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Complementary strengths. Equal Footing. Shared Solutions.

Joint statement on the European Competitiveness Fund: The EU for Business Network and the Single Market Value Chains Builder

As the European Union negotiates the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), the Council has adopted its partial negotiating position and the European Parliament is finalising its own.[1] Two of the ECF's new instruments will strongly influence whether Europe's ambition reaches the companies it is meant for by taking into full account and leveraging the diversity of Europe's territorial industrial ecosystems: the **EU for Business Network** (Articles 27–28) and the **Single Market Value Chains Builder** (Article 16). Both will be delivered — or fail to be delivered — in Europe's regions.

The European Clusters Alliance (ECA), the European Association of Development Agencies (EURADA) and the Vanguard Initiative (VI) bring together the three layers that already connect European priorities to firms on the ground: industry-led cluster organisations, regional development and innovation agencies, and the governments of industrial regions pursuing smart specialisation strategies and interregional innovation cooperation. We share one conviction: company competitiveness, future oriented industrial transformation, territorial development & cohesion reinforce one another, and the ECF's delivery instruments must be built on Europe's established support structures and territorial strengths.

1. Different functions recognised on an equal footing

The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), through regional consortia, provides free advisory, partnering and internationalisation services to individual small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), under a service catalogue agreed with the Commission for each contract period. Regional development agencies, governments and other organisations are critical actors in the EEN network acting as its local or regional contact points, providing SMEs with direct access to its services and connecting them to expertise, partners and opportunities across Europe and beyond.

Cluster organisations — connected at European level through the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP) — are part of industry-led ecosystems that serve companies both individually and collectively: they bring SMEs together with large firms, universities, research centres and public authorities around a shared strategic agenda; run standing working groups and thematic task forces; monitor technological and market trends and translate them for firms; develop talent strategies for their sectors; generate new value chains and cross-sectoral, cross-border collaboration; provide highly specialised services, including on regulation and Single Market compliance; and carry industry's needs upstream into regional, national and European policy. Regional development agencies combine enterprise services, regional intelligence, investment support and policy implementation. Regional governments provide strategic direction, infrastructure, demand and cross-border cooperation through their smart specialisation strategies (S3). European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs) and other expert partners add further capabilities, notably in digital test-before-invest, are also very often operated by regional development agencies or governments.

These functions are complementary: advising an individual company and developing an industrial ecosystem are different jobs, done with different methods and different partners. The Council's own text recalls that Union funding should facilitate the creation and expansion of innovation and industrial ecosystems in which small and large companies, research institutions, infrastructure providers, investors and public authorities interact.[2] The EU for Business Network should therefore recognise the EEN and the cluster organisations connected through the ECCP as **complementary foundations on an equal footing, each taking part in its own right**, and should link with regional agencies, regional authorities, EDIHs and other qualified actors. Equal footing means recognition in the Regulation, a meaningful role in co-design and a multi-

[1] European Commission, Proposal for a Regulation establishing the European Competitiveness Fund, COM(2025) 555, 16 Jul 2025; Council of the European Union, partial general approach, ST 10625/26, 16 Jun 2026; European Parliament procedure 2025/0555(COD), lead committee ITRE (co-rapporteurs Christian Ehler and Dan Nica), draft report PE784.506 of 20 Apr 2026.

[2] Council of the European Union, ST 10625/26, Recitals 5 and 7 (innovation and industrial ecosystems) and Recital 80 (EEN, ECCP and EDIHs).

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level governance, transparent opportunities to deliver and resources commensurate with each function. It does not mean identical mandates, a uniform organisational model or automatic entitlements.

The complementarity already works in practice. Silicon Europe, an alliance of fourteen clusters in eleven countries with more than 3,000 member organisations, two thirds of them SMEs, has connected large part of Europe's semiconductor and digital-technology ecosystems since 2012 in support of Europe's chips ambitions. The cluster-led Partnerships for Horizon Europe initiative has engaged 1,150 entities and held 957 one-to-one brokerage meetings over five editions, with the EEN contributing its partnering expertise. The MEDIC NEST meta-cluster, with twenty members and an accelerator coordinated with a regional development agency under the I3 instrument, has taken twenty-one health start-ups to investor readiness.[3] Clusters, agencies, regions and the EEN each contributed what they do best.

