



**Croatian Position on  
the 10<sup>th</sup> European Framework Programme  
for Research and Innovation 2028-2034**

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**REPUBLIC OF CROATIA**  
Ministry of Science,  
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## Introduction

We are at the crossroads where the Union needs to choose the path to remain globally relevant in research and innovation through ambitious goals, agile and efficient approach and concerted efforts of its member states accompanied by extensive investments. While the Union generates exquisite knowledge, it is failing to overcome the existing barriers in successfully transforming that knowledge into relevant and competitive innovation.

We recognise the green, digital, and just transition, alongside climate adaptation, as pivotal challenges that call for immediate action. These transitions are not only environmental and technological imperatives but also socio-economic opportunities that require comprehensive and coordinated action. For that reason, research and innovation must be at the core of these efforts, serving as the primary drivers of transformative solutions that ensure sustainable development, economic resilience, and social cohesion.

Croatia strongly supports the continuation of an ambitious and independent framework programme for research and innovation. With this paper, we are sharing such vision of the upcoming framework programme (FP10). Croatia believes that FP10 should take into account the successes as well as the limitations of its predecessors. While FP10 should strengthen excellence and promote the availability of synergies with other EU programmes, it should also contribute to building research and innovation capacity in EU member states that are still lagging behind in research excellence and innovation.

*This paper has been co-created based on extensive public and interservice consultations during the second half of 2024. However, the document does neither reflect nor anticipate the yet-to-be-determined position of Croatia on the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) or the official national position on FP10.*

# 1

## **FP10 should have a predictable, but simplified, structure and access for participation**

Predictability is a highly valuable trait of funding programmes. Hence, maintaining a familiar structure with vertical and horizontal pillars in FP10 would provide continuity and consistency relevant for the efficient and successful engagement of beneficiaries. Areas encompassed by those pillars, particularly those relating to industrial and societal challenges, would benefit from simplification by downsizing the number of topics covered. Reduction of and clear delineation between funded topics across the programme would enhance their clarity while diminishing fragmentation and overlaps.

Efforts under FP10 should aim for results that can have a more direct impact on the quality of life of European citizens. Additionally, FP10 should support balanced brain circulation without compromising the empowerment of research careers.

FP10 should be designed to include instruments tailored to each member state's unique capacities and capabilities. Furthermore, mechanisms in place should continue mobilising SMEs along with training and education in innovation skills across the Union.

To provide such solutions, the future framework programme must be guided by the principle of excellence. Excellence should be supported by a more robust interdisciplinary approach underpinned by openness, flexibility and transparency; reinforced through synergies, and focused on effectiveness. Flexibility, both thematic and budgetary, should be enabled for the unforeseen events such as the ones we witnessed in the recent years. Respectively,

further development of the European Research Area should be also driven by excellence and anchored in equity, while enabling synergies and coordination with other EU policy and financial instruments through actions with expected significant impact.

At the same time, collaboration outside the Union should be encouraged as an indispensable feature of this global programme. However, it should also be limited when necessary to preserve the Union's strategic interests, following the OECD's "protection, project, promote" principles.

To make the programme far more accessible to all those we want to attract, structural and procedural simplification and user-friendliness need to be all-encompassing. This includes simplified application and reporting requirements and an overall reduction of administrative burden. Because of its simplification, potential lump sum funding should be further expanded throughout the programme. In addition, a larger number of smaller projects that can make a strong impact should be financed.

Synergies and synchronisation with other Union instruments (cohesion policy) should be further enhanced. Alignment with national and regional instruments that contribute to the overall stability and accessibility of the programme should continue to be promoted. In that regard, we eagerly await further utilisation and synchronisation of different streams of funding. The budget of the programme should cater to the ambitious expectations we have envisaged for it in this paper.

## 2 **First pillar should remain inherent to the future programme structure and an autonomous emblem not only for *blue-sky* research**

FP10 should ensure adequate funding mechanisms for fundamental research that transcends current technological paradigms and enables transformative breakthroughs in scientific and societal development. In that regard, we would welcome a stronger focus towards projects on the lower end of TRLs and not aiming for immediate technological application.

We note that the ERC is duly reserved for the very end of a spectrum of scientific excellence. As such, it is oriented towards an extremely small pool of European scientific talent and thus insufficient to achieve the broad vision we have. Having this in mind, we advocate for the introduction of specific grants for fundamental research intended for widening countries. In this context, while frontier blue-sky research should be supported even more strongly, we recognise

the need to empower the existing flagships such as Marie Skłodowska Curie actions that provide significant added value through various modes of mobility thus enriching the talent pool.

Additionally, research infrastructures play a critical role in producing excellent research while fostering talent retention. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that less developed regions can benefit from these strategic assets through balanced access. RIs need to be enhanced across all sectoral domains addressing global challenges to contribute to the European strategic agenda and competitiveness, not only as a cross-cutting element of the FP10.

## 3 **Collaborative nature of the programme should directly reflect the industrial, technological and societal demands contributing to the R&I Union**

To get the research and innovation at the heart of devising solutions to identified challenges, the top-down pillar should comprise areas defined as wide enough to include relevant topics, but as narrow as possible to avoid fragmentation. A larger number of smaller projects would contribute more effectively to the set goals.

In that regard, we are certain that solutions in the areas that cover food (esp. healthy and functional food) and bioeconomy, health (esp. personalised medicine), climate adaptation and blue economy, digitalisation and advanced technologies (AI, quantum, high-performance

computing), clean energy and clean transport - along with the overarching topic of security, including cybersecurity - are largest contributors to the Union we want to see.

