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COMPET 440	ECOFIN 485
IND 253	COH 61
MI 350	INDEF 87
CADREFIN 157	CULT 46
FIN 545	CYBER 166
RECH 170	JAI 460
ESPACE 58	DIGIT 105
CONSOM 122	DATAPROTECT 124
DUAL USE 27	FREMP 130
EDUC 116	RELEX 511
TELECOM 171	COPS 212
ENER 180	UD 98
ENV 366	AUDIO 49
CLIMA 201	PROCIV 75
AGRI 276	IPCR 31
TRANS 226	MAP 90
SAN 223	FISC 136
PHARM 58	CODEC 692
BIOTECH 36	IA 85
POLMIL 164	CSC 242
POLGEN 84	

NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee
Subject:	Regulation establishing European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), including specific programme for defence research and innovation *- Guidance for further work*

Introduction

Over the last months the Ad hoc Working Party on the Multiannual Financial Framework (European Competitiveness Fund) has made substantial progress in the examination of the proposal for a Regulation on establishing the European Competitiveness Fund ('ECF').

In parallel, the Ad hoc Working Party on the Multiannual Financial Framework discussed all bracketed provisions of the Regulation and the outcome of the discussion is included in the draft negotiating box.

The Presidency is entering the last mile before submitting to the Council a Partial General Approach on the ECF. Some sensitive outstanding issues have emerged on which Coreper will be invited to provide political orientation in the coming weeks.

The Presidency invites Member States to provide political orientation on one of the most sensitive outstanding issues in the negotiations on the ECF, which is ensuring high quality projects while taking into account the different circumstances across the EU, in essence reflected in paragraph 78 of the negotiating box.

Based on the discussions in the Ad hoc Working Party and its ECF subgroup, the Presidency acknowledges that ensuring high-quality projects and high impact project selection is a common pursuit among Member States. At the same time, different circumstances across the Union should be considered, in order to harness the expertise across the EU.

Elements for consideration in order to ensure high quality projects while taking into account the different circumstances across the EU:

- An enhanced role of the **National Contact Points** (NCPs), to provide essential advisory and matchmaking support to help entities across the Union access ECF calls effectively. In this respect, it could be considered to further clarify that **capacity building measures** provided by the NCPs network will be eligible for funding under both the horizontal activities and the policy windows. In line with current practices, Union funding for NCPs would continue to cover project-related support costs and not general operational costs.

- **Further involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises** (SMEs). SMEs are present in all Member States and facilitating their access and participation could translate into pan-European coverage of the ECF. The level of SME integration, or of integration of complementary scientific, technological or industrial competences not yet present in selected projects, could also be considered for a potential tiebreaker framework to be included in the work programme rules. Such a framework would not affect the ranking of proposals assessed on the basis of quality and impact and would apply only when proposals achieve equivalent scores.

- A fine-tuned role of the **Single Market Value Chains Builder**, in the context of the work programme preparation and following consultation with Member States in the respective Programme Committees, to provide for dedicated calls targeting the uptake by SMEs or to include SME-related elements in value chain consortia, with a view to strengthening cross-border value chains and broadening participation across the Union.

- In accordance with the Performance Regulation, **enhanced monitoring provisions** could be considered in order to be able to identify excessive and persistent concentration of ECF funding.

Questions:

The Permanent Representatives Committee is invited to provide political orientation on the following questions:

- How can the ECF Regulation strike a balance between ensuring high quality and high impact projects and taking account of the different circumstances across the EU?

- Which of the actions proposed by the Presidency could be a fair and workable way forward and should be further developed at Working Party level?

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