



REPORT ON EUROPEAN SYNERGIES OF FUNDS

A research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network (RIMA) output that includes results and challenges on synergies between Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), and brings out some key recommendations

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Introduction

Creating synergies between the cohesion policy Funds and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation "Horizon Europe" (HE) is a need to boost European competitiveness and effectiveness of public investments. This is why efforts to facilitate coordination, complementarities and therefore synergies at European and national levels are rising.

This report initiated at the heart of the Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network (RIMA) is designed to analyse the "synergetic" activities that the European Member States (MS) have been carrying out during the programming periods 2014 – 2020 and 2020-2027 with the objective to contribute to better understanding of successes and challenges, to give possible improvements for the next programming period.

Drafted by Táňa Hálová Perglová (co-chair of the RIMA group), Armela Dino and Thomas Laemmer-Gamp (members of the RIMA group), the report is the outcome of the RIMA group (2023-2024) and should serve as an input to the group to support its future work. The report is under the responsibility of this independent expert group and does not commit the European Commission.

The structure of the report is as follows:

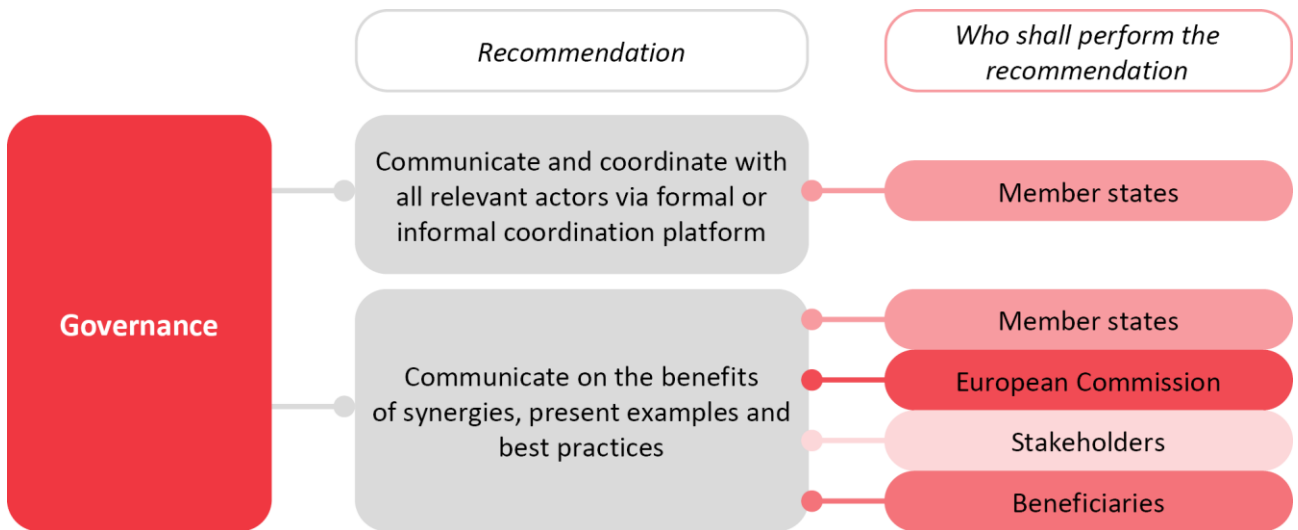
- "Executive summary" of the work of the group provides a summary of the key points and conclusions.
- "RIMA and its aims" describes the Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network, its objectives and its activity since its creation in 2023.
- "European legal framework and knowledge on synergies" includes a collection of recent documents developed at European level with reference to synergies of cohesion policy Funds and HE.
- "Wrap up of the meetings and tasks performed" indicates the outcome of three RIMA meetings and the survey on the ongoing practices related to synergies in the European Member States.
- "Good practice from Member States" draws out a few practices that European Member States have put forward as national successes for enhancing the complementary use of cohesion policy funds and research and innovation ones as well as possible issues.
- "Challenges" recompiles and explains the top challenges faced by the managing authorities and research and innovation bodies in the Member States.
- "Recommendations" offers ideas for possible improvements in the implementation of synergies between the cohesion policy Funds and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation "Horizon Europe".

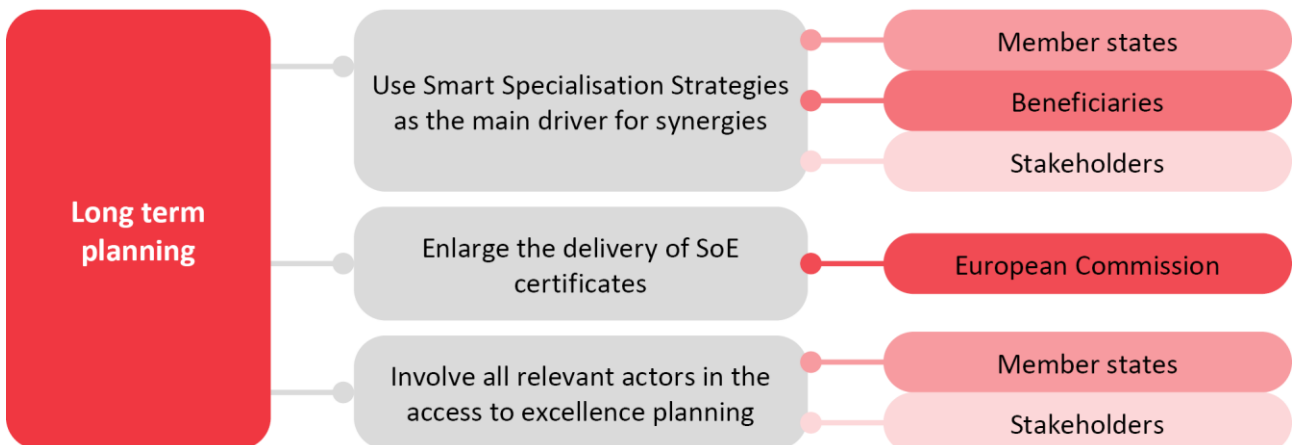
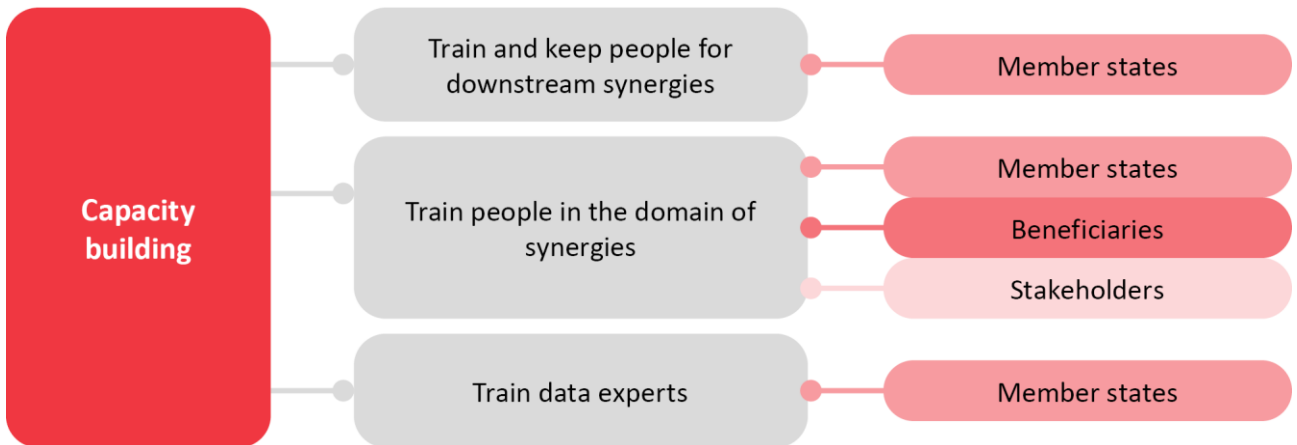
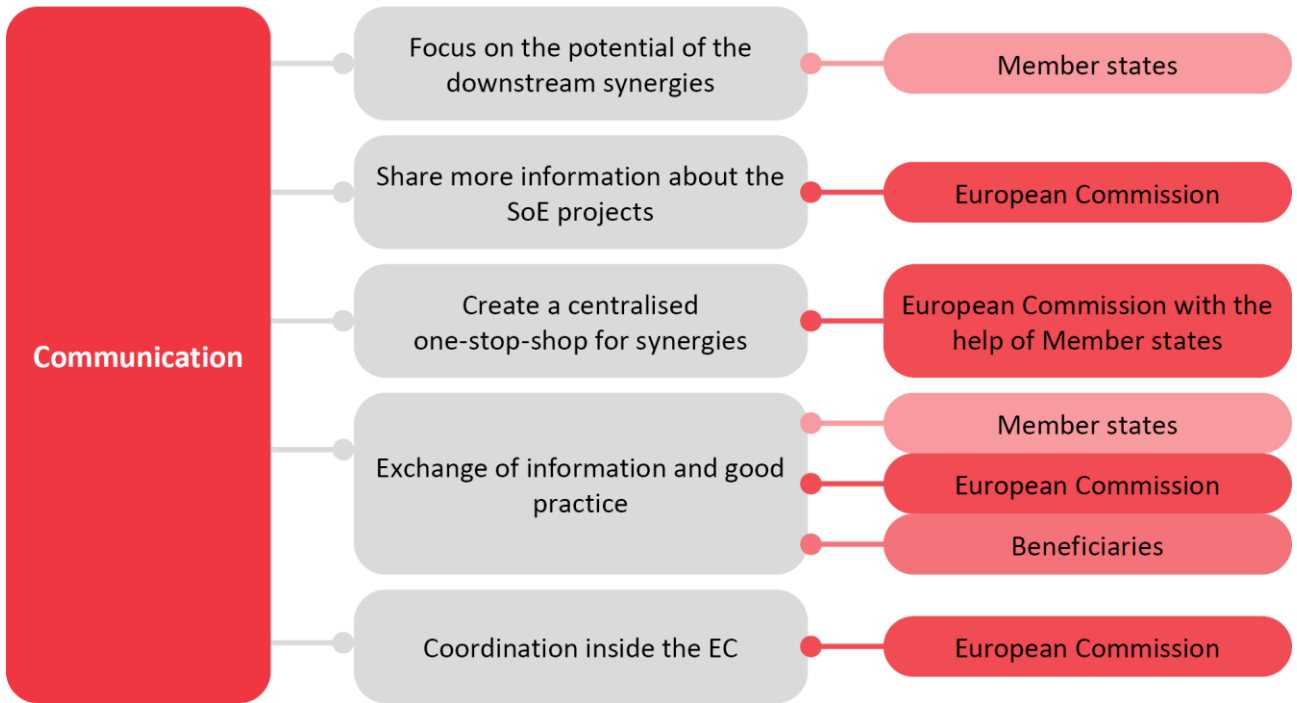
Executive Summary of RIMA work and recommendations

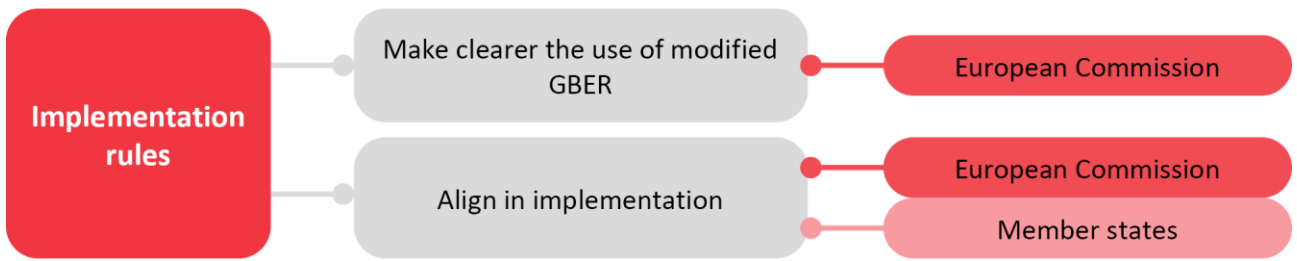
RIMA, the Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network, is a dedicated ERA Forum subgroup for a stronger dialogue and coordination between a) the European Commission (DG REGIO and DG RTD) and Member States and b) different communities within the Member States, e.g. R&I-related bodies on one side and Cohesion related bodies/managing authorities of cohesion policy programmes on the other side, with the aim to address practical experiences linked to the design and implementation of R&I policies at national and regional levels favouring the implementation of synergies and boosting scientific and innovation excellence throughout Europe.

During its mandate period of 18 months, RIMA members met three times and discussed different aspects of synergies implementation, their experience and challenges. The discussions were backed by a survey on synergies answered by RIMA members, both on R&I and cohesion side. All this information collected showed that across Member States we have various positive experiences with synergies both from cohesion and national budgets. However, lot remains to be done to exploit fully the potential of synergies. The outcome of discussions, experiences and challenges are presented in this report. The recommendations are divided into six groups – Governance, Communication, Capacity building, Long-term planning, Implementation rules, Legislative framework. The tables below show which recommendations can be put in place still in this programming period and which could be taken into account when preparing the programming period 2028+. Full detail of each recommendation is to be found in the Recommendation section of this report.

