



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

The European Competitiveness Fund and the new MFF: Future Roles and Opportunities for Clusters

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
24 September 2025, 8:30 – 10:00 CET

An initiative of the European Union





The European Competitiveness Fund and the new MFF: Future Roles and Opportunities for Clusters

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, hosted the EU Clusters Talk “**The European Competitiveness Fund and the new MFF: Future Roles and Opportunities for Clusters**” on 24 September, from 8:30 – 10:00 CET. The session outlined the main features of the Competitiveness Fund and the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), and raised the question of the role of clusters in the ECF.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderator: Chris Burns

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Overview of the European Competitiveness Fund and the new MFF
Magdalena Brussel-Jacaszek, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
Jan Potuzak, Economic Analyst, DG GROW, European Commission
Agnieszka Wojdyr, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
Viorika Dishnica, Legal and Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Panel debate
Hervé Floch, President of the Europe Committee, AFPC
Monika Antonowicz, Expert in Strategy and Analysis Department, Polish Agency for Enterprise Development
Montse Daban, President, CEBR
Raffaella Bruzzone, Chair “Access2Finance” Thematic Group, Enterprise Europe Network, Chamber of Commerce of Genoa
Sébastien Thomas-Chaffange, General Director, France Clusters
4. Funding opportunities
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- The European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), worth over €234 billion and pooling more than €451 billion in total resources, is the EU’s first programme to offer a seamless investment journey for companies.
- A single rulebook will replace 14 different sets of rules, streamlining access for beneficiaries. The ECF is designed to bring flexibility and agility.
- The panellists agreed that clusters are well-developed organisations that should be formally included in the implementation mechanisms of the ECF.
- There were concerns expressed regarding the role of clusters in the ECF.
- A call was made for the ECF to be truly accessible, balanced, and operational for all types of companies.



1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Chris Burns, the following news items were presented:

1. Invitation to [TCI Global Conference](#), Dublin, 14-16 October
2. [Net Zero Acceleration Valleys Survey](#), please reply until 30 September
3. [Public Consultation](#) on European Innovation Act, please reply until 3 October
4. [ECCP Investment Survey](#), collecting information on major investments attracted by clusters
5. Invitation to [C2Lab](#) in Kuopio, Finland, on 28-30 October
6. Upcoming [Clusters meet Regions](#) events

2. Overview of the European Competitiveness Fund and the new MFF

Magdalena Brussel-Jacaszek, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Jan Potuzak, Economic Analyst, DG GROW, European Commission

Agnieszka Wojdyr, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Viorika Dishnica, Legal and Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Magdalena Brussel-Jacaszek explained the background of the European Competitiveness Fund and gave an outline of its main features. Europe has made competitiveness a central priority, building on Draghi's diagnosis and the Competitiveness Compass adopted in January. The Commission reviewed funding instruments, conducted impact assessments, and consulted stakeholders to identify gaps in support for European companies. Findings showed that current funding is fragmented, lacks flexibility in crises, and does not provide seamless support along the full innovation journey. A key issue is the "Valley of Death", where companies struggle to scale up in Europe and must often seek capital abroad. To address this, the Commission created the **European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) of €234.3 billion within the multiannual financial framework**, making it the second largest budget envelope. The fund will be structured into thematic windows and closely linked with Horizon Europe and the Innovation Fund to ensure stronger coherence between research and industrial policy.

Jan Potuzak explained that the ECF is designed to pool over €451 billion to strengthen European competitiveness in strategic sectors. Its scale and impact lie in creating one of the EU's most powerful toolboxes to mobilise private investment, particularly through the InvestEU instrument, while ensuring seamless support across the entire investment journey—from research to scale-up and manufacturing. What is new is the introduction of a **single rulebook**, replacing 13 funds and processes with one simplified framework to speed up applications. The fund also ensures stronger **policy coherence** by linking Horizon Europe with industrial policy, and greater **agility** to adapt to emerging challenges throughout the seven-year financial framework.

He described the ECF's structure as a "house" with four thematic windows: clean transition and industrial decarbonisation; health, biotech, agriculture and bioeconomy; digital leadership; and resilience and security, defence industry and space. Horizontal instruments such as InvestEU, SME collaboration, skills, and project advisory will support projects across these windows. A cyclical



feedback loop will ensure that innovation feeds back into new research, creating continuous growth and alignment between funding, research, and industrial policy.

Magdalena Brussel-Jacaszek highlighted that the ECF introduces a **single, simplified set of rules** for all programmes to reduce complexity for beneficiaries. Key novelties include:

- **Additional resources:** Member States and private investors can add funds to specific windows or to the general envelope, providing flexibility.
- **Combined and cumulative funding:** Projects may draw on multiple programmes at once.
- **Coordination:** Alignment across all programmes will be ensured.
- **Competitiveness seal:** High-quality but unfunded projects will receive a label, giving them preferential access to other funding sources (e.g. national envelopes).
- **Eligibility:** Same criteria across all programmes, with an EU preference allowing some calls to prioritise European companies.
- **Third-country participation:** Open to EFTA and candidate countries; others may join subject to contributions.

