## **Executive Summary**

The structural challenges that underpinned the interventions under Priority 5, namely the need to modernize the educational infrastructure and facilitate access to quality education, continue to be a priority for the South-East region, due to significant disparities between counties and education levels.

The limited offer of school camps and leisure centres reduces opportunities for pupils to engage in extracurricular activities. Educational performance remains below the EU average, as evidenced by low PISA test scores, high rates of early school leaving and low participation in tertiary education.

Priority 5 interventions are aligned with the 2019-2024 Country-Specific Recommendations, which remain relevant. P5 contributes to CSR3 20219 and CSR2 2020 in terms of investment in education infrastructure. The degree of contracting indicates moderate progress and measures for disadvantaged groups and ESF+-type measures need to be further supported, as the findings of the CSR in May 2024 show a low level of implementation of recommendations in the field of education, underlining the need to step up efforts to achieve the assumed targets.

Priority 5 indirectly contributes to achieving the objectives of the Integrated National Energy and Climate Change Plan through interventions aimed at energy rehabilitation of educational infrastructure, although this is not the main objective of the actions.

As regards the contribution of P5 interventions to the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Programme supports, through the specific objectives OS4.2 and OS4.6, the improvement of access to quality educational services and lifelong learning, through modern and accessible infrastructure, including for distance education.

As regards the progress of implementation, the analysis shows that although there is an increased interest in funding, the pace of project implementation is slow. By the end of 2024, only 36% of the total allocation for Priority 5 had been contracted. The main barriers identified include delays in the contracting and approval process, administrative difficulties in obtaining permits, lack of financial resources to cover ineligible costs and economic fluctuations that have led to higher prices of construction materials. Also, the administrative capacity of beneficiaries is reduced, which affects their ability to manage projects in an efficient way.

The Danube Delta ITI mechanism encounters additional difficulties in attracting and implementing projects. Although there is demand for funding, delays in launching calls and administrative problems are affecting the progress of projects in this territory.

In terms of progress, the selected operations indicate a degree of ownership towards the final target of more than 74% for the capacity of new or upgraded classrooms dedicated to childcare and 83% for the capacity of classrooms in new or upgraded educational facilities. No progress has been made for SO4.6 given that calls for SO4.6 have not yet been launched.

Priority 5 is well founded and responds to real needs in the South-East region, and the interventions remain relevant to the socio-economic needs, being coherent with the European directions of development. However, its implementation is affected by administrative, financial and capacity problems. The slow pace of contracting and execution of works highlights the need to step up efforts to ensure the achievement of the objectives undertaken by the end of the programming period.

In order to improve the implementation of the programme, it is recommended to:

* + Accelerate the launch of calls for projects, as well as the evaluation, selection and contracting processes, in line with the 2025 timetable.
  + Strengthen the administrative capacity of applicants and beneficiaries, especially in small towns, for the efficient preparation and implementation of projects.
  + Support measures for inclusive education, in line with European recommendations, by continuing to invest in educational infrastructure for disadvantaged groups and by effectively applying the provisions on cross-financing, including by actively informing potential beneficiaries.
  + Focus support on key aspects of implementation that ensure the quality of results and sustainability of interventions, including the operationalisation of infrastructure, matching with other funding sources and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups, with a focus on small urban ATUs.