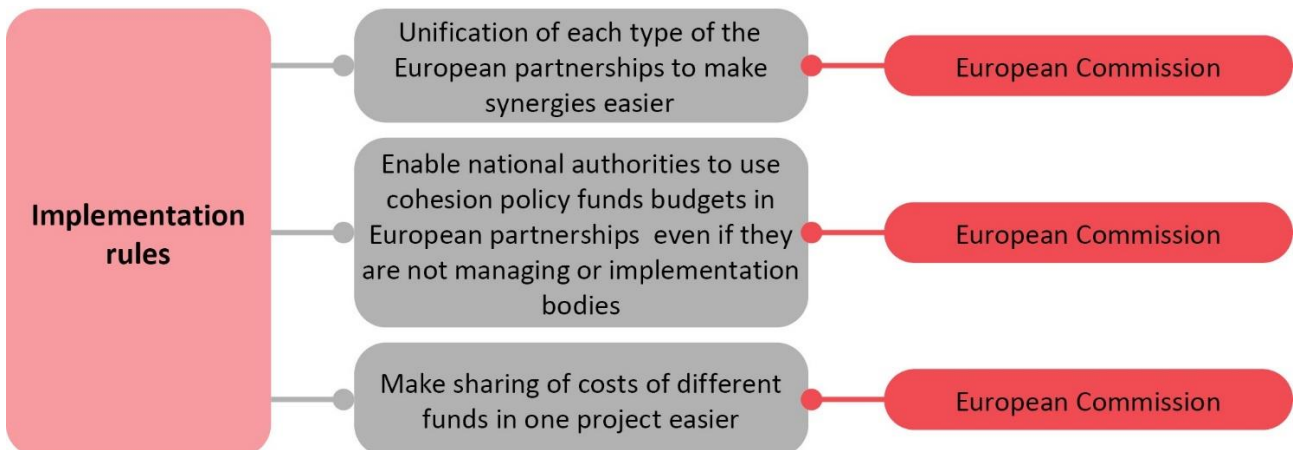
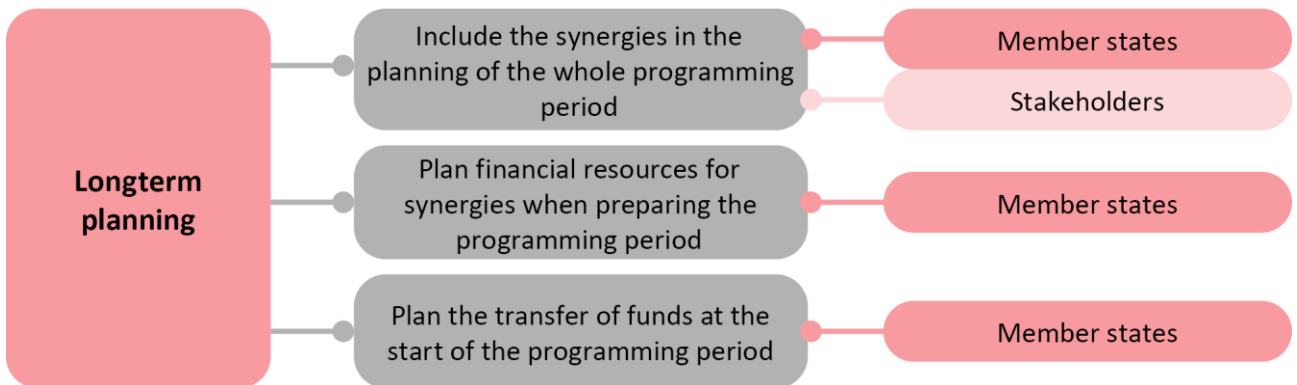
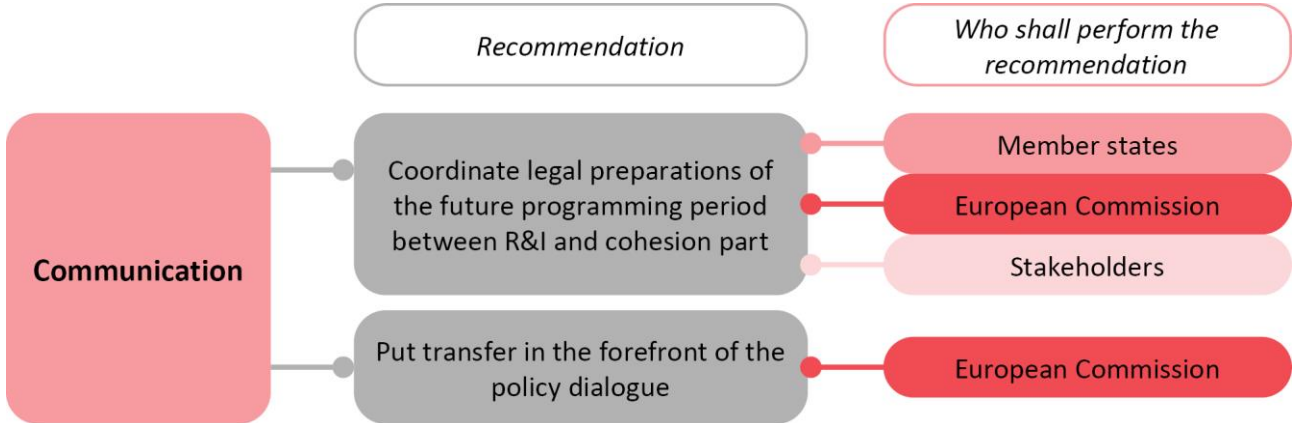
Recommendations that can still be implemented in this programming period:

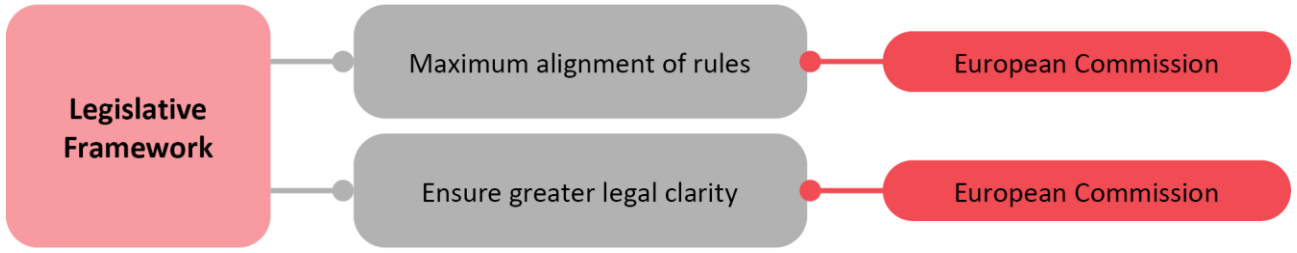






Recommendations for the future programming period:





RIMA and its aims

The Access to Excellence Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities' Network (RIMA) was established in 2023 to develop the Action 16 of the European Research Area (ERA) Policy agenda 2021–2024 stating the following: “a European Research Area (ERA) Action 16 “Improve EU wide access to excellence”¹

16 IMPROVE EU-WIDE ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE

R&I policy can only strive towards more excellence if the full potential of scientific resources in Europe can be utilised. The EU's R&I system needs to promote a more inclusive approach in which all can participate and from which all can benefit. Thus, “Improving access to excellence” is one of the four objectives for the revitalisation of the ERA.

The Commission will create a dedicated work stream in the ERA Forum with the general objective of supporting low R&I performing countries to increase the excellence of their R&I systems. The following objectives will be pursued:

1. promote and monitor access to excellence of researchers and institutions from Widening countries with cohesion policy support;
2. support Member States to better integrate researchers in smart specialisation strategies in cooperation with industry; and
3. help designing measures to support researchers in Widening countries to improve their skills for excellence in the labour market. Member States willing to increase the performance of their R&I system towards excellence should be encouraged and supported through this measure.

OUTCOMES

- Establish a dedicated work stream in the ERA Forum to improve access to excellence;
- Design and implementation of tailor-made support to individual Member States;
- Policy approach on the potential of COST to improve access to excellence across the EU.

RIMA is therefore a dedicated ERA Forum subgroup set up to establish for a stronger dialogue and coordination between a) the European Commission (DG REGIO and DG RTD) and Member States and b) different communities within the Member States, e.g. R&I-related bodies on one side and cohesion policy related bodies/managing authorities of cohesion policy programmes on the other side, with the aim to address practical experiences linked to the design and implementation of R&I policies at national and regional levels favouring the implementation of synergies and boosting scientific and innovation excellence throughout Europe.

The sub-group supports the ERA Forum in the following areas:

- Ensuring that Member States' R&I authorities and cohesion policy programmes managing authorities inform the Commission on progress and issues at national and regional level; provide opinions, recommendations or reports on specific issues, when required;
- Facilitating the exchange of experience and good practices on how to foster synergies between Horizon Europe and R&I-related cohesion policy programmes, and aiming at improving EU-wide access to excellence across the EU in terms of technological development and innovation performance and uptake;
- Supporting the exchange on policy developments for innovation and cohesion and on the implementation of Horizon and R&I related cohesion policy programmes, as well as on strategic reforms of R&I systems, as enablers for access to excellence;

¹ ERA Policy Agenda https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/ec_rtd_era-policy-agenda-2021.pdf, page last accessed on 19 March 2024.

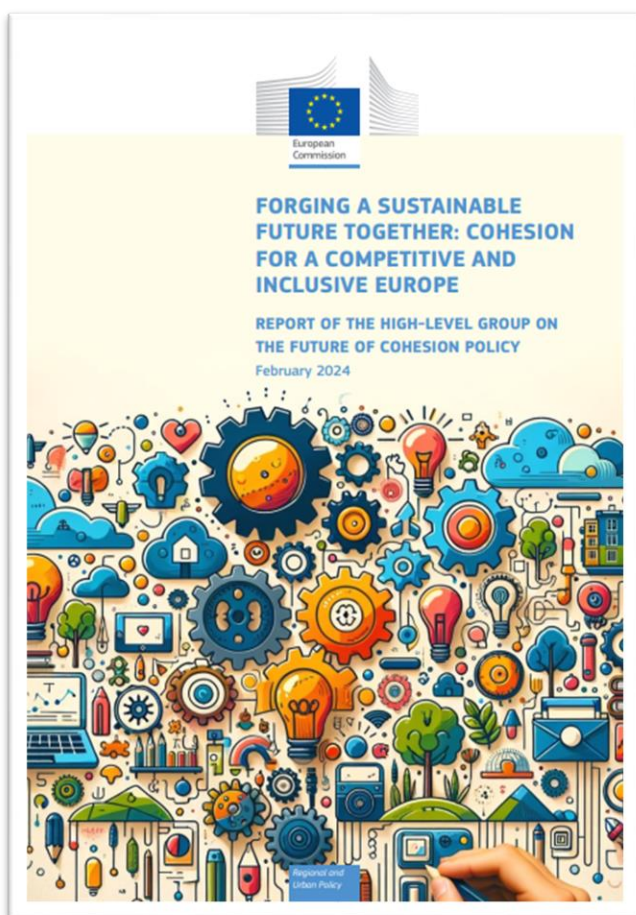
- Supporting the coordination between competent authorities in the Member States (cohesion policy managing authorities and R&I representatives, including National Contact Points for Horizon Europe) including at regional level. Encourage Member States to replicate, wherever possible, similar networks at national level to amplify the coordination and knowledge exchanges;

1. Sharing outcomes and practices from widening participation and spreading excellence projects.

Throughout discussions, exchanges of best practice and identification of challenges as well as through this report, the sub-group is delivering its first tasks.

The first two RIMA meetings and the work in-between them were dedicated to discussions over synergies and thus also over cooperation and coordination between R&I representatives and cohesion policy managing authorities (tasks 2, 3 and 4). The sub group highlighted examples of good practice, defined challenges and ideas concerning tasks 2, 3 and 4. Some of the suggestions refer to this programming period, whereas others may relate more to legislation and long-term management of R&I and cohesion policy programmes. During the third and last, under the current mandate, meeting additional examples were given by the RIMA Members, including those that did not participate in previous meetings and the final structure of the report was agreed.

European Legal Framework and Knowledge on synergies



Below a recompilation of the latest reports and strategic papers on the need and creation of complementarities between cohesion policy Funds and HE funds.

The [Report of the High-Level group on the Future of Cohesion Policy](#) (Feb 2024) reiterates the need for Cohesion policy to work for a more competitive and inclusive Europe.

The [Council Recommendations on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe](#) include synergies as both a framework condition to boost European competitiveness, as well as a policy objective between research and innovation, and other sectorial policies. (Nov 2021)

The [Council Conclusions on The European Court of Auditors' Special Report No. 15/2022 "Measures to widen participation in Horizon 2020 were well designed but sustainable change will mostly depend on national authorities"](#) (Oct 2022)

The [Council Conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No. 23/2022 'Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds – Not yet used to full](#)

[potential'](#) (Mar 2023)

[S3 experts report on synergies](#) (Oct 2023)

The [Council Conclusions on the future of cohesion policy](#). (Nov 2023)

The [Council Conclusions on Regional trends for growth and convergence in the European Union](#). (Nov 2023)

The [Council Conclusions on Strengthening the role and impact of research and innovation in the policymaking process in the Union](#). (Dec 2023)

[H2020 ex-post evaluation](#) (Jan. 2024)

Council Conclusions on H2020 ex-post evaluation (forthcoming)

HE interim evaluation

Wrap up of the meetings and tasks performed

1st meeting – 7th June 2023

The RIMA work was opened by Director General of DG RTD Marc Lemaître putting emphasis on the importance of synergies and coordination of policies to boost competitiveness and address fragmentation. The sub-group has three co-chairs – the Head of Unit for European Semester & Country Intelligence at the DG RTD, the Head of Unit for Smart and Sustainable Growth at the DG REGIO and a representative from the Member States. This co-chairmanship demonstrates the will to act together, cooperate, share information, enhance synergies and boost the access to scientific and innovation excellence.

The first meeting was dedicated to the presentation of RIMA, its aims and objectives and also to a tour de table of RIMA members. As the establishment of this group also originated from the European Court of Auditors report on synergies (https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?ref=SR22_23), the report and its recommendations were presented jointly by DG RTD and DG REGIO.

Some Member States presented their experience with different types of synergies to kick off the debate and the challenges:

A strategic approach to synergies was presented by the Czech Republic, the Seal of Excellence experience by Poland, transfers by Malta and Lithuania - the two pioneer countries for this new type of synergies, synergies in European partnerships by Cyprus and combined funding in form of Teaming projects, upstream and downstream synergies by Portugal.

The Member States session was followed by the presentation of takeaways from a Mutual Learning Workshop on Synergies organized by the Malta Council for Science and Technology, a presentation of the Regional Innovation Valleys action and an update on Widening Actions by DG RTD and on the Smart Specialisation (S3) Community of Practice by DG REGIO.

