



The "INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION"
COMMISSION and the "FEDERAL CO-OPERATION"
COMMISSION of the Interministerial Conference
of Science Policy of Belgium

Belgian Reflection Paper on the 10th European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

This document has been prepared by the Belgian federal and regional research and innovation administrations, collaborating through the concertation body 'CIS-CFS' (International Cooperation Commission and Federal Cooperation Commission).

Brussels, February 2025



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Executive Summary

In the past decades, Belgium has successfully participated in the European Union's Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation. Through its involvement, Belgium has mobilised its diverse Research and Innovation (R&I) community - comprising higher education institutions, research institutions, policy and societal stakeholders and industry - to tackle pressing global challenges and foster technological advancements. This participation not only boosts Belgium's R&I capacity but also facilitates the exchange of knowledge and best practices across Europe, leading to socio-economic impact and ultimately contributing to the broader goals of the European Research Area and driving innovation across various sectors. As Belgium prepares the negotiations of the 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10), our commitment to excellence and impact remains at the forefront of our national strategy.

This reflection paper outlines Belgium's vision¹ for a successful successor to the current programme and is structured around two parts: first, the principles that guide our approach to key issues for FP10, and secondly, our perspective on the programme's implementation.

Firstly, our key guiding principles can be summarised as follows:

- **Excellence and impact** must remain at the core of the next Framework Programme.
- We advocate for a **budget** that supports our high ambitions we have for FP10. To achieve this the budget should be stable and dedicated exclusively to R&I.
- Regarding the **structure** of FP10, we recommend building on the three-pillar structure of Horizon Europe to maintain stability and clarity, as well as fostering a better connection between them.
- A more efficient and cohesive approach to budget allocation is essential. **European funding programmes** should be designed from the start to work in **synergy**, with enhanced coordination by the European Commission across all initiatives, fostering a unified European funding ecosystem. This holistic vision will enable a clearer distribution of responsibilities among the various EU sectoral programmes related to R&I in the next Framework Programme.
- Excellent fundamental research must remain one of the priorities, with the **European Research Council** and the **Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions** as flagship instruments.
- We agree with the strengthening of the European Innovation Council (EIC) to better support innovative SMEs and start-ups, with a specific focus on disruptive **innovation**. Belgium recognises the added value of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT) but advocates for a better alignment with other Horizon Europe instruments supporting innovation, in particular the EIC, and favours a better cooperation of the EIT with relevant Partnerships of Pillar 2.
- We emphasise the significant added value of pre-competitive **collaborative research** and its central role in what is currently Horizon Europe Pillar 2. The interdisciplinary and intersectoral approach puts a focus on the short to medium-term (socio-economic) impact, which is crucial for addressing global challenges. Furthermore, collaborative research helps in reducing risks for private companies that develop strategies and solutions for a longer term sustainable and resilient competitiveness.

¹ The views presented in this paper may not reflect the final Belgian position in the actual negotiations, which could evolve based on new developments and analyses.

- Aligned with recent² reports, we highlight the significance of **research and technology infrastructures** and emphasise the added value of the latter to bridge the gap between science and market. A European strategy is essential and necessary to foster more pan-European connectivity between the various infrastructures in general.
- Belgium views **European Partnerships** as a vital mechanism for aligning Member States, industry, research centres, academia and the European Commission around specific sectors and strategic themes. However, the instrument should be adequately rationalised through efforts streamlining the partnership ecosystem, enhancing openness, coherence, and simplicity.
- Belgium recognises the significant potential of the **mission** approach but believes that mission governance needs to be revised to anchor the missions at a higher and more horizontal political level. To do this, Belgium recommends reorienting missions as a coordinated strategic planning process that leverages the full spectrum of existing programmes and instruments available within the European Union, extending beyond Horizon Europe.
- It is key to strike a balance between the need for **international cooperation** and addressing the concerns about **knowledge security**. In doing so, we must address and mitigate potential risks, while also considering the costs of non-cooperation with third parties due to security risks.
- By embedding inclusive **gender equality** in R&I policies, we maximise the potential of diverse talents, ensuring that Europe remains at the forefront of scientific excellence.
- Belgium believes that FP10 should be set-up to explicitly recognise and incorporate **Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (SSAH)** expertise throughout the Programme. This approach aims to address societal challenges by integrating SSAH across FP10, monitoring its inclusion across projects in FP10, and ensuring inclusivity in the selection of experts.

Secondly, our main messages regarding the programme's implementation can be summarised as follows:

- **Applicant-oriented simplification**, particularly when integrating multiple funding sources, requires consultation with all relevant stakeholders. We fully support Commissioner Zaharieva's proposal to reduce the administrative burden and explore the use of digital tools, including AI.
- **Reduce the administrative burden** and **simplify** processes for applicants and beneficiaries.
- **Enhance transparency** and **harmonise communication**, providing clear guidelines for the implementation of recent instruments such as lump sums and blind evaluations.
- Design calls to ensure they are **accessible** to a **broader range of especially newcomers from all types of R&I actors**.