Social sciences and humanities (SSH) are indispensable for ensuring ethical conduct of research, meeting societal needs and identifying opportunities for societal benefits. Hence, their integration into all relevant aspects of FP10 should be ensured, particularly through support for projects aimed at transforming knowledge into concrete public policies and services.

## 4

## We ought to continue fine-tuning the instruments covering the whole innovation cycle insisting on getting to impactful innovation

Particular attention should be given to the EIC Pathfinder and EIC Transition as instruments crucial for the transitional phase from R&D to commercialisation.

While more support should be given to instruments that result in incubators, accelerators and innovation clusters connecting startups with mentors, investors and industries, we are to avoid further strengthening of concentrated innovation hubs in the EU at the expense of a more balanced geographical spread across the Union. Absolute mobilisation of all scientific niches is necessary to create opportunities and space for the development of research capacities and a culture of innovation in the Union. This is in line with the already proposed recommendations by the EIC Board itself, which noted the untapped potential for excellence in the widening countries by barely having an 8% share in participation.

Setting an objective to increase participation, we support proactive measures listed by the EIC Board and aimed at doubling the participation across all EIC instruments.

There are exceptional differences in the maturity of innovation ecosystems reflected in the variation of knowledge and engagement with the EIC programmes, perception of the potential success, availability of a public or private support system to the applicants, unconscious bias representation at the Union level etc. These distinctions, together with differences in accessibility to innovation-related instruments, need to be taken into account and dealt with effectively by taking up evidence-based piloting across the FP. This approach also includes discontinuation of the instruments/bodies that contribute to the exacerbated concentration.

## 5

## Missions and partnerships should be simplified and redefined

Partnerships remain a strong feature of the collaborating nature of the framework programme. They should only be applied in areas and to address societal challenges that no other FP instrument can address. For partnerships to reach their envisioned potential, there is a need for their comprehensive revision as well as the investment of stronger efforts aimed at the exploitation of other sources for co-financing. This primarily refers to cohesion-related instruments for widening countries that should contribute to further synchronisation of European and national priorities and a stronger dedication to openness. Partnerships need to be simplified and redefined in agreement with Member States, while also taking into account their added value to the national and European ecosystem and European research area at large. Furthermore, appropriate funding should be available for open calls. On the other hand, partnerships in the area of digital and advanced technologies, such as EuroHPC, continue being

a lighthouse of a pan-European collaboration dedicated to the large-scale infrastructure that successfully mobilises national efforts on a Union level.

Following up on the results of the missions it is clear that their needs go above and beyond the FP and not only budget-wise. While constrained to the FP, they fail to reach their set goals. Missions present an excellent example of putting the R&D at the centre of policy-making. To avoid losing their comprehensiveness and policy relevance, the budget for all their non-R&I related activities should be mobilised from other Union programmes as well as regional and national sources, and their ownership lifted to a government level. A mission-oriented approach in RDI should embed placing the research and innovation at the core of policy-making on a Union level, with the timely involvement of Member States.

# 6 **FP10 should significantly contribute to overcoming the RDI gap along with recognition and utilisation of talent and innovation potential across the Union**

Tailor-made and diversified activities for countries with underperforming RDI systems should continue to be financed within the FP10, providing indispensable support to widening countries in the area of research and innovation.

The importance of having a separate horizontal pillar dedicated to the countries with a lower RDI intensity in the FP cannot be overstated. The recognition of this need and efforts put in place to address it go way back and before Horizon Europe. We commend the extensive effort put in creating mechanisms and measures that include - but also go beyond - the core actions of the “widening” component in Horizon Europe as praiseworthy. These instruments have set the bar for the future high but attainable goals and are to be treated as a starting position for the FP10. Such an approach presupposes an even more pronounced financial support going beyond the current 3% as well as potential new instruments that ought to empower the widening countries in the area of innovation. This path, if incorporated in FP10, would continue helping the burgeoning of national R&D spending.

Building up, enhancing and empowering research infrastructures; strengthening capacities through providing technical support, training and mentorships; and providing dedicated programmes for excellence and fundamental research, skills development, mobility and collaborating programmes with the non-widening countries should be continuously supported along with the core activities.

In line with the necessity of financing a larger number of smaller projects, a line of financing research projects (RA/RIA) with a coordinator from a widening country would boost the development of national ecosystems through increased organisational capacities.

Also, the hop-on instrument should be revised to allow joining projects that already include a widening country in their consortium. On that note, specific measures resulting in dedicated

schemes for widening countries should be developed within the ERC and EIC instruments.

Support should also be given to the existing supporting structures on a national level, both through empowering NCPs and supporting their collaboration as well as providing continuous support to research managers. This is especially important for the support provided for the innovation-related activities.

Further development of innovation-related instruments that should facilitate widening countries participation in other parts of the FP exclusively dedicated to innovation is especially important.

Finally, and in recognition of the utmost importance of agility from the level of those same member states – instruments that recognise the interplay of all other available financing with that of the FP should be encouraged, be that through the downstream or upstream synergies or the usage of the Seal of Excellence. To ensure maximum effectiveness of synergies, FP10 should align administrative requirements and procedures with other EU funding instruments (especially decentralised activities and Cohesion Fund), thereby reducing administrative burdens for applicants and increasing accessibility for stakeholders from different Member States. This goal also requires efforts outside the remit of FP programming - a more coordinated and aligned programming on national, regional and European levels.

*With this, we look forward to engaging with other Member States and the Commission on the upcoming FP10 proposal.*