Mapping survey and its outcomes

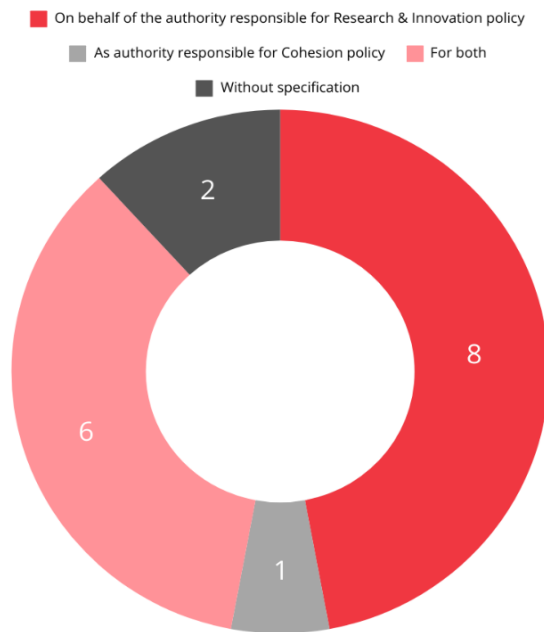
The first meeting revealed how many actions and synergies are being implemented but also the lack of complete information on what types of synergies countries use and which sources. It is worth mentioning that MS/regions have no legal obligation to monitor the synergy implementation.

This finding led to an elaboration of a survey which was sent to all RIMA members in September 2023 to fill it in by mid November.

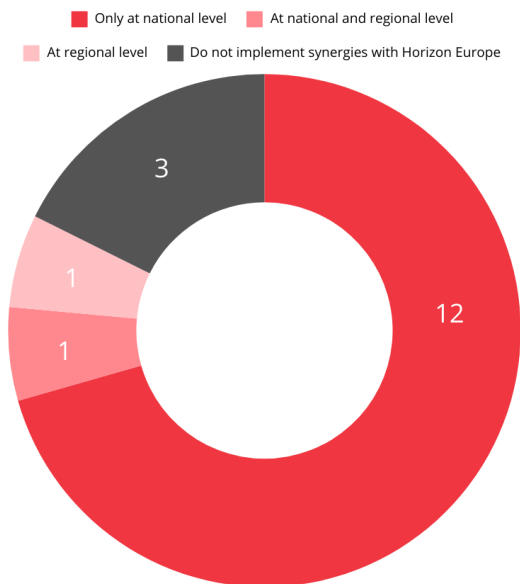
All together 16 Member States (17 responses) filled in the survey. The following section is bringing the details about the responses and gives a good picture of activities performed by Member States.

Synergies in general

17 replies to the survey:

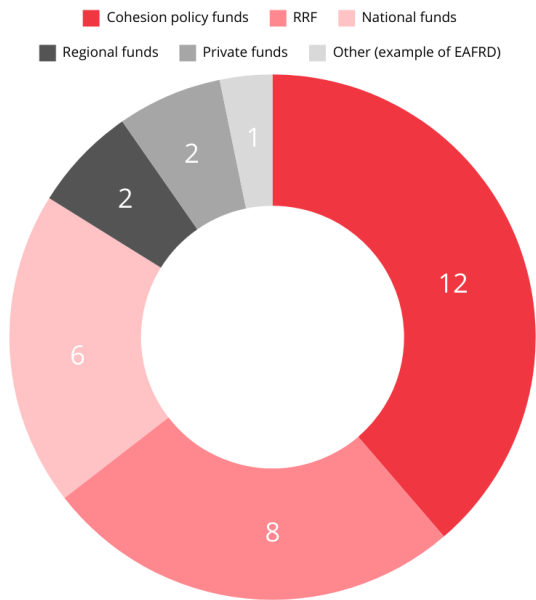


Implementation of synergies with Horizon Europe:



From the 16 Member States answering only 2 do not implement synergies with Horizon Europe. Out of the 14 who implement them, 12 do it only at national level, 2 at national and regional level and 1 only at regional level.

Synergies are mostly financed from:



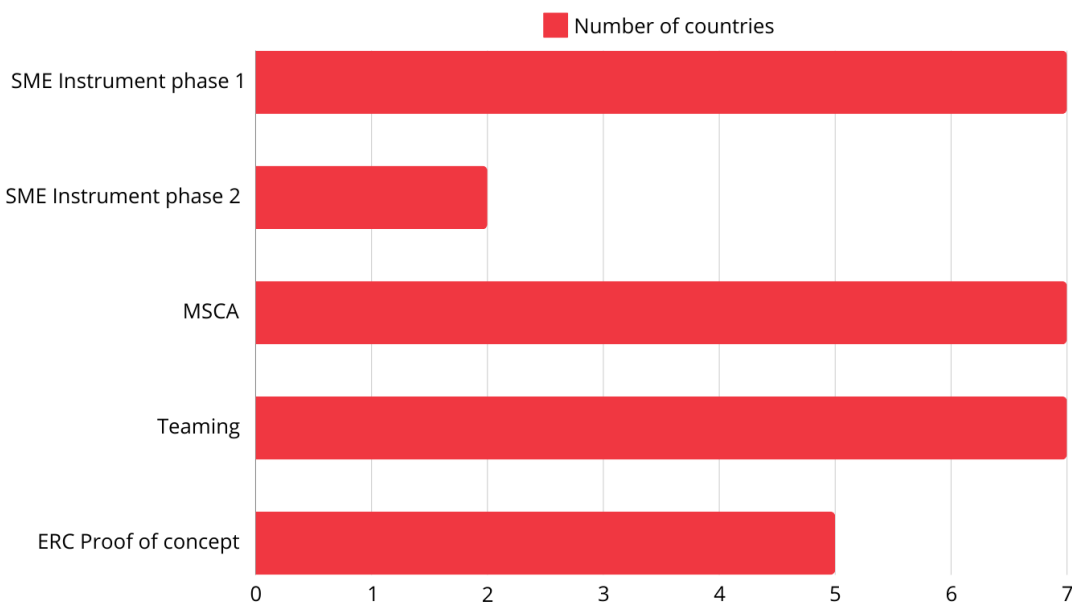
With regards to financial sources, synergies of Horizon Europe projects are mostly happening with cohesion policy Funds, Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), national funds, regional funds and private funds.

Only 6 out of the 16 responding Member States reported synergies with other Union programmes. The most common one is Digital Europe.

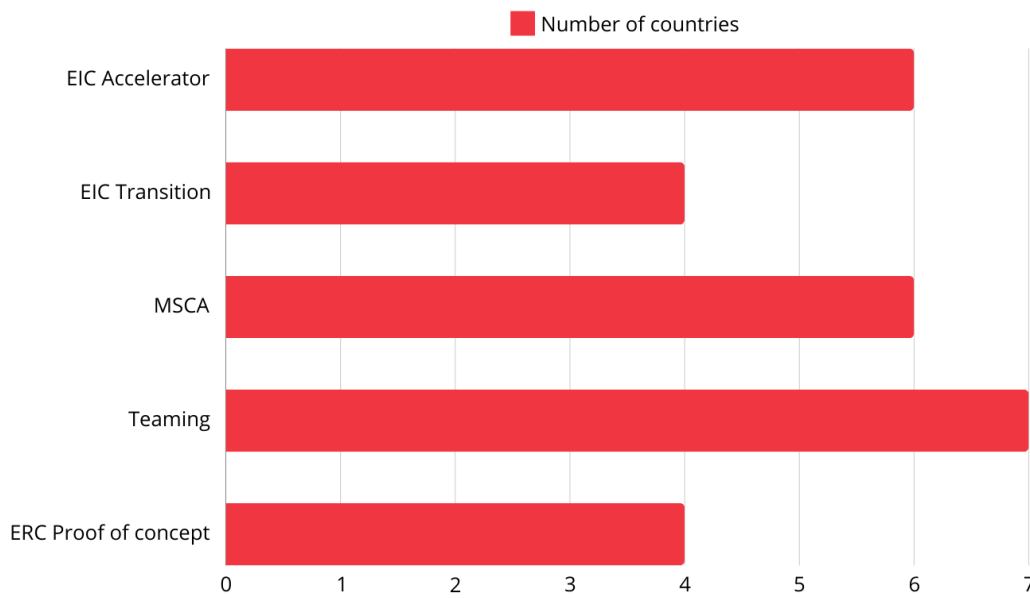
Seal of excellence

Some countries finance Seal of excellence (SoE) projects. The numbers differ between Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe but we can mostly see continuity, when a Member State started to finance SoE holders, it has continued from one programming period to the following one.

Number of countries financing Seal of Excellence holders in Horizon 2020

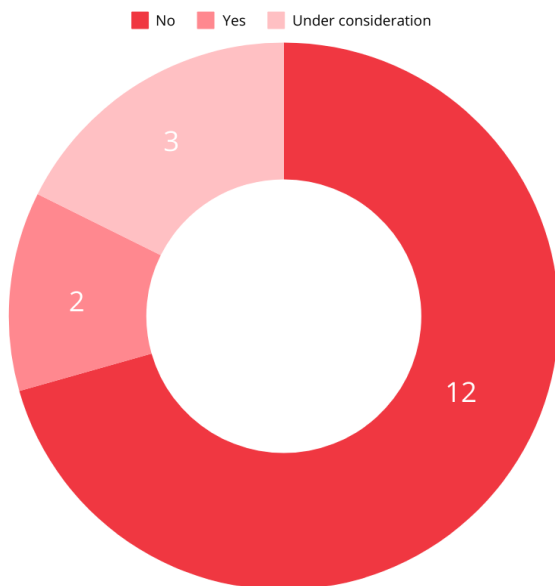


Number of countries financing Seal of Excellence holders in Horizon Europe



Transfers

Transfers are a new tool and the survey revealed reluctance of Member States to use it based on lack of experience with this tool, but also uncertainty about the legislative framework and the boundary conditions, even if the guidance offer quite detailed description of the steps to be undertaken. Only 2 Member States reported the decision to use this tool.



European Partnerships

Only 5 Member States finance their national contribution in European partnerships through European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) or RRF (one from the 5), 3 Member States are considering it from cohesion policy Funds.

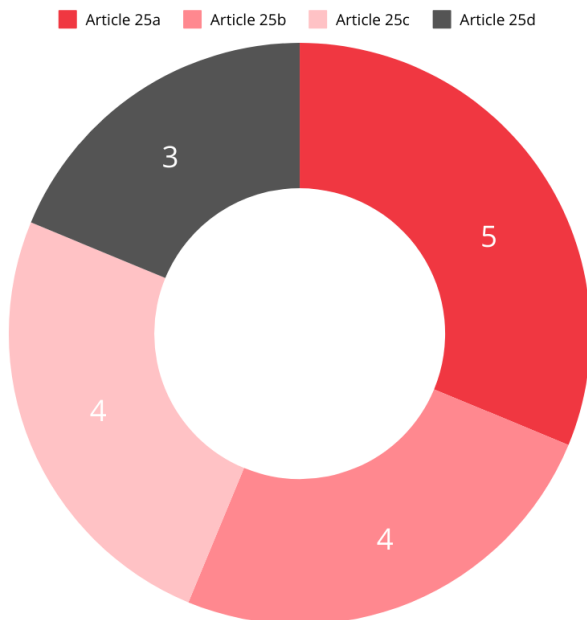
Downstream synergies

Only 3 countries out of 16 reported implementation of downstream synergies.

GBER

The General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER) modification, based on the feedback from the Member States, proved to be a very good step to enhance synergies. 7 countries out of 16 use the revised GBER articles. Most countries, which use the revised GBER, praise the simplicity, reduced administrative burden, the same level of support for beneficiaries as from Horizon Europe.

Number of countries use the revised GBER articles:



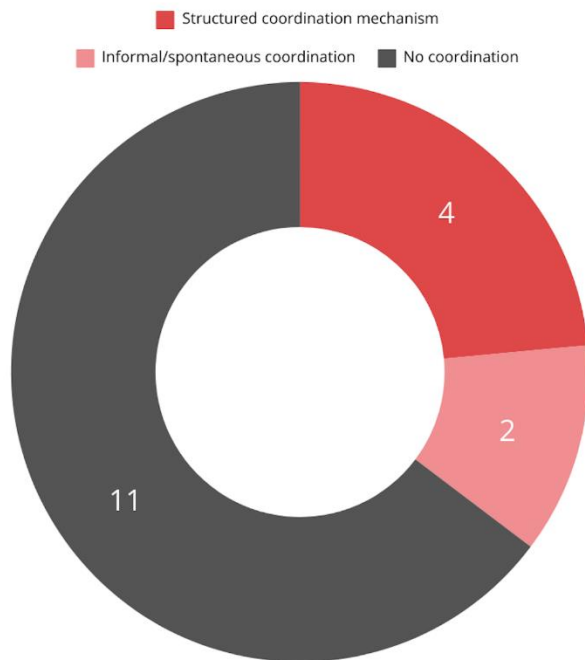
Data use for synergies

Only 7 countries use data for synergies.

They mostly use eCorda, Horizon Dashboards, Kohesio and other, mostly national and regional databases on projects financed from cohesion policy Funds. The NCP network and SoE community of practice are also valuable source of data. Only 5 countries reported they could share data with EC in a structured manner (xls, csv, json format).

Synergies governance

The survey revealed that only 6 countries have a strategic approach towards synergies and a dedicated coordination mechanism where ministries and different funding bodies and players cooperate and coordinate the approach. In other two countries this need is coming from the field, from the practitioners of synergies who meet spontaneously in informal groups. Other countries have neither structured approach nor informal, meaning the synergies are probably done in an unsystematic manner.



The mapping survey, even if not filled by all EU member countries, showed that even if synergies with Union programmes are well set in political documents and regulations, we still do not use their full potential. Member countries are cautious to implement new things and pave the way for more synergies. It seems like the main barriers are capacities but also lack of experience and good practice. That is the reason why any initiative to exchange views and practice is very welcome.

