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- Council conclusions (approved on 23 May 2024)

Delegations will find in the annex the Council conclusions on *The ex-post evaluation of Horizon 2020 and future outlook*, approved by the Council at its 4026th meeting held on 23 May 2024.

**COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS ON THE EX-POST EVALUATION OF HORIZON 2020 AND
FUTURE OUTLOOK**

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING

- its Conclusions of 27 May 2016¹ on “FP7 and the Future Outlook: Research and innovation investments for growth, jobs and solutions to societal challenges”, which support the ambitious simplification efforts initiated by the Commission, recognise the importance of ensuring attractiveness and accessibility of the Framework Programme (FP), acknowledge the need to better align policy agendas, acknowledge that most recent and sufficient high quality data is needed to assess the longer-term impacts of the EU R&D&I Framework Programmes, whilst taking into account the need to minimise the administrative burden for participants, and invite the relevant national and regional authorities and the Commission to increase the leverage effect of public research and development (R&D) spending on other public and private funding of research and innovation (R&I) as well as to foster public-private cooperation;
- its Conclusions of 1 December 2017² “From Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020 towards the ninth Framework Programme”, which stress that EU added value must be the major driver for the design and implementation of the FP;

¹ 9527/16
² 15320/17

- its Recommendation of 19 November 2021³ on “a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe”, in which it proposes a common set of values and principles inherent to the European Research Area (ERA) and its R&I systems, such as the pursuit of excellence and inclusiveness as a principle to reach the full potential of the ERA; pointing as well to the importance of coordination and coherence between the European dimension and national and regional R&I policies, the overall responsibility to increase impact of knowledge on society; reaffirming the target of investing 3% of Union GDP in research and development;
 - its Conclusions of 13 October 2022⁴ on the European Court of Auditors’ Special Report No 15/2022 on “Measures to widen participation in Horizon 2020 were well designed but sustainable change will mostly depend on efforts by national authorities” and its Conclusions of 9 March 2023⁵ on the European Court of Auditors’ Special Report No 23/2022 on “Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds - Not yet used to full potential“, which stress the importance of synergies between Union programmes, on the one hand, and between European, national and regional levels, on the other hand, in order to ensure coherent programming and implementation and to address the R&I divide.
1. WELCOMES the Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the “*Ex post* evaluation of Horizon 2020, the EU framework programme for research and innovation”⁶ published on 29 January 2024; NOTES that several of the recommendations of the ex post evaluation are being addressed in Horizon Europe, and therefore LOOKS FORWARD to the Commission’s timely reporting on the Horizon Europe Interim Evaluation. REAFFIRMS the importance of a strong and rigorous evidence base to inform the design and implementation of Framework Programmes.

³ 13701/21
⁴ 13426/22
⁵ 7258/23
⁶ 5941/24 and 5941/24 ADD 2 - 4

I. Core Principles

2. EMPHASISES that, driven by the pursuit of excellence to deliver impact for the benefit of EU citizens, the overarching goals of the Framework Programme are to strengthen the EU's scientific and technological bases while promoting all the research activities deemed necessary to contribute to the design and implementation of relevant Union policies; NOTES that the Framework Programme is thereby instrumental for the Union's political and policy priorities, including the development of the ERA in which researchers, scientific knowledge and technology circulate freely, strongly contributing to the Union's competitiveness and resilience.
3. UNDERLINES the pivotal role of the Framework Programme as the central instrument at EU level to support R&I and AFFIRMS the added value of the Framework Programme in enabling R&I activities, in particular collaborative research, that would not have been possible through other means or funding sources.
4. RECOGNISES the evaluation's message that to achieve these goals and to boost the Union's competitiveness, its attractiveness for R&I talent, and its capacity to leverage public and private investments, an adequate budget and stability during the implementation phase of the Framework Programme is necessary, without prejudice to the future MFF of the Union. In addition STRESSES that this requires a strong and interconnected European R&I system at the EU, the national and regional levels and RECALLS that the EU Member States remain far from achieving the EU-level target of investing 3% of GDP per year in R&D – with an EU investment of 2.22% of GDP in 2022.

II. Scientific impact

5. WELCOMES the substantial scientific impact Horizon 2020 generated, driving scientific breakthroughs and pioneering advancements in science and technology, thereby considerably contributing to the Union's position as a global scientific powerhouse. RECOGNISES in particular the scientific contributions of the European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) as flagship instruments and WELCOMES their positive structuring effect on the quality of science, training, career development and working conditions of researchers. CALLS ON the Commission to further explore ways to extend the leveraging effect of these instruments towards scientific excellence and improved researchers' skills and careers on all the Framework Programme's participating organisations.
6. TAKES NOTE that Horizon 2020 covered the entire R&I value chain, and CALLS on the Commission to aim for a balanced approach in the funding opportunities between fundamental research and the final stages of economic or societal valorisation of research results, including providing more opportunities for collaborative research at lower Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs). STRESSES the importance of investing in a strong and broad knowledge base, ensuring a wide range of R&I outputs on the longer term, thereby reinforcing the Union's ability to respond fast and effectively to unforeseen crises.