Beyond traditional grants and procurement, the ECF will offer a wide set of instruments:

- **Financial instruments:** Building on InvestEU's success, the ECF will provide equity, loans, and guarantees to mobilise private investment.
- **Industrial mechanisms:**
 - *Value chain builder:* Support for projects enhancing supply chain resilience.
 - *EU Tech frontrunners:* Industry-driven innovation, with ecosystems of SMEs, academia, and research.
 - *Production ramp-up:* Funding for projects already underway, not just new initiatives.

In sum, these instruments aim to leverage EU budgetary guarantees, stimulate private capital, and strengthen Europe's industrial base.

Agnieszka Wojdyr presented the ECF's horizontal and cross-cutting activities:

- **Project advisory:** Building on InvestEU's experience, companies will receive help in structuring investment proposals, developing business plans, and even support during implementation. This will be delivered with partners such as the EIB Group.
- **Business acceleration services:** Guidance will cover growth strategies, access to technologies and infrastructures, navigating ECF funding opportunities, and matchmaking.
- The **EU for Business Network** will be created, building on the Enterprise Europe Network and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform. This network will act as an ambassador for the ECF, offering local and regional advice, especially to SMEs.
- Dedicated **SME actions** will be included under each thematic window, ensuring targeted support for small and medium enterprises. A single entry point and unified data system will simplify access, allowing companies to find all funding information in one place.
- Beneficiary **service deck:** A single electronic data interchange area for participants comprising all ECF activities



3. Panel debate

Previously to the panel debate, the attendants were asked about three questions, one of them being their views on the Competitiveness Fund.



Clearly the audience expressed their concerns about the need to clearly explicit the **roles that clusters must play in the new instruments** to be created on the framework of the Competitiveness Fund, and specifically how clusters will be involved in the **EU for Business Network**.

All speakers expressed their support for the initiatives and **agreed that clusters are well-developed organisations that should be formally included in the implementation mechanism of the ECF**.

Hervé Floch described the European Competitiveness Fund as a major step forward in strengthening EU support for innovation, which is vital for Europe’s competitiveness and jobs. With China and the US pushing aggressively in this area, Europe needs such an **ambitious tool** to remain at the forefront in strategic sectors. He expressed strong support for this initiative on behalf of European cluster organisations and added that **clusters have a fundamental role in Europe as connectors of innovation ecosystems across regions**. They uniquely bring together research, industry, training, technology transfer, and funding, enabling research results to be transformed into innovation, the engine of competitiveness. Within the ECF, clusters should have a **specific role as they will be key to animating and linking actors from research to industry, with impact on SMEs**. To illustrate this leverage, he shared his experience from the French Pôles de Compétitivité: over 20 years, 53 clusters generated €55 billion in R&D and innovation projects, with 80% involving SMEs. This demonstrates the concrete capacity of clusters to drive innovation, competitiveness, and SME engagement.

Monika Antonowicz expressed her support for the Commission’s initiative but raised concerns about the **risks of over-centralisation**. A “one-size-fits-all” approach may not reflect the diverse needs of regions, SMEs, and clusters. The fund should allow differentiated approaches, regional flexibility, and bottom-up project design to avoid becoming a tool that looks strong on paper but fails in practice. Safeguards are needed for weaker sectors, such as crafts and traditional agri-food, to ensure balanced development across Europe. She also called for flexibility and faster responses to crises,



drawing lessons from the COVID-19 experience. Montse Daban added that, as experience shows, translating EU-level ambitions into regional practice is complex. Co-funding requirements, often set at 50%, are especially difficult for many regions and risk creating uneven implementation. Clearer alignment between regional and European strategies is necessary to overcome these barriers.

Montse Daban said that the ECF could be a powerful tool if managed through a simple, interoperable front door with blended finance and **clusters embedded as delivery partners**. Clusters, representing thousands of stakeholders across Europe, can act as assisted entry points to guide SMEs and help them become investment-ready. The fund has the potential to address key challenges: improving access to scale-up capital, easing complex approvals for facilities such as labs and clean rooms, and mitigating high energy costs. However, its success depends on ensuring the promised “one-stop shop” truly functions effectively.

Raffaella Bruzzone, speaking as chair of the Enterprise Europe Network’s thematic group on access to finance, underlined that the EEN connects local ecosystems with clusters, associations, and regional agencies, while also operating at transnational and global levels across 50+ countries. This positioning makes the network a vital partner in ensuring SMEs have easy access to the ECF. The key challenge for the fund will be to **balance the diverse needs of companies**—from highly innovative and competitive sectors to more traditional industries that remain the backbone of Europe’s economy. Simplification is essential, but equal attention must be paid to making the fund truly operational and accessible to all types of SMEs.