2nd meeting – 6th December 2023

The 2nd RIMA meeting took place on 6th December 2023 and the agenda was divided into two parts. The morning session brought news about the Access to Excellence tools from DG RTD, an introduction to the Smart Specialisation Strategy Community of Practice (S3CoP) report on the interplay of synergies and S3, and a presentation of DG COMP about the amendment of the General Block Exemption Regulation. At the end of the morning session, Germany and Portugal shared their ways of cooperation between R&I and Cohesion policy communities.

The afternoon session was dedicated to discussions around the survey results. The aim was to understand better comments from Member States made in the survey, exchange practices and agree on considerations for the future.

The outcome of the discussions with considerations for the future were the following:

Seal of Excellence

The issue of different rules of programmes (Horizon Europe vs ERDF/ESF+) leads some Member States to ask for a new project proposal and re-do a kind of evaluation. This challenge can be solved by the “direct award” decision to fund the SoE holders without technical re-evaluation therefore avoiding any delays and additional work. For the alignment with Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) a self-declaration was presented as a solution.

There is still a different level of awareness amongst MSs and also within the same MS of the new synergy possibilities introduced in the current Regulations and explained in the Guidelines. More information campaigns shall be done with the focus on synergies.

The application of GBER article 25 seems to raise some doubts in cases that the project has to be adjusted because it has already performed some work or because of financial restrictions on the side of the funding body. Clear guidance shall be set for those cases.

The need to unify the reward of SoE of Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) for all projects above the threshold. It would be then up to the Member States to establish additional thresholds if they would be willing to. This fact would facilitate SoE of MSCA implementation without the need to separate the projects into two groups with two different implementation rules (including use of GBER articles).

The current rule of information shared by the Commission - based on ex-ante consent by the applicant – is limited to basic information on the proposal due to the legal constraints on data protection. It could be enlarged to the whole project proposal and Evaluation Summary Report (ESR) which would help the research funding organizations to focus work on certain aspects depicted in the ESR during the implementation.

Transfers

As a new tool, there is no experience with this kind of synergies, besides the two Member States that decided to implement the transfer (MT and LT). The main considerations are about a positive narrative in the context of high-level meetings or the Enhanced dialogue, showing the implication of less administrative burden for the Member States, including statistics from transfers to the Member States. A presentation of the experience of these two pioneering countries was requested for the following RIMA meeting.

Cumulative funding and European partnerships

While the European Partnerships have been streamlined into three well defined groups, each one with specific common rules, MS seem to suffer from the fact that each partnership is finally implemented differently. These operating procedures for implementation of the partnerships vary from ERDF rules. MS find it difficult to align with so many different partnerships.

The Common Provision Regulation (CPR) states clearly that if you implement any part of the operational programme, you must be designated as an intermediary body with all aspects it represents. This condition proved to be a real barrier and prevented the use of ERDF for financing partnerships.

Whereas Horizon Europe targets excellence, ERDF programmes target regional economic development. Those targets do not match necessarily. The 'must' to follow Smart Specialisation Strategy limits the possibility to finance partnerships.

Partnerships are supposed to be long-term partnerships between Member States and the European Commission. Administrative issues like Grant Agreements concluded only for 2 years, different approaches to the same issue inside the EC and agencies create additional administrative burden on the Member States. This prevents Member States from long-term planning of co-financing.

The co-financing in Institutionalised partnerships is based on sharing the cost of the same project. However, according to the cohesion policy regulations, it is not possible to report twice on the same cost (double cost declaration). A solution was found by the EC, and clearly explained in the Guidelines note (Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes (OJ C 421, 4.11.2022)), but there is a need for easier solution.

Downstream synergies

There is a lack of understanding of the concept and its advantages among all actors which comes with the lack of political support and lack of skilled human resources to work on downstream synergies.

Closer work between the EC and the Member States on the question of data sharing and databases to be used would be welcomed.

3rd meeting – 19th – 20th September 2024

The 3rd RIMA meeting took place on 19th and 20th September 2024. The meeting started on 19th in the afternoon with presentations on the takeaways for the future in both R&I and cohesion policies. A special presentation by DG BUDG was dedicated to the STEP Regulation and its implementation. Practical experience with the transfer of funds on the examples of the two pioneer countries Lithuania and Malta was presented. RIMA members learnt about the actual state of implementation, the challenges and their solutions. The afternoon session was closed with practical experience of synergies with European partnerships and Regional Innovation Valleys call under European Innovation Ecosystems Work Programme (Horizon Europe).

The second day was dedicated to discussions over the report and its recommendations. All members agreed that the recommendations are very valuable and useful. However, some of them, especially those concerning the legislation changes and mindset changes will be very hard to implement. It is absolutely essential to involve decision makers in the process of synergy design. Therefore, clear communication of benefits of synergies with concrete examples are very useful.

RIMA members also expressed their suggestions for the report improvement.

EC informed RIMA members about the outcome of WIDERA call on synergies, about the state-of-the art of the data management and the developments in the ERA policy.

Good practices in different types of synergies

Seal of Excellence

Support to EIC Seal of Excellence



Bulgaria – Ministry of Innovation and Growth provides funding to EIC Seal of Excellence holders from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. After 2024 this support will continue under “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation operation programme” (ERDF).



The Czech Republic – the Technology Agency, supports EIC Seal of Excellence holders from Recovery and Resilience Facility. Previously this support was granted from national budget which may be the case after the end of RRF.



Portugal finances SME Instrument phase 2 and EIC Accelerator Pilot Seal of Excellence holders.



Haut de France region will fund EIC Seal of Excellence holders from ERDF funds.



Poland supports EIC Accelerator Seal of Excellence holders from the European Funds for Smart Economy Programme (ERDF part).



Cyprus finances EIC Seal of Excellence holders from the Recovery and Resilience Fund.

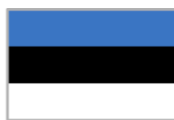
Lessons learned and challenges

- Issues arose concerning the text from the Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes and the extent to which the simplification approach is possible in phases that follow after the projects have been evaluated (e.g. project modifications before ERDF funding is confirmed). The simplified approach under ERDF monitoring is a challenge. All-encompassing Guidelines for MAs to mitigate different interpretations of the Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes are needed.
- Modified GBER is a way forward, however in the case of Seal of Excellence projects it is not clear to what extent the project can be modified to still fit in the GBER article 25.
- SME status and the verification if the undertaking is in difficulty are critical to the possibility of receiving State aid or setting the State aid intensity. Both must be performed by the funding body and may make the project funding impossible.
- Limited period of RRF does not allow to fund projects lasting over mid 2026.
- Additional checks (for example the DNSH principle, check of ultimate owners, etc.) in RRF funding create another administrative step before the grant agreement.
- Contrary to cohesion policy Funds, RRF is not viewed as a national contribution, thus it is not possible, except in duly justified cases, to combine RRF and HE resources in one project unless each is used on different activities (https://commission.europa.eu/publications/updated-guidance-recovery-and-resilience-plans_en).
- Changes in the nature of instruments complicate possibilities for synergies. Some countries were not able to react to the switch from SME Instrument phase 1 to EIC Pilot and could not continue supporting the SoE holders.

Support to Marie Skłodowska Curie Seal of Excellence



The Czech Republic supports projects that received SoE in two calls: MSCA FELLOWSHIPS and MSCA COFUND from the operational programme Johannes Amos Comenius (ERDF/ESF). On top of that, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports supports all Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions projects of the „fellowship“ type that are ranked above the threshold (over 70%).



Estonia uses SoE principle with incoming postdoctoral grants – the postdoctoral fellows who ranked at least at 70% but received no funding, are eligible for funding from an operational programme.



Sorbonne university funds up to 5 contracts per year for MSCA – Postdoctoral Fellowship Seal of Excellence holders from its own resources. The candidates undertake to submit an ERC project at the end of the contract.



Haut de France region will fund MSCA Seal of Excellence holders from ERDF funds.



Slovenia finances MSCA Seal of Excellence holders from national funds.



Cyprus finances MSCA Seal of Excellence holders from ERDF funds under the Cohesion Policy Programme “THALIA 2021–2027”.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Guarantee of supporting high quality projects together with considerable financial and personal savings present a real bonus in the support of SoE holders.
- In some instruments SoE is equal to all projects above the threshold, in others it is not. GBER can be used only for Seal of Excellence and not for all projects above the threshold, thus it creates two sets of projects from the State aid perspective for those funding organisations which decide to support all projects above the threshold.
- Timing is a challenge, shall be better aligned and be accompanied by a comprehensive communication with potential applicants.
- Synergies can contribute to a good use of ERDF despite differences in timetables, commitment rates, etc.
- The possibility of using RRF and ERDF funding shall have clear, simple and transparent rules so that Member States and regions are motivated to use them.
- Seal of Excellence holders shall benefit from a real fast track to get the funding and not impose on them additional rules/checks.
- Seal of Excellences provides additional motivation for researchers applying under the MSCA calls. However, SoE grants are based on national funding rules and procedures which can cause administrative burden for applicants and make the SoE grants less attractive.
- Strict adherence to the Smart Specialisation Strategy focus areas makes it difficult to support postdoctoral fellows across all research fields.

Support to Digital Europe Seal of Excellence



Bulgaria supports Seal of Excellence holders of Digital Innovation Hubs under “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation operation programme“ (ERDF).

Cumulative Funding



Bulgaria grants 50% of funding to selected Digital Innovation Hubs under Digital Europe Programme from “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation operation programme” (ERDF).

Lessons learned and challenges

- Each fund has its own rules concerning eligible cost. The cumulation can harm projects when they need to be implemented by using different methods, rules. Sometimes the whole cost categories cannot be granted by one source because of differences in counting and project expenditure design.

Good practice – Combined funding



Bulgaria supports Teaming and Twinning projects from 2023 WIDERA calls under “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation operation programme” (ERDF).



Slovenia finances Teaming projects from cohesion policy funds.



Poland has supported International Research Agenda as a combined funding to the Teaming projects under Operational Programme Smart Growth and European Funds for Smart Economy Programme.



Croatia, the Ministry of Science and Education provided a complementary funding scheme from the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion (ERDF) for Croatian projects that had previously won a Twinning or ERA chair project in Horizon 2020.



Portugal combines different funding sources in Teaming projects, Excellence Hubs and Pathway to Synergies under the Widening part of Horizon Europe programme.



Estonia supports Teaming projects from ERDF.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Very broad wording of interventions in the Operational programme text enabled the support of teaming projects without OP modification.
- Common understanding of eligibility of activities and expenses between different funds is crucial.
- Questions raise about the GBER article 25d use, about eligibility rules from ERDF, about rules applied on indirect costs. All those present a challenge when combining funding from Horizon Europe and ERDF.
- Timing and the alignment of timing is crucial for successful implementation of Teaming projects.
- Teaming call foresees that complementary funding should cover infrastructure and equipment costs. In some countries, there are limitation using ERDF for that purpose and national co-funding had to be mobilised instead.
- Financing of Teaming projects from ERDF may present several challenges. First in the timing when Teaming project may exceed duration of the eligible ERDF funding. Second in State aid rules when it comes to the monitoring of economic activity which must be monitored during the depreciation period (in case of a building this period may be very long).

European Partnerships



Bulgaria supports participation of Bulgarian consortia in two Institutionalized European Partnerships – in the Chips Joint Undertaking and Clean Hydrogen Partnership for the construction of hydrogen valleys. In both cases “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation operation programme” (ERDF) is involved.



Estonia uses ERDF funds as a national contribution in European partnerships and ERA NET Cofunds.



The Technology Agency of the Czech Republic co-finances some calls under Co-funded European Partnerships from RRF. Others are co-funded from national budget.



Cyprus participates in 7 European Partnerships. The national contribution is financed by the ERDF under the Cohesion Policy Programme “THALIA 2021–2027”.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Implementation of the European partnerships lack a single approach to financial and project management, a single Grant Agreement and a unified reporting to the Horizon Europe database.
- Co-funding rate varies from one European Partnership to another (depending on the Consortium Agreement amongst the participants) and creates complication regarding the ERDF reporting.
- Keeping the conditions as similar as possible across the European partnerships, regardless the funding body, might be an obstacle for funding from cohesion policy Funds and a reason why Member States cover them from national budgets.
- Different rules of Horizon Europe and cohesion policy Funds makes implementation of European partnerships more complicate and more difficult than using national budgets.

Transfer



Malta transferred 5 mil. EUR from ERDF to Horizon Europe in 2022 to support single beneficiary projects under pillar 1, pillar 3 and widening actions. Projects supported through this transfer adhere to Horizon Europe rules and regulations and are managed by EC/its executive agencies. By providing a second chance to high-quality proposals that initially did not secure funding, this ‘transfer’ mechanism will encourage increased submissions to Horizon Europe and attract more projects.

Lessons learned and challenges

- Engaged countries (LT and MT) reported clear benefits from the transfer – their implementation capacity can focus on national calls, projects under transfer are treated equally as HE projects, the process is now set and running.
- Communication efforts should be enhanced to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged throughout the whole process. The national body could not communicate with the successful host organisations before the process was finalised.
- The prolonged gap between initial notification and eventual funding resulted in the risk that supervisors could have taken on additional work or projects in the interim, with the potential consequence that their availability to supervise the post-doctoral researchers would be hindered.

Other synergies



Croatia awarded additional points to successful institutions in Horizon 2020 for their excellence during the evaluation procedures for research projects within ESI funds. The scheme was envisaged as a tool to encourage Croatian research organisation to compete with high quality projects both in Horizon 2020 as well as in ERDF.



The Czech Republic piloted its involvement in ERA NET Cofunds in the frame of a project financed from Operational Programme Technical Assistance. Thanks to this project an informal group on synergies, involving managing authorities, research funding organisations and research stakeholders, emerged.



French agencies ANR and BPI developed schemes to encourage French researchers and companies to apply to Horizon Europe calls.