III. Societal impact

7. TAKES NOTE of the significant contributions of Horizon 2020 to addressing key societal challenges in alignment with Union priorities and linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); WELCOMES the evolution, after the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020, to a more strategic, interdisciplinary and directional approach of the programme, aimed at promoting R&I activities that have the potential to transform social, economic, and environmental systems and increase the Union's resilience. NOTES that Horizon 2020 did not fully reach its budgetary target for climate-specific topics.

8. EMPHASISES that in order to engage the full potential of investments into R&I at all levels, this approach requires the coordinated engagement and the early involvement of Member States and consultation of all stakeholders in setting and co-designing the R&I thematic priorities. STRESSES the value of a bottom-up approach being less prescriptive within the thematic priorities, tapping into the full potential of researchers' creativity to address these. INVITES the Commission to continue combining relevant contributions from all programme parts to enable the pursuit of common objectives and increase impact in key areas, as was initiated by the Focus Areas approach. RECALLS the important role of R&I outcomes in the policy-making process and ENCOURAGES the Commission to optimise feedback to policy from Framework Programme projects.
9. ACKNOWLEDGES that the integration of social sciences and humanities (SSH) increased over the lifetime of the programme and the quality of the integration of SSH in projects improved, but REGRETS the uneven uptake of SSH across programme parts as well as in their qualitative integration in projects; UNDERLINES the importance of including a societal perspective on research activities and technology development and leading to better opportunities for industrial and societal value creation. CALLS ON the Commission to further improve the adequacy of societal considerations already at the drafting stage of all work programmes and by evaluating it more rigorously in project proposals where relevant.

IV. Economic impact

10. ACKNOWLEDGES the wider economic impact of the programme, not only by stimulating employment and economic growth as a result of investments in R&I and the transfer of knowledge to society and to the market, but also by leveraging public and private investment and raising the productivity of companies involved; EMPHASISES the need to further promote and support private investments through the FP; NOTES the estimate that every euro invested in Horizon 2020 will yield five euro of benefits for EU citizens by 2040. WELCOMES the enhanced efforts to strengthen the R&I performance of the Union.

11. WELCOMES the introduction of the European Innovation Council (EIC) pilot in Horizon 2020, initiating the creation of a one-stop shop for innovation measures; REAFFIRMS the need for Member States and the Commission to continue supporting all types of innovation, including breakthrough innovation and technology potential across Europe and the efforts to strengthen the European venture capital market that facilitates cross-border investments and increases the available risk capital for innovation, including scaling up new technologies. CALLS ON the Commission to further deepen synergies between relevant innovation instruments and programmes, such as to enhance complementarities between the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) and the EIC in support of innovation and to assess options to avoid overlap of instruments.
12. EMPHASISES that despite the vast amount of exploitable results of Horizon 2020 projects more effort is needed to enhance the effective uptake by end users, including policy makers. ACKNOWLEDGES the efforts of the Commission to put Union-wide exploitation and dissemination support services and tools in place to improve the visibility as well as the usability of results, but URGES the Commission to continue improving and extending these tools and services and to explore additional ways of supporting beneficiaries in improving their knowledge valorisation and communication capacities and skills.
13. HIGHLIGHTS the added value of early involvement of end users or their perspectives in the design and structure of relevant R&I projects. WELCOMES the increased number of newcomers attracted to Horizon 2020 from various sectors, scientific disciplines and countries, and CALLS ON the Commission to continue facilitating participation of new entities from across the Union that can add value in reinforcing knowledge creation and valorisation, in particular SMEs.

V. Synergies

14. ACKNOWLEDGES the progress made in facilitating synergies between Horizon 2020 and other EU programmes and funds; NOTES that in Horizon 2020 upstream synergies and alternative funding have made progress in implementation but that downstream synergies and complementary funding from EU, national, regional, and private sources showed a need for improvement. ACKNOWLEDGES that Partnerships may encourage synergies between national and EU funding, and reinforce knowledge creation and valorisation; RECOMMENDS establishing more efficient pathways within the Framework Programme, between relevant sectoral EU programmes and to national and regional programmes for refinement or scaling up of research and innovation results generated by Framework Programme actions in order to boost their exploitation and take-up; ENCOURAGES the Commission and the Member States to investigate ways to broaden the scope and use of the Seal of Excellence and to increase awareness of this opportunity.
15. INVITES the Commission to develop with Member States an overarching vision on the European, national and regional R&I funding landscape that leads to simplification and a more coordinated approach by design of the programmes and better connection between all parts, thereby enhancing complementarity, coherence, reducing fragmentation and maximizing the further uptake of R&I results. ENCOURAGES the Commission and Member States to strengthen the cooperation between bodies involved in the management of relevant R&I-related programmes at EU, national, and regional level, including cohesion policy programmes and the Framework Programme; INVITES the Commission to continue investing in creating awareness for funding bodies and applicants of exploitable results of the Framework Programme as well as follow up opportunities across programmes and at different stages of the R&I pipeline.

