**Accessibility for persons with disabilities not included among the selection criteria for funding of projects under new EU rules**

**The EESC hearing on the new MFF and cohesion policy seen from the disability perspective shows the EC proposal could still be improved**

The European Commission's proposals for new rules governing the funds that underpin EU cohesion policy fail to list equality and accessibility for persons with disabilities among mandatory eligibility criteria for funding. This poses a risk that public money may be used to finance infrastructure or services that will only increase their discrimination, an EESC hearing revealed.

"The accessibility in the next Multiannual Financial Framework is simple rhetoric," said the EESC member, **Ioannis Vardakastanis**, one of the main speakers at the public hearing [**"**The new MFF and cohesion policy: how to better use EU funds for persons with disabilities in the new financial framework"](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/new-mff-and-cohesion-policy)**,** held by the EESC Study Group on Disability Rights on 23 October.

The hearing, which included participants from the EESC, European Commission and various NGOs, discussed the proposal for the new Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) – which sets common provisions for seven funds, managed jointly with Member States and representing the main tools for the implementation of cohesion policy – and the possible changes it would bring for disability policies.

Regulations governing the use of individual funds which fall under the CPR, such as the European Social Fund+ (ESF+), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or Cohesion Fund (CF), were also discussed. The event was opened by **Javier Doz Orrit,** EESC rapporteur for the Multiannual Financial Framework after 2020.

**Mr Vardakastanis** told the hearing that in a recent opinion, the EESC had asked the Commission to reincorporate Article 7 of the CPR currently in force into its new text and to have accessibility for persons with disabilities included in the new Article 67 as a criterion for the selection of operations that are to be financed from EU funds.

Article 7 of the current CPR obliges Member States and the Commission to prevent any discrimination during the preparation and implementation of the funded programmes and to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities. It has been removed from the proposed CPR and its provisions were included in the new Article 67 - save for accessibility which is not mentioned.

In this way, accessibility, non-discrimination and equality are included in the preamble of the new CPR but are no longer embedded in its main text nor in the new ERDF or CF regulations. According to the EESC, this may mean they would no longer represent criteria for the selection of operations to be funded using EU money.

"Under the new regulation, accessibility is not obligatory. This will allow for public funding to be used to create working spaces, products or services that will make discrimination of persons with disabilities even bigger," **Mr Vardakastanis** warned.

The same concerns were voiced by the EESC in its [opinion](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/regulation-european-regional-development-fund-2021-2027) on the ERDF and the CF, authored by **Mr Vardakastanis**, but were also echoed by other participants in the hearing which included representatives from the European Disability Forum (EDF), European Network for Independent Living (ENIL), European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASDP) and Spain's ONCE Foundation.

"There are more than 80 million people with disabilities in the EU. We want the relevant regulations to be clear that investment in inaccessible infrastructure or technology cannot be accepted," said **Catherine Naughton** of the EDF, adding that "it should be possible to invest in accessible housing in the same way it is possible to fund energy-efficient housing".

The participants also asked for the transition from institutional to community-based care for persons with disabilities to be restored as an investment priority under the new rules so as to enable these people to live independent lives and be included in their communities. In the same vein, building or renovating segregated institutional care facilities must not be eligible for funding.

**Maria Tussy-Flores** of the ONCE Foundation gave a positive example of a successful use of EU funds. Through the ESF and in cooperation with the Spanish government, ONCE helped some 100,000 people with disabilities in Spain undergo job training and around 80,000 got a job, of which 45% were women.

"This is a true value of the ESF. These events were life-changing for these people," she said.

It was stressed that associations representing the disabled should be involved in decision-making and monitoring of projects and programmes that affect them. Another concern raised was that smaller organisations are often incapable of managing EU funds, as they lack expertise and the necessary capacity to even apply for them. The EDF therefore recommended a two percent allocation of funds for capacity-building for smaller organisations.

The participants agreed that the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) should be embedded in the main texts of the ERDF, CF and ESF regulations and the CPR, and references to it strengthened across all of them.

"The EU budget should be a tool to implement the CRPD, and should not support actions which are at odds with it," **Ms Naughton** maintained.

But the proposed cuts to cohesion policy funding, amounting to 6%, 12% and 46% of the ESF, ERDF and CF budgets respectively, show the lack of political ambition on the part of the Commission.

"Cohesion policy is a crucial instrument for the Commission to tackle disparities and inequalities among citizens and regions alike, especially in these times of uncertainty and growing populism. Its proposal has just not been politically ambitious enough," **Mr Vardakastanis** concluded.