2. A No-wrong-door Network rooted in the territories & based on real participation

Every company should be able to reach European support through the territorial partner it knows and trusts — an EEN partner, a cluster organisation, a development agency, an EDIH or another qualified intermediary — and be connected to the right expertise without repeated applications or unnecessary handovers. A common service map, referral protocols, interoperable case management and once-only data should turn "no wrong door" into an operational guarantee. A shared digital gateway can support this cooperation; it cannot replace personal contact, industrial knowledge and local delivery capacity. Cooperation between networks is essential, and no single network should hold an exclusive gateway function or a hierarchical position over other competent partners: membership of one network cannot be the sole route to the functions carried out by another.

The creation of an umbrella network in the shape of the EU for Business network should, in other words, neither dilute the specific complementarity of its constituent networks nor conflate the different functions played by diverse actors within each of them. It should work as a **multiplier, not as a gatekeeper**, strengthening coordination, visibility and cross-referral while preserving the distinct expertise, access points and functions of the networks and organisations involved.

Participation must be real, not nominal. A region's cluster community is diverse — often a dozen or more organisations, each covering a distinct (part of the) value chain — and its participation in the Network should reflect that size and diversity, through arrangements designed for collective, ecosystem-level services. The same applies to the regional development agencies and governments.

The service portfolio must be able to evolve. A core catalogue should be complemented by an adaptive component, reviewed regularly with the ecosystems and within the ECF's policy windows, so that services respond to new industrial needs between contract cycles — as the cluster community's rapid mobilisation in 2020 during 'covid' showed is possible. The Network must preserve the identities and proven services of the initiatives it builds on, with a transition that avoids any service gap for SMEs. Where Member States designate national contact points, these should work through and with the Network's territorial partners, not as a parallel channel. Geographically balanced coverage must mean services are also genuinely accessible in less developed, transition, rural, insular and outermost territories — measured by the share of each region's companies and ecosystem actually reached, not by nominal coverage at Member State level. Importantly, the creation of a single network should not result in an overall rationalisation or reduction of the funding previously available to its constituent networks. On the contrary, greater integration and coordination should be matched by **adequate, and where necessary, increased resources** to reflect the broader range of functions, actors and services that the new architecture is expected to bring together.

3. A Value Chains Builder that is company-led, cluster-facilitated and region-enabled

The Value Chains Builder should combine strategic direction set at EU level with continuously updated knowledge from firms, cluster organisations, research organisations, organised regional innovation ecosystems, regional agencies and au-

[3] Silicon Europe, www.silicon-europe.eu (consulted 16 Oct 2026); European Clusters Alliance, Clusters Shaping Industrial Strategies — Good Practices (2026), cases 3.1.9 (Partnerships for Horizon Europe) and 3.1.15 (MEDIC NEST). Figures as reported by the organisations concerned.

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thorities — including shared value-chain intelligence. It should target the capabilities, bottlenecks and strategic dependencies where cross-border coordination adds real value: neither attempting to reproduce complete global value chains in Europe, nor imposing European projects where regional cooperation suffices.

Companies must remain at the centre of investment and implementation. Qualified cluster organisations and their European partnerships should be able to facilitate supplier discovery, mobilise SMEs and lower-tier suppliers, form consortia across regions and sustain cooperation beyond individual projects. Regional governments and development agencies align S3 priorities, demonstration infrastructures, skills, innovation procurement and complementary public and private finance. EEN partners and other specialised organisations contribute their partnering and business-support expertise. Actions should form coherent portfolios from research and testing to first customers, production capacity and follow-on investment, connecting both strong and emerging industrial ecosystems as well as the players operating within.