The Federal State of Germany, the federal government and the federal state governments established the “Federal-Länder Dialogue on Strengthening Synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy Funds” which acts as a national coordination mechanism for cooperation between involved stakeholders.



Spain established a network of R&D&I policies that supports coordination and complementarities between different funds. Managing authorities, R&I authorities at both state and autonomous regional level participate in this network.



The Federal State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia trains research and innovation stakeholders to open up the potential for synergies. It developed support measures to encourage synergies both on programme and project levels.



There are good examples from Spanish regions (Castilla y León, Andalusia) about building synergies based on Smart Specialisation Strategies and their dedicated platforms.

Lessons learned and challenges

- When new instruments (new synergy activities) need financing, often the planned budget and activities have to be reorganised. It is very useful to foresee synergy activities and an adequate budget line for these cases.
- Synergies with cohesion policy Funds might be difficult when combining bottom-up calls with smart specialisation criteria which are a must for funding from cohesion policy Funds.
- In some countries, centralized administrations together with highly autonomous regions make access to information about synergies difficult. They lack a more automatic information system for collecting information on synergies.
- Legal basis integrating financial mechanisms for synergies would be very helpful.
- There remains considerable uncertainty surrounding the concept of synergies, and the current support mechanisms are insufficient. There is a notable lack of adequate training and capacity-building to effectively guide, particularly, national contact points (NCPs) for Horizon Europe on the optimal methods for promoting complementarities between EU programmes.
- Strong commitment of different managing authorities of different funding sources for implementing synergies and better coordination is often lacking.

- The purpose of different instruments, expected results, possible participants and implementation areas differ from funding source to funding sources making synergies more difficult and challenging.
- Any new initiative brings opportunities but also great uncertainties, especially during an ongoing EU funding period. The European financial control should be aware that synergies are difficult to implement and that (smaller) errors can be possible – even if you try to prepare and predict everything in advance.

Challenges

The approach of creating synergies between the cohesion policy Funds and other Union instruments, in particular with Horizon Europe, is generally viewed positively as the received contributions from the informal consultation (nine responses) demonstrate. However, there are challenges in the implementation of synergies at various points. These challenges can be grouped into different categories as presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Categories of challenges



In the context of synergy implementation across various funding instruments, several key issues emerge that impede the optimization of resources and realisation of programme objectives. Firstly, while all EU programmes respond to general overall Commission common objectives, each programme has its specific purpose, expected outcomes, potential participants, and areas of implementation. Each instrument is tailored to its unique set of goals, beneficiaries and implementation rules, and while in some cases there is a convergence of objectives, harmonizing these elements might still remain a challenge. Furthermore, the level of granularity varies significantly between the Work Programmes (WPs) under Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes. This discrepancy can cause friction in developing and synchronizing synergy projects.

Additionally, there is a noticeable lack of synchronization in the timing and preparation of programming documents between Horizon Europe and ERDF. While the public consultation on the Horizon Europe Strategic Planning can be useful possibility for managing authorities to get to know in advance the priorities of the programme and even provide comments, and the Operational Programmes can be revised and adapted, this misalignment is felt to complicate the cohesiveness of project development and execution, often resulting in disjointed or inefficient processes.

There is a lack of sufficient awareness on the process of development and exploitation of synergies. Even if the new HE and ERDF regulations under the 2021-27 programming period have mirror articles on synergies and specific provisions, an Annex (in HE) with a list of possible synergies between the different programmes, a guideline document has been issued and a Seal of Excellence Community of Practice meets regularly, still considerable uncertainty seems to exist with regard to the concept of synergies. This includes both programming bodies and beneficiaries. While the issuing of guidelines has been very appreciated, they should be better diffused and improved from a user-friendliness point of view to ensure that beneficiaries and other stakeholders have access to a comprehensive guide outlining the entire process. Current support mechanisms for the exploitation of synergies are insufficient. While the including of a specific task to the Europe Enterprise Network (EEN) to promote synergies is welcome, there seems to be a notable lack of

adequate training and capacity-building to effectively guide, particularly, national contact points (NCPs) for Horizon Europe on the optimal methods for promoting complementarities between EU programmes. Regular training programs focusing on the understanding and implementation of synergies should be initiated and offered to NCPs by the Commission, with active encouragement for participation from Member States.

There is also a gap in the knowledge and experience among managing authorities regarding the diverse funding schemes available. This deficiency includes a lack of familiarity with specific legislative frameworks, cost reimbursement procedures, and other technicalities intrinsic to each funding mechanism. A critical factor in the effective implementation of synergies is sometimes also the commitment level of the managing authorities. There is sometimes a shortfall in the coordinated effort required for successful synergy execution, stemming from a lack of resources and information about synergy opportunities. In addition, financial resources currently allocated to some ERDF programmes are insufficient to fully exploit the opportunities for synergies between different funding streams. This scarcity of funds limits the scale and impact that could be achieved through concerted efforts.

A solution to these challenges lies in a more systematic and coordinated approach including all relevant stakeholders at European, national and regional stakeholders. This includes also more coordination within the EC services for better coordination of different EU programmes. At all levels alignment of rules for implementation, including e. g. project proposal templates, ways and methods of reimbursement of costs, and State aid framework on EU and national level. Of particular importance is the alignment of EU and national rules of funding. Coordination is also an issue at national and regional level. Informal or formal coordination mechanisms enhance effectiveness and efficiency of synergy development and exploitation.

The following examples from the instruments Seal of Excellence, synergies with European Partnerships, Cumulative Funding and upstream and downstream synergies further illustrate these findings that are based on the results of the informal consultation of Member States and discussions during the RIMA meetings.

The **Seal of Excellence** is helpful in identifying good projects for ERDF funding. However, there is no precise overview of which projects are awarded such a seal. According to some stakeholders, there is a need for a better flow of information from the Commission so that good ideas are not lost. In this context we welcome the recent developments made by the Commission to provide access to detail Seal information through specific databases.

In addition, even if the letter sent to the Seal holders explicitly mention that the Seal does not entail automatic funding from alternative sources, the Seal of Excellence holders still seem to expect this support that unfortunately cannot be always met by ERDF funding. In many cases there is no funding basis for financing these projects due to a lack of national or regional programmes or instruments respectively that allow for an easy realisation of SoE-labelled projects. Reasons for this include a lack of budget and the fact that timing and preparation of programming documents (Horizon and ERDF) are not aligned. Even if the possibility of issuing always open calls for Seal of excellence would solve the issue of timing, not all managing authorities are considering and implementing this option.

In addition, the project applicants are often requested by the managing authorities to submit new applications, even if the spirit of the Seal of excellence would require that the proposal is submitted to the managing authorities without any change and evaluated as such, and it is not always easy to adequately consider the European component in these applications for funding. In such cases, evaluation procedures may also create challenges as there are different rules of evaluation at European and national/regional level. Several managing authorities solved this challenge by making the Monitoring Committee decide on alignment of criteria with the HE instrument.

Seal of Excellence projects have become much easier to implement as a consequence of the newly introduced Art. 25 a-d GBER. The GBER amendment has solved main problems in terms of costs and funding levels. However, some issues still exist.

European partnerships are meant to be long lasting partnerships between the European Commission and public/private sector (depending on the type of the partnership). Hence the implementation of this instrument does not correspond to the aim and creates barriers. There is room for improvement in terms of:

- Clear financial rules and a single approach to financial management (all partnerships under one type respecting the same principles and the same rules). It will facilitate financial reporting but also financial management (with pre-financing and other issues) and the alignment with cohesion policy Funds.
- A single Grant Agreement - a single project for the whole programming period. This will prevent double efforts in writing projects that change only minor things. It will also prevent overlapping. Resources will be saved on both sides - EC and MS.
- Reporting of projects into HE database. Projects financed under partnerships do not appear in the HE database of projects. If we take into account that partnerships represent 50% of pillar II budget, it is not fair that statistics do not reflect them at all. As there does not exist a unique database of those projects, it is impossible to work with them further in terms of synergies.
- Synchronization on the timing. Since European Partnerships are large projects with long timeframe implementation, they cannot have synergies with calls after 2025 due to restrictions on Cohesion Policy Regulatory Framework (decommitment rule).

Cumulative Funding faces the challenge that funds have their own rules concerning eligible costs. The cumulation can harm projects in terms of administrative burdens when they need to be implemented by using different methods and rules. Sometimes entire cost categories cannot be granted because of differences in accounting and settling the project expenditure. This is a technical problem which results in the situation that the beneficiary cannot make use of the cumulation.

In 2023, the Commission launched a call for proposals “Implementing Co-Funded Action Plans for Connected Regional Innovation Valleys” under European Innovation Ecosystems Work Programme (Horizon Europe). This initiative is structured as a co-funding action, consortia are required to secure 50% complementary funding. Selected projects entered the implementation phase in autumn 2024. All projects are expected to act as funders (comparable to an intermediary body), providing support for interregional innovation projects (cascade funding) from various sources. An example was given by one of the Member States where the ERDF managing authorities came across the challenge of determining the appropriate legal framework and raised questions regarding the reporting procedures, for example: Is the ERDF money used in these projects still subject to ERDF regulations, or is it governed by the rules of the Horizon Europe regulation? Which reporting rules apply? Do the projects require “double reporting” to both the EU funding body for the entire project budget and to the ERDF managing authority for the ERDF portion? How can the application and the reporting from the projects funded by the five RIV-projects be implemented in their regions?

Practical challenges also arise from State aid regulations. The funding rates for for-profit beneficiaries in Horizon Europe differ significantly from those under the ERDF. As a result, projects face significant uncertainties about which funding rules should be applied within the cascade funding scheme. This impacts the recipients of financial support schemes and their reporting obligations.

The Cumulative funding in RIV EIE 2023 call needs clear guidelines, including in the domain of State aid, to be implemented with lowest administrative burden for the regions.

Upstream and downstream synergies are described as less challenging. However, there is agreement that the targeted development of synergies, particularly with regard to their strategic utilisation for the

development of topics, is very time-consuming. In many cases, such synergies arise by chance. To remedy this, improvements are needed on two levels:

Firstly, resources are needed at the level of the ERDF managing authorities in order to have an overview of the many opportunities that arise at the programme level. Resources are also needed to initiate synergies in a targeted manner by approaching projects and (potential) funding recipients. In order for such coordinating activities to take place in a meaningful way, it is necessary to know all stakeholders including potential beneficiaries. These tasks could not be accomplished with the current staffing and resources at the level of ERDF managing authorities. One solution could be to obtain additional funding for these tasks as part of technical assistance as part of ERDF programmes.

Secondly, there is a need for better coordination of Horizon Europe and ERDF, both in terms of their timing and with regard to the standardisation of requirements (e.g. target groups and criteria). This should already be ensured during the programming phase. There is also a need for clearer communication and clear guidelines from the Commission on how synergies can be realised in the context of certain instruments. This is not always clear. While the former is important so that the funded activities and their results can be seamlessly integrated, the second aspect is important so that the relevant stakeholders can be addressed.

Identified challenges serve as the basis for the recommendations presented below.

Recommendations

Many recommendations (for both Member States and Commission) came up from the interactions and written contributions of the MS representatives participating in RIMA. They can be divided into 6 groups:

- Governance
- Communication
- Capacity building
- Long-term planning
- Implementation rules
- Legislative framework

Governance

Communicate and coordinate with all relevant actors.

Coordinated activities on national level involving research funding bodies, cohesion policy managing authorities, national contact points, regional levels shall be put in place by the Member State in order to support the successful implementation of synergies. It can be done through an informal or formal coordination body/platform where actors could exchange information and actively brainstorm on enhancing synergies and putting them in practice afterwards. Thus, these activities shall involve people with good understanding of the respective mechanisms and ability to act in a timely manner so as to reduce the risk associated with deferred granting of funds, which can in turn result in unintentional deterrence of interest by project beneficiaries.

Coordinate legal preparations of the future programming period.

It is necessary that people in both the Member State and in the Commission responsible for R&I policy talk to people responsible for cohesion policy. They shall seek to remove the barriers already during the preparation of the legislation. They shall have the same understanding of the synergy concept and see its benefits.

Communication

Communicate more on benefits of synergies.

The understanding of synergies differs very much from Member State to Member State and even inside the Member States between different actors and levels. In order to unlock the potential of synergies, more information campaigns, sharing of experience and good examples shall be organised by the relevant authorities in the MS. All means of communication shall be used (from examples during the workshops/events, through social networks to targeted campaigns on leverage effect of synergies). Members of the RIMA group should use these occasions to multiply the spreading of the good practices, lessons and solutions learnt in RIMA.

Focus on the potential of downstream synergies.

MS authorities to explain better the benefits of downstream synergies for all actors, taking into account the motivation of different actors, by showing concrete examples.

Put transfers in the forefront of the policy dialogue.

Transfer as a new tool needs to be more politically highlighted during the high-level enhanced dialogue meetings – concrete examples of decreased administrative burden shall be emphasized. EC shall keep reminding that in order for the transfer to take place, the Regulation asks it to be explicitly indicated in the Partnership Agreement already when drafting it otherwise it requires to amend the ERDF programme if agreed by programme monitoring committee. EC shall also assist MS to well define the amount estimation of transfers.

Share more information about SoE projects.

EC could consider sharing more information about the SoE holders and projects with the research funding organizations, under strict conditions that the information is shared with those who have a financing scheme. The EIC SoE dashboard recently developed goes in the right direction and the info on the support to Seals gathered through the new feedback feature of the tool from managing authorities, should be used by the Commission to give good visibility to the work of the Member States engaging in synergies actions.

Create a centralized 'one-stop-shop' for synergies.

The Commission and Member States should consolidate existing information on synergies, including potential opportunities, exemplary cases, guidelines, Q&A concerning combination of funds, and legal framework conditions. This comprehensive resource should be made easily accessible to potential beneficiaries through a 'one-stop-shop'.

Exchange of information and practice.