VI. Supporting the ERA

16. WELCOMES the goals and achievements of the Science with and for Society (SwafS) part of Horizon 2020 and CALLS ON the Commission and the Member States to better align the Framework Programme with the policy framework of the ERA to improve their relevance in establishing a single, borderless market for R&I across Europe.
17. WELCOMES the improvements made towards gender balance in Horizon 2020, but CONSIDERS that women's participation, including in project coordination, in the programme should be reinforced; INVITES the Commission to further analyse the causes of imbalances and to explore stronger additional measures to support women researchers, evaluators, entrepreneurs and innovators, and RECOMMENDS a continued focus on integrating the gender dimension in research and innovation content and supporting the mainstreaming of gender equality.
18. HIGHLIGHTS the development, upgrading and improved accessibility of research and technology infrastructures realised in Horizon 2020, enhancing research collaboration, enabling state of the art scientific advances, and ensuring the testing of innovations; RECOMMENDS that the Member States and the Commission facilitate access to research infrastructures, including for collaborative research, and create greater synergies between EU, national and regional funding programmes for research infrastructures, to ensure their operations are sustainable, in line with the work and recommendations of ESFRI.

19. WELCOMES the progress made on the integration of the open access principles and requirements in Horizon 2020, the development of the open access publishing platform Open Research Europe (ORE) and the establishment of the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC), contributing to enhanced knowledge circulation; RECOMMENDS further and incentivising findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (FAIR) data management across disciplines and programme parts.
20. RECALLS that Horizon 2020's openness to international R&I cooperation is instrumental to strengthen the EU's excellence and attractiveness, to tackle global challenges and to support the Union's external and development policy objectives. CALLS on the Commission to strengthen international collaboration in line with the principles and values for international cooperation in R&I as well as the strategic autonomy of the EU while preserving an open economy and taking into account the changing geopolitical context by balancing openness and freedom of scientific research with the need to enhance research security.

VII. Widening Participation

21. NOTES the moderate increase of the participation rate and of the EU contribution share of widening countries in Horizon 2020, and the persisting disparities between widening and non-widening countries; RECALLS that genuine sustainable change requires continuous national investments and targeted reforms in national R&I systems. URGES the Commission to assess and present the impact and effectiveness of the implemented widening measures, taking account of different root causes of the R&I divide. ACKNOWLEDGES that there were fewer newcomers amongst the beneficiaries in Spreading Excellence and Widening Participation as compared to the other programme parts; HIGHLIGHTS at the same time considerable disparities among widening countries both in participation as well as in success rates and INVITES the Commission in this regard to assess and present the impact of various options towards a more effective approach, including tailor-made actions, that consider the root causes identified and contribute to closing the R&I divide.

22. HIGHLIGHTS that partnering with high-performing institutions enabled by widening measures decisively contributed to the quality of the research in widening countries, and INVITES the Commission to strengthen measures that support opening up researchers' networks and providing networking opportunities, especially for early career researchers. CALLS ON the Commission to explore a wider use of synergetic and collaborative approaches for capacity building, as well as to extend support measures hereto.

VIII. Implementation

23. NOTES with regret that several parts of the programme suffered from significant oversubscription and hence resulted in a serious loss of effort and resources for applicants; CALLS ON the Commission to continue exploring new approaches to address oversubscription as well as the low success rates, to continue simplification efforts and to reduce administrative costs for applicants and beneficiaries; NOTES that close to three-quarters of proposals assessed as high quality by independent experts could not be funded. WELCOMES the piloting of measures aimed at enhancing the efficiency or reducing the complexity of the programme and INVITES the Commission to explore further options for diminishing error rates in operational expenditure and personnel costs within supported actions; EMPHASISES that a transparent and timely evaluation of pilots, taking into account feedback from beneficiaries and stakeholders, is needed before changes are rolled out more broadly; STRESSES at the same time the importance of the rules for participation remaining as stable as possible and the need of guidance documents for applicants and beneficiaries.

24. NOTES that in general the excessive number of instruments in the programme, including the complex Partnerships landscape, hampers navigability and accessibility for applicants despite considerable improvements made, such as the Funding and Tenders Portal. CALLS ON the Commission to investigate the added value of each separate instrument and to discontinue or reorient those that underperform or overlap. ACKNOWLEDGES the vital role of the National Contact Points to guide and support applicants and INVITES the Member States and the Commission to further strengthen their roles and practices and to additionally support organisational research management and capacity.

IX. Monitoring

25. WELCOMES the enhanced attention to assessing the results and impacts of Horizon 2020, but NOTES with regret that the monitoring arrangements in Horizon 2020 were too narrow in scope mainly when considering economic and societal impacts, cross-cutting issues – notably SSH and gender –, policy priorities – such as climate action – and in assessing leveraging effects on organisational R&I change of its beneficiaries. Therefore, ENCOURAGES the Commission to continue assessing long term impacts of the programme in future evaluations, improve data collection and data quality covering the entire programme, and to further develop innovative methods, relevant indicators and realistic targets to optimise monitoring.