4. Smart specialisation and an identifiable interregional instrument

Smart specialisation is the bridge between industrial needs, regional investment choices and EU strategic objectives. It should inform ECF and Horizon Europe programming, and the synergies with the national and regional partnership plans, through genuine multi-level participation — as the European Committee of the Regions has also called for.[4] The experience of the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) instrument and of the Vanguard Initiative's thematic pilots shows how complementary regional strengths generate cross-border demonstration, new industrial partnerships and market uptake at the stages closest to the market.

The 2028–2034 framework should therefore preserve I3 as a clearly identifiable and adequately resourced interregional innovation instrument. At the same time, there should be strong coordination and clearly defined complementarities between I3 and the Value Chains Builder, with practical pathways allowing projects, partnerships and investment pipelines developed under one instrument to connect to the other. This would help ensure continuity from interregional innovation cooperation and demonstration through to larger-scale value-chain development and follow-on investment.

5. Finance enabling functions - Govern jointly - Measure outcomes

Business access, industrial intelligence, project preparation, value-chain facilitation and interregional coordination require professional capacity over time. The ECF should provide identifiable and predictable resources for these critical roles assigned to delivery partners — financing by role, not by label — under transparent and proportionate selection, quality requirements and conflict-of-interest safeguards. Financial support to third parties, where provided for in programmes and calls, should remain accessible through the relevant competent organisations. Cluster organisations and agencies that help prepare firms for investment should act as trusted enablers — not as investment decision-makers or commission-based brokers.

Regional and territorial actors, the EEN and the cluster community should have a meaningful place in the ECF's stakeholder and advisory arrangements and in the preparation of work programmes, without creating new administrative structures. Accountability should focus on results — SMEs and ecosystem actors reached, time to useful assistance and client satisfaction, technology adoption, cross-border supplier relationships, market uptake, public and private investment mobilised, and participation of emerging regions — building on existing data, with strong confidentiality safeguards and minimal reporting burden.

[4] European Committee of the Regions, Opinion on the European Competitiveness Fund (CDR 3194/2025, rapporteur Pehr Granfalk), adopted 4 Mar 2026.

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Our five requests to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission

1. **Recognise** the EEN and the cluster organisations connected through the ECCP, on an equal footing and each in its own right, as complementary foundations of the EU for Business Network in the operative provisions of Article 27 — not only in the recitals — alongside regional development and innovation agencies, regional authorities, EDIHs and other competent partners.
2. **Establish a No-wrong-door Network** with differentiated services and an adaptive service catalogue, several trusted points of access, interoperable referrals, continuity of existing SME support and participation proportional to each region's ecosystem; membership of one network cannot be the sole route to the functions of another; connect national contact points to the Network rather than beside it.
3. **Co-design the Article 16 Value Chains Builder** with industry, cluster organisations, organised regional innovation ecosystems, regional authorities and development agencies; enable company-led, cluster-facilitated and region-enabled value-chain portfolios with meaningful SME inclusion, links between complementary regional capabilities and continuity beyond individual projects.
4. **Anchor territorial delivery in smart specialisation and genuine multi-level governance,** and preserve a distinct, adequately resourced interregional innovation instrument I3 with effective links to the ECF, Horizon Europe and regional investment programmes.
5. **Match every assigned delivery function** with identifiable and predictable support, fair and transparent participation conditions, neutrality safeguards and proportionate, outcome-based accountability.

What we offer

Subject to the decisions of our governing bodies, our three networks stand ready to test a joint referral protocol between EEN consortia, cluster organisations, development agencies and EDIHs in volunteer regions; to contribute jointly to a shared evidence base and to European value-chain intelligence; and to provide joint input to the Commission's work programmes and implementing acts for Articles 16 and 27–28.

Europe does not need to choose between support for individual companies, industrial ecosystem building and cooperation among its regions. It needs all three, working together on equal terms, where firms are situated.

European Clusters Alliance	EURADA	Vanguard Initiative
Authorised representative:	Authorised representative:	Authorised representative:
Antonio Novo Guerrero	Theo Föllings	Ellen Mulder
Date: 30/10/2026	Date:	Date: 30/10/2026

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Ondertekend door:
Theo Föllings
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