The exchange of information between Member States should be more dynamic, aiming to identify success cases potentially replicable in other geographies, and for efficient sharing of good practices. Open discussions aiming at solving challenges and bottlenecks are extremely beneficial for all stakeholders. Similar to what is already being done with other European support instruments, it could be beneficial to create a database on intervention needs in each Member State, which could allow the implementation of multi-country competitive strategies.

Coordination inside the EC.

The co-ordination and knowledge within the EC services of different EU programmes should be enhanced. Involvement of country desk officers from DG REGIO is very beneficial for coordination and spreading of knowledge about possibilities for synergies.

Capacity building

Train and keep people for downstream synergies.

Downstream synergies require specific skills that most of the financing bodies do not have. Therefore, it is important for Member States to bring together people who are able to depict suitable projects for downstream synergies, do the data mining work and prepare the strategic design - focus of downstream synergies. Specific trainings shall be put in place.

Train people in the domain of synergies.

Member States could develop dedicated training for people in research funding organizations, in managing authorities, the national contact persons to understand each other, to see possibilities for synergies, to broaden their knowledge.

Train data experts.

Ensure more training about the use of the databases for downstream synergies.

Long-term planning

Include synergies in the planning of the whole programming period.

MS together with relevant stakeholders should take synergies into consideration when the cohesion policy programmes and R&I programmes are being planned. At the level of Member States some synergies can be planned in advance like support of Seal of Excellence holders, downstream synergies, transfers, budget for European partnerships. Others, like synergy calls for Regional Innovation Valleys, can be identified only during the programming period. However, a special budget could be planned for such types of synergies already during the programme drafting.

Think of financial resources for synergies when planning the programming period.

Synergies are not only about the tools to finance projects that must be planned financially. They are also about human resources, their skills and development of capacities. All those costs shall be included in the long-term planning.

Plan transfer at the start of the programming period.

The Regulation requires the transfer to be explicitly indicated by the Member States in their Partnership Agreement or to amend the operational programme. In order to avoid the lengthy modification process, it is better to plan the transfer already when drafting the Partnership Agreement /operational programme. EC shall assist Member States to define the amount estimation of transfers realistically.

Use Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) as the main driver for synergies.

Member State could match the S3 aims together with different Union programmes and design downstream synergies according to S3 priorities.

Enlarge the delivery of SoE certificates.

EC shall consider to enlarge SoE to other monobeneficiary schemes like European Research Council (ERC) as for the moment this is limited only to ERC PoC. At the same time, it shall be considered to enlarge the SoE certificate to all MSCA projects that pass the threshold. It would facilitate the financing of all those projects without making distinctions between them.

Involve all relevant actors in the access to excellence planning.

Any vision for 'access to excellence' must include a focus on how research and innovation can be better supported by European and national actors, and how these instruments align.

Implementation rules

Unification makes synergies easier.

EC shall strive for more unified implementation inside one type of European partnership. It would allow the Member States to align with one set of rules and enhanced ERDF use in partnerships.

Enable easier involvement of managing authorities in European partnerships.

EC shall consider removing the necessity to be an intermediate body from CPR for the implementation of partnerships in the future programming period. This rule is a barrier for ERDF use in European partnerships.

Make the sharing of costs in one project easier.

EC shall find an easier solution for sharing the cost of the same project by cohesion policy Funds and Union programmes.

Make clear the use of modified GBER.

GBER modification was a very good step forward. However, Member States still have some uncertainties about its use – for example if the articles can be used when the SoE project is modified or if the national MAs must verify SME status and undertaking in difficulties for SoE projects. Clear guidelines on those issues shall be given.

Alignment in implementation.

We shall strive to align the rules for implementation even more, such as project proposal templates, the way and methods of reimbursement of costs, State aid framework on EU and at national level.

Legislative framework

Maximum alignment of rules.

We shall keep on striving for alignment of EU, national and regional rule.

Ensure greater legal clarity.

The Commission should guarantee the existence of the necessary legal framework before engaging in discussions with Member States concerning potential synergies. This approach will foster a more effective, seamless, and transparent process, facilitating Member States' decisions on the available categories of synergies.

Annex I: Examples of good practices from Member States and observers

BULGARIA

Good practices – Seal of Excellence

- **Support for innovative SMEs, received Seal of Excellence by the European Innovation Council:**

Bulgarian Ministry of Innovation and Growth (MIG) provides funding to support innovative SMEs that have received quality label “Seal of Excellence” (SoE) by the European Innovation Council (EIC) under “Horizon 2020” and “Horizon Europe”. The procedure BG-RRP-2.006 “Support for innovative SMEs that have received Seal of Excellence” was launched under the Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP), Component: “Research and Innovation”, Investment 1 “Programme to accelerate economic recovery and transformation through research and innovation”. 12 contracts were concluded with a total value EUR 17 422 366,60 and are currently in implementation.

In addition to this, under Priority area 4: Synergy with Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programs under Bulgarian ERDF Program “Research, Innovation and Digitalization for Smart Transformation” 2021-2027 (PRDIST) it is envisaged to support projects of Bulgarian enterprises including SMEs awarded with SoE by EIC under “Horizon Europe” after 2024. This measure will ensure continuation of support and compliance with the procedure for innovative SMEs that was launched under RRP. The total grant allocation under PRIDST from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) amounts at EUR 50 million.

Seal of excellence instrument is also used to support Digital and innovation hubs awarded with the seal under Digital Europe Program. Targeted procedure “Funding of selected European Digital Innovation Hubs awarded with the “Seal of Excellence” will support 8 projects of the Bulgarian EDIHs, which successfully passed the selection procedure of EC and received the “Seal of Excellence” under call DIGITAL-2021-EDIH-01 of the Digital Europe Program. EDIHs awarded with by the Digital Europe Program will receive 100% funding under PRIDST. The total value of the received projects amounts at EUR 26 504 391,98 and the projects are currently under evaluation.

Good practices – Cumulative Funding

- **Support for European Digital Innovation Hubs:**

Procedure “Cumulative funding of selected by the European Commission (EC) European Digital Innovation Hubs” granted 50% funding to 4 Bulgarian EDIHs. The contracts under PRIDST are concluded and their total value is EUR 6 946 788,71.

Good practices: Combined funding

- **Support for participation of Bulgarian beneficiaries in European institutionalized partnerships:**

Under Priority area 4: Synergy with Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programs under PRDIST it is envisaged to support projects that promote international scientific cooperation and the participation of Bulgarian consortia in the framework programs of the EU through synergy with the institutionalized European partnerships established by Council Regulation (EU) 2023/1782 of 25 July 2023 amending Regulation (EU) 2021/2085 establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe, as regards the Chips Joint Undertaking. The procedure “Participation of Bulgarian organizations in institutionalized European partnerships” will provide funding for the participation of Bulgarian consortia in the European (institutionalized) partnerships

under the FP "Horizon Europe", which cover the priority areas of the Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization 2021-2027 (ISSS). Europe's institutionalized partnerships play an important role in achieving strategic goals in Bulgaria, such as accelerating the transition to sustainable development goals and Europe's environmental and digital transformation. The indicative budget of the procedure is EUR 41 058 405,99.

Procedure "Complementary funding to support Bulgaria's participation in the European partnership "Clean Hydrogen" for the construction of a hydrogen valley" is approved by the Monitoring Committee of the PRIDST and will be launched in 2024. The envisaged budget of the procedure is EUR 8 180 670 (BGN 16 000 000) combined with similar amount of funding from the Clean hydrogen partnership.

Good practices: Teaming and Twinning projects

Under PRIDST are envisaged two procedures:

- Complementary support for Bulgarian scientific organizations for projects approved for funding under the Horizon Europe Framework Program HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-01 (Teaming), phase 2 and
- Support for Bulgarian scientific organizations with projects that have passed the evaluation thresholds under Horizon Europe - HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-02 (Twinning).

CROATIA

Good practices – Twinning and ERA Chair

The Ministry of Science and Education has conducted a complementary funding scheme from ERDF for Croatian projects that have previously won a Twinning or ERA chair project in Horizon 2020. Complementary funding was ensured from ERDF (Operational Programme Competitiveness and Cohesion 2014–2020) in a total value around EUR 1,2 million and 6 projects within 5 institutions were supported. The aim of the complementary funding was to provide support for the strengthening of innovation capacities, development of infrastructure and equipment of scientific organizations that have proven to have development potential by winning the project within the Horizon 2020 program. Based on post-implementation reports it is clear that the enquired equipment and infrastructure was instrumental for conducting new research and strengthening capacities of the institutions.

Additional example of synergies

Successful institutions in Horizon 2020 were awarded additional points for their excellence during the evaluation procedures for research projects within ESI funds. For example, scientific organizations that were previously highly rated in Horizon 2020 programs were awarded additional points for their excellence on two open competitive calls for (collaborative) research projects that were funded from ERDF OPCC funding 2014-2020.

The scheme was envisaged as a tool to encourage Croatian research organisation to compete with high quality projects both in Horizon 2020 as well as in ERDF. The impact of this measure is to be evaluated.

Lessons learned and challenges

In order to evaluate the impact of introduced measures and adjust future calls, Croatia has introduced the obligation to all applicants to complete a survey during project proposal submission as well as made it mandatory for all applicants to participate in all future surveys regardless if they received funding or not.

- During the design of the Seal of excellence scheme for funding from ERDF (Program Competitiveness and Cohesion 2021-2027), some issues arose concerning the text from the Commission Notice on Synergies

between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes (OJ C 421, 4.11.2022) - and the extent to which the simplification approach is possible in phases that follow after the projects have been evaluated. The issues concerned the following part of the text: “Provided that it complies with the rules of the programme, it is possible for the MA to apply certain categories of HE rules (for example, to the categories, maximum amounts and methods of calculating eligible costs).” and “The same rules apply for monitoring and control as for other operations under the relevant ERDF programme.” The questions concerned the extent to which the simplified approach would be acceptable in the implementation phase of projects, monitoring and control phase. Could the cost verification method used in HE be applied in the projects financed from an ERDF Call for proposals for alternative funding for the holders of Seal of Excellence in Horizon Europe? It would, for example, mean that during the implementation the costs are not individually controlled and checked (with invoices, evidence of payment etc.) or are controlled in a very simple way – for example, only to ensure that the total amount of invoices doesn't exceed the total amount of resources per activity that was displayed in project proposal. **All-encompassing Guidelines for MAs to mitigate different interpretations of the Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes are needed.**

Regarding Teaming for Excellence action – the ERDF financed part is subject to State aid rules, which means that, the ancillary nature of economic activity of a research organization should be ensured and monitored for the depreciation period, which would be around 25 years in case of a building (Centre of Excellence). The timing of the Horizon Teaming for Excellence could present an issue – a Teaming project that would be contracted from both sources at the end of 2024 and would last for 7 years, could have trouble financing the ERDF component after the end of the eligibility period from the financial perspective 2021–2027.

CYPRUS

Good practices – Seal of Excellence and European Partnerships

Cyprus' authorities recognize the benefits of synergies and complementarities between different European funds and were positive to apply where relevant. Synergies in R&I are important especially for small scale R&I ecosystems, as the use of available funding becomes more efficient and with greater impact.

Cyprus organisational set up was built in a way to favour synergies. More specifically, Directorate General Growth, Ministry of Finance is the Programming and Managing Authority for Cohesion Policy Funds and the Coordinating Body of Recovery and Resilience Fund. In addition, Research and Innovation Foundation (RIF) is the single national authority in charge of supporting and promoting research, technological development, and innovation in Cyprus. RIF is the responsible body for the implementation of R&I projects financed by National Funds, Cohesion Policy Funds, RRF and in parallel is the National Horizon Europe NCPs network host. Therefore, strong, and close co-ordination and co-operation between all competent authorities and all national stakeholders is an important factor to promote synergies.

Synergies between cohesion policy Funds (ERDF), Horizon Europe and RRF were promoted from the very early stages of programming.

In order to facilitate the procedure and to enhance synergies and complementarities between different funding sources (national funds, ERDF, RRF) Cyprus Authorities, adopted a single set of rules irrespective of funding source (where possible) and one single electronic platform.

MSCA Seal of Excellence Projects are funded by the EDRF under the Cohesion Policy Programme “Thalia 2021-2027”. Implementation of MSCA Seal of Excellence – 2nd Opportunity projects was smooth and with very positive results. It was an important opportunity to support high quality projects with less administrative burden. Thus, this synergy can be labelled as a best practice example.

The EIC -Seal of excellence it was decided to be financed under the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF).

Cyprus' Authorities decided to use synergies between ERDF and HE for the European Partnerships. This was a quite complex and difficult procedure, especially at the beginning.

In addition, the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy decided to have Complimentary National Funding to all TEAMING Excellence projects selected for funding.

Lessons learned and challenges

Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes (2022/C 421/03) is a useful tool. In addition, it must be acknowledged that RIMA meetings were a very good opportunity to exchange information and views on the practical aspects of applying several options of synergies. European Commission (DG REGIO and DG RTD), were very supportive and helpful to answer questions and find solutions.

The most important challenge remains the different rules and regulations between Horizon Europe and cohesion policy Funds. In order to facilitate and further enhance synergies between the two funding sources their respective Regulatory frameworks have to be aligned. It is complicated and difficult to be in line with several different set of rules (Regulation for HEU 2021/695, Regulations for Cohesion Policy EC 2021/1060, EC 2021/11058, State Aid Rules).

Since, this was the first time Cyprus applied synergies on European Partnerships and considering that the European Partnerships projects are very complex (e.g. the co-financing rate varies in each European Partnership), applying cohesion policy rules resulted in even higher complexity and to, inevitably, a certain increased administrative burden. For example, projects co-funding rate varies from one European Partnership to another (i.e. rates determined in the consortium agreement or after the proposals have been evaluated / funding decision was taken or after all projects have been completed and reporting has been concluded). Therefore, there is different project co-funding rate per Partnership and per Call for Proposals which creates complexity and administrative burden during the ERDF expenditure reporting.

