This umbrella initiative covers a range of communication activities featuring EU action for the Regions and making it tangible and playful for non-specialist audiences.

- ◇ [#EUinmyregion Regional campaigns with an ultra-local flavour, and with a smile!](#): One-month fully-fledged communication operations with partner Regions, currently in 8 Member States (Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Romania)
- ◇ [#EUinmyschool partnerships, together with regions, EU-funded projects, schools and local interlocutors](#): Memorable experiences whereby school pupils aged 3-19 years can explore European projects near them.
- ◇ [#EUinmyregion dedicated tools and services for Managing Authorities](#)

### REGIOSTARS

Since 2008 the European Commission has handed out annual REGIOSTARS awards to EU-funded projects which demonstrate excellence and new approaches in regional development. With the goal of inspiring other regions and project managers across Europe, participating projects are in the spotlight of communication activities at European level. In the last several editions, REGIOSTARS have been awarded to projects in five thematic categories (smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, urban development and a topic of the year), plus public choice awards.

[Further details on this year's competition.](#)

### Smart Regions

Smart Regions, in collaboration with Euronews, takes a tour of Europe, visiting the cities and towns where Cohesion Policy projects are reducing regional disparities and bringing real, tangible benefits to communities across the EU.

[Smart Regions](#)

### Project database

Hundreds of thousands of projects throughout the EU have benefited from investment through EU regional policy programmes over the years. Take a look through our database to discover some examples of the wide range of projects which have received support.

[Project database](#)

### ESIF Open Data Platform

The ESIF Open Data Platform allows anyone and everyone to check progress in delivering investments at EU level, by theme, by country or by fund. Datasets can be visualised, embedded in other sites or downloaded to analyse.

[ESIF Open Data Platform](#)

### Kohesio

The new Kohesio knowledge base of cohesion policy-funded projects provides publicly available data on EU investments to support policy making, tackle disinformation and bring more transparency. Discover EU projects in your region with [Kohesio](#).

### **EURegionsWeek**

The European Week of Regions and Cities is an annual four-day event during which cities and regions showcase their capacity to create growth and jobs, implement European Union cohesion policy, and prove the importance of the local and regional level for good European governance.

[EURegionsWeek](#)

### **EMFAF success stories**

“EMFAF success stories” is a campaign showcasing the positive results of the EMFAF funding. It aims to raise awareness and garner support among wider non-expert audiences and to encourage coastal communities, entrepreneurs, researchers to rely on EU support for their projects.

[Maritime and Fisheries Policy homepage](#)

### **Human stories on the European Pillar of Social Rights**

The new [ESF+ website](#) features stories with powerful testimonials which spotlight individual life changing experiences thanks to projects funded by the ESF, FEAD, YEI and EaSI. The stories underpin the EU wide integrated campaign on implementing the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#) Action Plan and communication on the European Year of Youth 2022.

### **Euronews Real Economy magazine on social topics**

Every month Euronews Real Economy magazine selects a topical issue or a new social policy initiative and travels to the Member States to meet the people who benefit from ESF and other related actions, showing how EU funding helps them in their daily lives.

[Real economy latest episodes](#)





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