Sébastien Thomas-Chaffange agreed that clusters can play a strategic role in the success of the European Competitiveness Fund, which has the potential to be a real game changer. The fund is not only about pooling financial instruments but about strengthening Europe’s industrial and innovation capacity. In his experience, initiatives like *Cluster Invest* demonstrate how clusters can act as financial and strategic intermediaries—identifying promising projects, preparing them for investment, and connecting them with both public and private financiers. In doing so, clusters translate European ambitions into tangible results for companies on the ground, making them a **strong support mechanism for the fund**.

Despite these frequent references to their importance, **clusters are not yet explicitly recognised in current regulations**, as Monika Antonowicz pointed out. One reason could be lack of reliable data on cluster impact. Proposals were made for a Cluster Impact Score or similar KPI to provide evidence-based discussion and demonstrate their value. Such a tool, supported by an updated and accurate ECCP cluster map, would better reflect the contribution of clusters to SMEs, regions, and Europe’s competitiveness.

Concerns about the role of clusters in the ECF were also voiced in the chat:

- Norbert Reichl: One size fit all is difficult approach. We need more competitiveness and front running tech development but should never forget the many SMEs in Europe that are the basis for wealth and jobs all over Europe. Additionally, we should not forget the food security topic. so please consider support mechanisms that help SMEs with necessary adoption of innovative solutions to remain competitive on future markets. Cascade funding is a relevant option and **clusters play an important role in all kinds of actions related to SME engagement. So please, not just pleasant words, but real support for cluster organisations.**



- Yuan Chai: Clusters have the **systemic view in their respective sector, they can better implement European strategies in their ecosystem, support SMEs for more competitiveness and contribute to a more aligned regional / national / European strategies**
- Hervé Floch: Could it be considered that **clusters have a formal co-leadership in the governance of the future EU for Business Network?**

Montse Daban proposed that **clusters should be included in the governance of the ECF**. Their presence in strategic stakeholder boards and coordination tools would allow them to decisively shape implementation. Clusters should also have a stronger role in regional smart specialisation strategies, where their expertise is often overlooked. Additionally, the clusters' own sustainability is critical. Dedicated funding strategies for clusters are needed to ensure they can leverage their knowledge and play their full role.

Raffaella Bruzzone added that it will be crucial for SMEs to have **a clear entry point** to access the fund and understand which instruments best fit their investment strategies. Clusters and the EEN should not be seen as competitors but as complementary actors helping SMEs with financial literacy and guidance on suitable tools—be they grants, equity, or debt—while avoiding false expectations. Sébastien Thomas-Chaffange acknowledged that financing the industrialisation of SMEs must be a core priority of the ECF, and this requires working with actors closest to them—namely, clusters and regional ecosystems. The fund should remain **simple and clear, ensuring support is delivered locally and effectively**.

On this point, related to the Project Advisory, chapter 26 of the ECF, attendees highlighted:

- Yuan Chai: when we talk about place-based innovation, we also need to **provide place-based support**. Having clusters who have the trust from companies, supporting them to be part of the European programme is very important
- Raffaella Bruzzone: I guess we will all have - **by reinforcing collaboration with relevant players (as Clusters are) - an important role to play to ensure smooth, adequate access to ECF and to other financial providers from our EU SMEs**

Answering several questions from the audience, Magdalena Brussel-Jacaszek explained that the ECF aims to remain broad and flexible rather than overly prescriptive. While specific industries like agriculture, agri-food, and food safety are not explicitly listed, they are fully covered under the relevant windows such as biotech. The goal is to avoid lengthy “Christmas tree” lists of sectors and instead provide **adaptable frameworks** that can address diverse needs. **Flexibility** applies not only to budget management but also to programme design, ensuring calls are not narrowly defined around specific projects. Clusters are recognised as major intermediaries, though they are part of wider territorial ecosystems that include multiple local actors. The Commission is mindful that innovation is place-based and rooted in territories, requiring strong connections across regions and stakeholders.

Viorika Dishnica added that the ECF is the first programme designed to support SMEs along a **seamless investment journey**, covering all development stages to enable growth. Its toolbox will be aligned with different levels of company maturity, with details to be provided in the work programmes once the proposal is approved. Each window will have its own work programme, but companies may benefit across multiple windows depending on their needs. She confirmed that the Commission recognises clusters both as the **voice of SMEs and stakeholders** and as **ambassadors of**



the ECF on the ground, and their involvement in governance, such as the strategic stakeholder board, is considered essential.

4. Funding opportunities

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Nina Hoppmann shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. [European network of national competence centers for innovation procurement](#); deadline 20 January 2026.
2. [Scaling up deep tech ecosystems](#); deadline 20 January 2026
3. [Expanding Investment Ecosystems](#); deadline 20 January 2026