European Partnerships are big projects with long timeframe implementation, therefore we cannot have synergies with calls that will be announced after year 2025 due to restrictions on Cohesion Policy Regulatory Framework (decommitment rule).

CZECH REPUBLIC

Good practices – Informal governance, Use of RRF and Cohesion policy funds

First synergies were developed under a project financed from the Operation Programme Technical Assistance. The aim was to introduce a scheme for SoE holders of SME Instrument phase 1 and also to involve the Czech Republic in ERA NET Cofunds. The project paid for the staff involved and travel costs. The CZ contribution to the projects was financed from the national budget. As a dissemination activity, the project beneficiary, the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, shared its procedure, best and bad practice with relevant ministries and agencies inside the country. As a result, **an informal group on synergies was created. It gathers “synergy fans” from ministries, agencies but also some research organizations. This informal group exchanges information, elaborates on strategies for synergies and also organizes some formal events.**

Thanks to RRF, the SoE scheme could continue for EIC Accelerator SoE holders which would not have been the case because of budgetary constraints. Also, the CZ contribution under some calls of ERA NET Cofunds and European partnerships is financed from RRF. The Czech Republic did not opt for co-financing of co-funded partnerships from cohesion policy Funds because of complexity of the partnerships.

The operational programme Johannes Amos Comenius (OP JAC) supports projects that received SoE in two calls: MSCA FELLOWSHIPS CZ and MSCA COFUND CZ. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions projects of the "fellowship" type support Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe projects that received at least 70% of the total number of points, but due to a lack of funds in the given call could not be financed. OP JAC supports not only SoE projects, but all successful ones above the threshold (over 70%). For SoE holders the Article 25b GBER is used. In the MSCA COFUND CZ call, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions type COFUND projects with SoE label are supported. OP JAC takes advantage of the possibility of having a call announced for the entire duration of the operational program, with only an interruption in the case of evaluation on the HE side. **The main benefit of supporting SoE projects is the guarantee to support high quality projects without additional evaluation and thus with considerable financial and personal savings.**

Lessons learned and challenges

The EC guide for synergies together with GBER modification are very good steps forward. However, some shortages remain and their improvement would be another step to enhance synergies. As for SoE the Czech Republic would recommend to deliver it to all projects above the threshold (including in MSCA). We would also welcome to have more information shared by the EC such as Project proposal and Evaluation Summary Report and not to ask for it from the beneficiaries.

RRF imposed additional checks (extra Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) evaluation, ultimate owner, conflict of interest, etc.) and thus created another administrative step before the grant approval. Contrary to cohesion policy Funds, RRF is not viewed as a national contribution, thus it is not possible to combine RRF and HE resources in one project unless each is used on different activities. Last but not least, the time limit of RRF does not allow us to fund projects above the RRF duration (in practice only projects funded in 2024 at the latest can be funded).

The implementation of European partnerships, which were to be long lasting partnerships, does not correspond to the aim and creates barriers. Thus, we recommend clear financial rules and a single approach to financial management, a single Grant Agreement for the whole programming period and reporting of projects into the HE database.

ESTONIA

Good practices – Teaming, MSCA SoE, partnerships from ERDF

Estonia currently has 3 Teaming projects, co-financed from ERDF. The government of the Republic of Estonia has agreed to co-finance these projects to the extent of at least 50% of the total project volume. Most of the state's co-financing comes from structural funds from programs managed by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Estonia applies the Seal of Excellence (SoE) to incoming postdoctoral grants. Postdoctoral fellows who have achieved a positive evaluation (at least 70%) in the MSCA grant application process, but were not awarded funding, are eligible for our grants if they choose to continue their research in Estonia. A key advantage of the SoE is the reduced administrative burden, enabling decisions to be made within 1–2 months.

Estonia leverages Horizon partnerships synergies in its ERDF program, titled 'Support for the Internationalization of Research and Development and Participation in the International Knowledge Market.' One key activity under this program is supporting participation in international research, development, and innovation initiatives. The funding is directed towards projects submitted by Estonian R&D institutions that have received a positive evaluation in European partnerships and ERA-NET application rounds, as outlined in the participation plan. ERDF funds are used as the national contribution. The first partnerships commenced at the beginning of 2024.

Lessons learned and challenges

Since most of the co-financing of Teaming projects comes from structural funds, several conditions must be taken into account. First of all, when planning structural grants, such funds must be foreseen in the operational plan. At the same time the flexibility of using the funds for other activities should also be provided for in case the projects are not successful in the Horizon application round and co-financing is not needed. It is difficult to guarantee the co-financing of long-term projects that start in the middle or at the end of the structural funds period, because the rules for the next period are not yet in place and the recipient of the support cannot be assured of the conditions of the co-financing.

Only those projects that meet certain conditions can be financed from structural funds. Projects must be submitted in the areas of smart specialization. Implementation rules of different European programmes and structural funds can be better aligned and simplified in order to reduce the administrative burden on the recipients of support and those who design the conditions for granting support. Mapping different conditions and taking them into account has proven to be a serious challenge.

One of the bottlenecks in implementing the MSCA Seal of Excellence has been communication. Perhaps the European Commission could centrally provide a platform (e.g., a single environment) for sharing information about those countries that utilize the Seal of Excellence option for funding postdoctoral researchers.

Following the smart specialization strategy has proven to be a significant obstacle in the use of ERDF funds. Currently, there are some research fields where we cannot accept incoming postdoctoral fellows because the measure is funded by ERDF, and these fields either lack or have only a very indirect connection to smart specialization areas. We agree that setting a focus in funding is important and should remain so. However, perhaps it would be reasonable not to completely exclude other fields but rather prioritize the development of smart specialization areas. Otherwise, we are in a situation where we have applications and funds, but we are unable to fund the applications.

FRANCE

Good practices – MSCA and EIC SoE, additional support schemes

"From post-doc to PI" is a Seal of Excellence set up by Sorbonne Université (Paris) in 2023. Sorbonne Université will fund up to five 2-year contracts each year from among the winners of the MSCA-PF Seal of Excellence. Candidates undertake to submit an ERC project with the university as host institution at the end of their MSCA contract. This SoE is funded from the university's resources (national funding).

"Funding of projects by public laboratories and companies recognized for their European excellence" is a Seal of Excellence scheme set up by the Hauts-de-France Region, using ERDF funding (€9.7m). The focus is on the EIC and the MSCA. To date, no projects have been funded.

The French National Research Agency (ANR) developed schemes to encourage French researchers to apply to Horizon Europe multi-beneficiary calls and to help them network, to fund for laboratories/units hosting a young researcher who is expected to apply for the ERC and to encourage resubmission to the ERC if the first attempt is unsuccessful. BPI France has a similar scheme to encourage companies to participate in HE projects.

Lessons learned and challenges

France's national structure, with strong centralization in Paris-Region and a high level of autonomy in the regions, makes access to information difficult. For the moment, there is no automatic information system for collecting information on synergies.

France faces strong substitution effects with the ERDF, as regions have injunction to use mainly the cohesion funds, although synergies can contribute to the use of ERDF. Furthermore, timetables and commitment rates can differ significantly. More generally, the implementation of these synergies poses a problem.

The main recommendation would be to create a legal basis that integrates the financing mechanisms in synergy.

GERMANY

Best practice – governance of synergies, synergies on project level

Coordination on policy level: Federal-Länder Dialogue on Strengthening Synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy Funds

In order to facilitate programme synergies in the Federal State of Germany the federal government and the federal state governments established the “Federal-Länder Dialogue on Strengthening Synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy Funds”². This forum, which was established in 2014, meets at least once per year acting as a **national coordination mechanism for cooperation** between involved stakeholders. Beside the annual meeting there is frequent ad-hoc communication between the members. Members of the dialogue forum are representatives of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, the Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection and of the Federal State ministries of science and the ministries of economy.

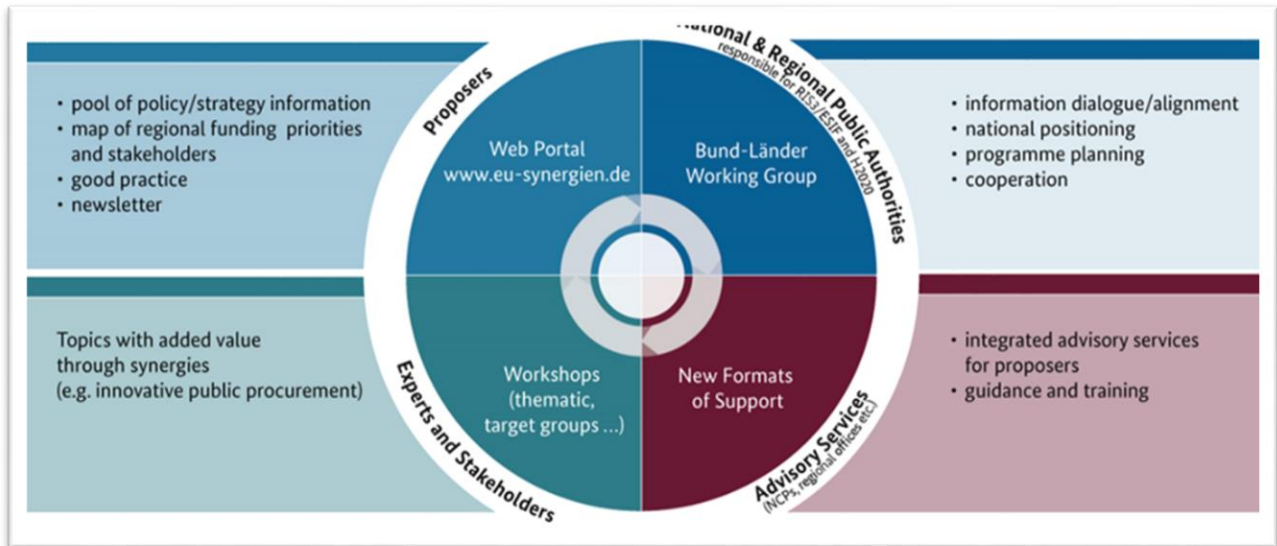
The Federal-Länder Dialogue is a key element of the Partnership Agreement in EU funds and pursues the objective to better coordinate relevant policies and programmes: *“The ‘Federal-Länder Dialogue on Strengthening Synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy Funds’ is to be continued and expanded in the 2021-2027 funding period with the participation of the relevant federal and Länder authorities and in exchange with the European Commission and other stakeholders (e.g. the European Committee of the Regions). It should also enable strategic coordination between the programmes in the future, strengthen the interdepartmental exchange of experience and information between programme planners and develop practical solutions for how the instruments in and between projects can have a complementary effect and thus reinforce each other. Synergies between Horizon Europe and other EU programmes can also be addressed here.”*³

The Federal-Länder Dialogue provides a **set of different instruments and activities** for strategic coordination as presented in Figure 1.

² Official name in German: Bund-Länder-Dialog zur Stärkung von Synergien zwischen Horizont Europa und den Fonds der EU-Kohäsionspolitik

³ Partnerschaftsvereinbarung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Europäischen Kommission für die Umsetzung der Strukturfonds gemäß Dachverordnung EU 2021/1060 für die Förderperiode 2021–2027, pp. 45–46

Figure 1: Elements of the Federal-Länder Dialogue on Strengthening Synergies



In order to facilitate corresponding communication and collaboration among the members a **management office** was established, which is hosted on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research by the DLR Projekttraeger – German Aerospace Center (DLR).⁴ Tasks of the management office include:

- Preparation and follow-up of regular meetings of the federal-state working group SynBLAG;
- Development, implementation and documentation of workshops;
- Advice to research and other stakeholders that look for support with the creation and realization of synergies.

Developing synergies on project level: Synergien.NRW – an initiative of the Federal State Government of North Rhine-Westphalia

Through the initiative Synergien. NRW project development is encouraged in three innovation fields that are relevant for the Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia, including health, food and energy. By this, it also supports planning and implementation of North Rhine-Westphalia’s research and innovation policies. Key objectives of the initiative are:

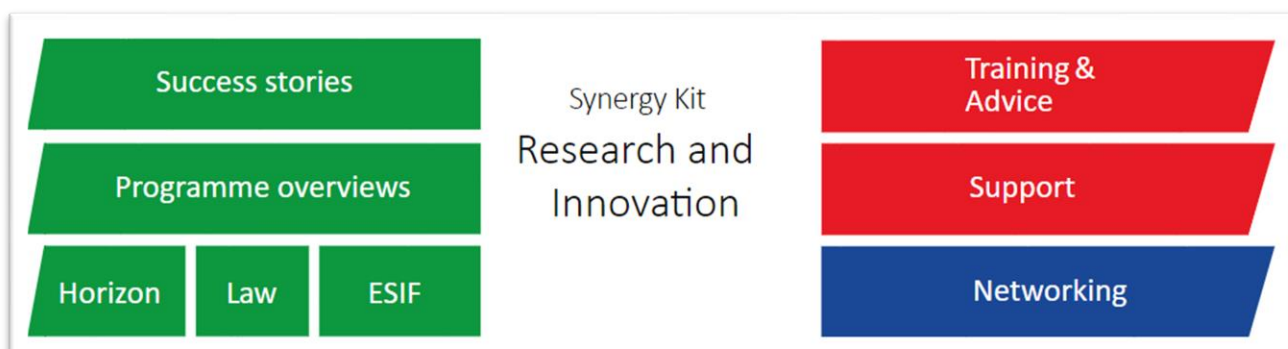
- Support for the public sector in North Rhine-Westphalia, in particular the programme planners for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), including European Territorial Cooperation (INTERREG), and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in the EU in the design of funding programmes.
- Mobilising and training of research and innovation stakeholders (project managers, multipliers and applicants/beneficiaries) in order to open up the potential for synergies and in this way boost North Rhine-Westphalia’s participation in EU funding programmes and the transfer of results.

In order to support these objectives, strategies, tools and information related to the creation of synergies between EU research and innovation programmes and support measures of the Federal State government have been developed, tested with and disseminated among research stakeholders and companies.

⁴ <https://www.eubuero.de/en/synergies-dialogue-managing-office-2405.html> and <https://projekttraeger.dlr.de/en>

The initiative was set-up as a project that received financial support from the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia. A tool kit was developed to support both programme owners and beneficiaries in their efforts to develop programme and project synergies (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Synergy Tool Kit



Further information on Synergien.NRW is available at www.synergien-nrw.de/en/The-Synergien-NRW-project-1879.html.

MALTA

Good practices – MSCA and EIC SoE, additional support schemes

In September 2022, Malta and the European Commission agreed on a Partnership Agreement to transfer €5 million from ERDF to Horizon Europe (€1 million per year as of 2023 to 2027) to support single-beneficiary projects stemming from Horizon Europe calls under Pillar 1 and/or Pillar 3 and/or Widening Actions.

5 ERA Fellowship projects will be supported through this ‘transfer’ mechanism in 2023. These projects, which were not supported from Horizon Europe due to lack of funds in the call, will still receive funding and contribute to European research and innovation efforts.

These projects have gone through a rigorous evaluation process by independent experts assigned by the EC. The projects’ quality, excellence and relevance are thus ensured. Projects supported through this transfer will adhere to Horizon Europe rules and regulations. This consistency in management ensures smooth operations and alignment with EU research and innovation priorities. The management of these projects will be carried out (in the case of the ERA fellowships) by the Research Executive Agency (REA), rather than by the national authority. This centralized approach streamlines project management and execution. **By providing a second chance to high-quality proposals that initially did not secure funding, this ‘transfer’ mechanism will encourage increased submissions to Horizon Europe and attract more projects.**

Lessons learned and challenges

Insufficient Information on the Process and Exploitation of Synergies – There remains considerable uncertainty surrounding the concept of synergies, and the current support mechanisms are insufficient. There is a notable lack of adequate training and capacity-building to effectively guide, particularly, national contact points (NCPs) for Horizon Europe on the optimal methods for promoting complementarities between EU programmes.

It is understood that this was the first process of its kind, but the process could have been better streamlined and expedited to ensure the commitment and availability of both supervisors and post-doctoral researchers. This prolonged gap between initial notification and eventual funding resulted in supervisors taking on

additional work or projects in the interim. Consequently, their interest and availability to supervise the post-doctoral researchers may have been hindered.

Communication efforts should be enhanced to keep all stakeholders informed and engaged throughout the whole process. While Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST) was aware that the transfer was going to take place, MCST could not communicate this with the successful host organisations before the process was finalised.

This prolonged gap between initial notification and eventual funding resulted in the risk that supervisors could have taken on additional work or projects in the interim, with the potential consequence that their availability to supervise the post-doctoral researchers would be hindered.

In 2018/2019, MCST embarked on discussions to introduce the Seal of Excellence (SoE) for the Horizon 2020 SME Instrument Phase 1. However, the landscape shifted with the termination of the SME Instrument Phase 1 under Horizon 2020, as the EIC Accelerator program took its place. Given the substantial budget required to adapt the SoE for the EIC Accelerator program, further progression towards implementing the SoE in Malta was halted.

POLAND

Good practices – SoE, Teaming

As a part Smart Growth OP 2014-2020 (PO IR) Poland provided funding to support SMEs that have received “Seal of Excellence” (SoE) under SME Instruments I & II under “Horizon 2020”. In the next financial perspective 2021-2027 as a part European Funds for Smart Economy (FENG) Poland also provides funding to support SMEs that have received SoE under EIC Accelerator under "Horizon Europe".

Additionally, under PO IR and FENG support is provided to International Research Agenda as a combined funding to the Teaming project under “Horizon 2020” and "Horizon Europe".

Lessons learned and challenges

Poland is deeply aware of simplification for SoE projects introduced to GBER regulation. The new article 25 a-d has solved main problems in different types of costs and funding levels between HE and ERDF-financed national programmes. However, still there are some significant issues to clarify:

SME status and undertaking in difficulty - According to article 73.4 CPR, by funding SoE projects, MAs shall ensure only: compliance with the programme, consistency with the corresponding strategies as well as with the scope of the fund concerned and attribution to a type of intervention. Neither SME status nor the verification if the undertaking is in difficulties seem to fall within the scope of such verification. On the other hand, article 2 (28) of GBER regulation defines that date of granting of the aid means the date when the legal right to receive the aid is conferred on the beneficiary under the applicable national legal regime. It seems to implicate, that MAs should verify all the conditions to grant a State aid at the moment of confirmation of the State aid to the beneficiary (it means, at the moment of application or signing a grant agreement). Among these conditions, it seems that these two requirements: SME status and the verification if the undertaking is in difficulties are critical to a possibility of receiving many State aid types or to setting the State aid intensity. However, the special „privileges” established in article 25 a for SoE project do not refer to these two issues (although SME status is a condition verified also in many EC calls for proposals, for instance in EIC Accelerator). At the same time, assessment done by national MAs will always be much later than the project’ assessment done by EC. However, neither the GBER nor the CPR regulation clearly outline how the managing authority should proceed with projects that received Seal of Excellence (SoE) especially with regards to the SME status and undertaking in difficulty assessment. It would be highly beneficial if the regulations explicitly exempt MAs from the obligation to assess the SME and undertaking in difficulty status in case of SoE projects.

Cumulative funding – EDIH, TEF AI from Digital Europe.

In case of cumulative funding (ex. European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH), Testing and Experimentation Facilities AI (TEF AI) from Digital Europe), each fund has its own rules concerning eligible cost. The cumulation can harm projects when they need to be implemented by using different methods, rules. Sometimes the whole cost categories cannot be granted by one source because of differences in counting and project expenditure design. Thus, the Beneficiary cannot make use of the cumulative funding technically speaking.

PORTUGAL

Examples of good practices: Seal of Excellence, Teaming, downstream synergies

Projects that have been granted SoE under SME Instrument (phase 2) and EIC Accelerator pilot could apply to one scheme. The funding has been granted to the “grant” part.

Monitoring of the implementation of the Excellence Hubs and Pathway to Synergies instruments in the Widening & ERA Programme and how different funding sources are being combined and used.

Evaluation of the sustainability of the Teaming projects, and their long-term strategies, as an example of effective implementation of synergies between different funding sources.

Specific examples on downstream synergies under the H2020 partnerships (reported under the scope of the Working Group set by JRC in 2020⁵)

Lessons learned and challenges

Implementation rules and timeline from different European funding programmes can be better aligned and simplified. A fast track mechanism needs to be implemented for R&I projects. For example, the possibility of using RRF or ERDF funding in Horizon Europe should have clear, simple and transparent rules, so that MS and regions are motivated to use it and implement this possibility.

Make sure that the implementation at project level does not mean extra administrative work for the stakeholders. Increase knowledge about the overall impact of applying funds in each territory, especially when associated with strategic measures.

Fill gaps in funding opportunities.

Mapping of synergies.

⁵ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/w/pilot-2-on-research-and-innovation-public-private-partnerships-for-ris3-implementation-approaches-for-widening-stakeholder-engagement-and-networking->

Best practice – governance of synergies, synergies on project level

Synergy programmes between different EU funds and national financial resources are governed in the Republic of Slovenia by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation and by the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development. While each support measure is under preliminary screening for consistency with the S3 Strategy, which is being managed by the Ministry of Cohesion and Regional Development, as a managing authority of European cohesion policy.

Examples of good practices: Combined funding: Teaming (financed from ESIF), alternative funding – Seal of excellence within MSCA (financed from national funds)

Lessons learned and challenges

It is difficult to implement cumulative funding (European partnerships) due to different rules of implementation (national vs EU funding) and combined funding (Teaming) within different programming periods (the calls for proposals from EC are not aligned with ESIF programming period).

It is difficult to co-finance positively evaluated proposals of MSCA (from national or RRF funds) within “simplified procedure” as the rules on EU level are defined only for Seal of excellence projects (positively evaluated could have 84% of points, 1% less than 85% which is the usual basis for Seal of excellence, which is similar, but rules are different – GBER, new evaluation procedure...).

The purpose of different instruments, expected results, possible participants and implementation areas within different funding sources are different.

Not enough available financial allocations for harvesting the full potential of synergies of different funding.

Timing and preparation of programming documents from different funding are not aligned.

The level of the preparation of the projects is sometimes not mature enough.

Strong commitment of different managing authorities of different funding sources for implementing synergies and co-ordination is often lacking.

Knowledge and experience on different funding schemes between different managing authorities is also often lacking (legislation, reimbursements of costs etc.).

SPAIN

Examples of good practice – synergies with cohesion policy and R&I funds, IDI Network

The report “[Implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategies into the practice with the support of the Synergetic Funding](#)” is a good showcase of good practices to build synergies between structural and R&I funds in Spain.

The country as well counts with a network of managing funds authorities and R&I ones at both state and autonomous regional level - the Network of R&D&I policies – [Red IDI](#) that supports coordination and complementarities between funds.

The Network’s main objective is to coordinate the different agents of the Spanish Science, Technology and Innovation System to optimize the design and development of public support frameworks for R&D&I, thus favouring the mobilization of resources and access to financing from the European cohesion policy and, in particular, the ERDF.

This main overall objective is complemented by a number of specific objectives:

- To facilitate coordination and cooperation between the administrations responsible for R&D&I policies and the management of ERDF of the General State Administration and Autonomous Communities.
- To avoid overlapping in the definition of programs and in the use of R&D&I resources.
- To support the preparation, monitoring and evaluation of the requirements and criteria of the favourable condition included in the ERDF regulation in relation to R&D&I.
- To promote the exchange of information, participatory communication and dissemination of activities and main achievements.

Based on these objectives, the IDI Network’s activities are organized through its work plans, which are usually annual. They fall within the framework of the IDI Network Strategic Plan 2021–2027, published in April 2023. The operation of the IDI Network is included in its Internal Regulations.

At present, the network and its various activities are directly linked to the ERDF’s policy objective 1, “a more competitive and smarter Europe by promoting innovative and smart economic transformation and regional ICT connectivity”. It is also co-financed through technical assistance axis 13 of the Regional Operational Programme of Spain (POPE) and by the CDTI, E.P.E, the Spanish innovation agency under the Ministry of Science and Innovation, which is currently responsible for the Technical Secretariat.

For its part, the IDI Network is considered one of the agents of the Spanish Science, Technology and Innovation System (SECTI), which is made up of all public and private coordination, financing and



implementation agents and their relationships, structures, measures and actions for the promotion, development and support of R&D&I policy in Spain.

The most relevant actors in Spain's RDI policy ecosystem are part of the RDI Network structure. There are three levels of representation: at a European, national and regional level; and also three distinct bodies: the Standing Committee, the Plenary and the Technical Secretariat.

GUILD MEMBERS

Best practice and challenges

Investments from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in lower R&I performing countries have been crucial in increasing the quality of their research and higher education sector by supporting capacity building activities, research infrastructures and human resources, young researchers, internationalisation and mobility. However, in the current programming period synergies have focused more on innovation activities, in particular demands driven by the private sector needs.

The Seal of Excellence (SoE) provides additional motivation for researchers applying under the MSCA calls. However, SoE grants are based on national funding rules and procedures which can cause administrative burden for applicants and make the SoE grants less attractive. GUILD would encourage the development of guidelines for national/regional authorities to shape the financing conditions as close as possible to the MSCA scheme to ensure the greatest impact of synergy. Additionally, in some cases, strict adherence to the Smart Specialisation Strategy focus areas makes it difficult to support postdoctoral fellows across all research fields.

Another example is the use of ERDF funds for the Teaming Centres of Excellence. Although the Teaming call foresees that the complementary funding should cover infrastructure and equipment costs, in some countries, universities have experienced limitations in using ERDF funds for that purpose and had to mobilise national co-funding instead.

YERUN MEMBERS

Best practices and recommendations

Engaging stakeholders such as universities and other research-performing organisations is crucial for fostering synergies between cohesion and research and innovation (R&I) funding. The importance of this engagement lies in enhancing competitiveness, building robust innovation ecosystems, and addressing regional disparities across the European Union. The Draghi report underscores the significance of research and innovation as pillars of sustainable growth and competitiveness in the EU, advocating for a stronger focus on strategic investments in R&I. Universities, as hubs of knowledge creation and transfer, play a pivotal role in this process. They not only drive innovation but also act as bridges between local, regional, and global innovation systems.

Examples of best practices in leveraging synergies illustrate how such approaches can be implemented effectively. The Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), as highlighted by YERUN member NOVA University Lisbon, has developed specific measures to support applicants to the European Research Council (ERC), including funding programmes for proposals that were highly rated but not funded due to budget constraints. These initiatives strengthen the capacity of researchers to secure competitive grants and align national priorities with EU-level excellence-driven funding mechanisms. Similarly, the Academy of Finland has implemented a top-up funding scheme to support universities participating in Horizon Europe projects. This additional funding, highly valued by YERUN member University of Eastern Finland, ensures that institutions can cover costs not fully financed by Horizon Europe, enhancing their ability to leverage EU

funding and participate in groundbreaking research collaborations fully. Such practices demonstrate how national funding bodies can bridge gaps and maximize the impact of synergies, ensuring that promising research projects continue to thrive and contribute to innovation ecosystems.

One key recommendation is to ensure universities are well-informed about synergy modalities that link cohesion policy Funds (such as the European Regional Development Fund) and R&I programmes (such as Horizon Europe). Policymakers should actively foster dialogue mechanisms for these institutions to proactively engage with regional and national authorities to articulate their funding needs and explore co-creation of instruments that leverage both funding streams. By aligning priorities and enabling structured dialogues, this collaboration can foster effective implementation of synergies, ensuring that investments in R&I directly contribute to regional economic and social development.

Universities should also be supported by national and EU policymakers to take active steps to raise awareness about these opportunities among their faculty and research staff. This includes organising workshops, disseminating information about best practices, and fostering networks. Additionally, funding instruments should be co-designed to meet the real needs of the innovation ecosystem.