Finally, we invite in this paper stakeholders across the quadruple helix to join us in cultivating a collaborative ecosystem that prioritises excellence and maximises the impact of our collective efforts. Together, we can position FP10 as a leading force in advancing R&I that addresses challenges at all governmental levels.

² See for example, Draghi, M. (2024). The Future of European Competitiveness. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en.

Key Guiding Principles for FP10

Research and innovation (R&I) play a crucial role in addressing significant societal challenges, including a successful digital and green transition, and enhancing European resilience and competitiveness, particularly in today's dynamic geopolitical landscape. As highlighted in the Draghi report³, bridging the innovation gap with the US and China is essential for the EU to transform its strengths into competitive industries and into a better and more resilient society on the global stage.

In this regard, the 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10) should strengthen technological and industrial leadership, improve the quality of life for European citizens and address global challenges in a solution-oriented manner. Moreover, FP10 should serve as a central hub for R&I activities aligning with other EU, national and regional policies and initiatives. We must enhance and strengthen instruments and policies that leverage national, regional, and private R&I investments, with a focus on research and technology infrastructures, partnerships, and missions. In the transition to FP10, we favour continuity with the current Framework Programme, Horizon Europe, as many aspects are functioning effectively. A drastic restructuring or change in approach may not necessarily lead to greater coherence and simplification and could, have the opposite effect. Retaining the current structure will help beneficiaries navigate through the programme's funding opportunities. Nevertheless, we should remain constructively critical with an open mind for potential improvements.

Excellence and Impact

Excellence and impact – scientific, economic, technological and societal - must remain the two guiding principles of the next Framework Programme.

Previous programmes have showcased their commitment to **excellence**, and Belgium believes FP10 should build on this foundation to attract the best talents and ideas to Europe and retain them.

We acknowledge the critical role of blue-sky and bottom-up, curiosity-driven research and firmly support the European Research Council (ERC) as the pinnacle of independent scientific excellence. Frontier research not only expands the knowledge base and strengthens Europe's resilience in facing unforeseen crises, but also underpins the innovation pipeline, laying the groundwork for future innovations. It is thus important to preserve the independence and autonomy of the ERC's Scientific Council.

Furthermore, Belgium supports the Proof of Concept (PoC) Grants to maximise the innovation potential of breakthrough research and advocates for better integration of ERC results with other initiatives of Pillars 2 or 3 like the European Innovation Council (EIC).

³ Draghi, M. (2024). The Future of European Competitiveness. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en.

We strongly support the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), a highly valuable programme with structural impact on the training of the next generation of researchers, and we are in favour of preserving the nature and success of this instrument, including its status as a separate programme.

We furthermore believe it is crucial to empower and encourage less experienced applicants as well as researchers with non-linear careers, ensuring that various funding instruments, such as MSCA and ERC, are accessible for excellent researchers across all stages in their careers. Research infrastructures can contribute to achieving excellence in science by providing access to state-of-the-art facilities and installations.

Horizon Europe has introduced numerous initiatives and tools aimed at translating knowledge into tangible results and creating more **impact**. Belgium emphasises the need to enhance these capacities in FP10 and to promote knowledge sharing. In this context, we advocate for the following:

- **Inclusive involvement of stakeholders:** Incorporate input from R&I stakeholders to ensure comprehensive coverage across the entire spectrum of R&I, from fundamental research to market and societal application and uptake whenever beneficial.
- **Synergies across pillars:** Foster synergies among the pillars to optimise the innovation pipeline and maximise impact.
- **Clear objectives and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** FP10 should be guided by well-defined targets and KPIs that address the global challenges we face. Continuous monitoring through these KPIs can enhance impact and can also provide an objective way to assess programmes and initiatives. Additionally, harmonisation in the use of KPIs across different programmes will further facilitate synergies.
- **Interdisciplinarity:** Promote interdisciplinary and intersectoral collaboration to amplify project impact and leverage excellence through cross-fertilisation among disciplines and (types of) stakeholders.

In addition, we also support Horizon Europe's cluster approach in Pillar 2 aimed at strengthening R&I through collaboration across sectors and policy areas. It exemplifies the value of pre-competitive collaborative research to address societal challenges, including in a mission-oriented innovation policy framework. Such collaboration between excellent R&I actors and industry can create significant impact on society and economy.

Widening

Based on the insights from the 2022 Court of Auditors evaluation⁴, a fresh approach to widening measures is necessary. The European Commission should thoroughly assess and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of these instruments, as well as their effectiveness and impact taking into account different root causes of the R&I divide. This may require addressing shortcomings in existing Horizon Europe instruments and, if necessary, phasing out those that are underperforming. Throughout this process, we must emphasise quality over quantity. A more strategic and effective approach is needed,

⁴ Special Report 15/2022: Measures to widen participation in Horizon 2020 were well designed but sustainable change will mostly depend on efforts by national authorities.

including tailor-made actions that address identified root causes to contribute to help bridge the R&I divide.

To achieve structural impact, Belgium emphasises the need for FP10 widening measures to be complemented by continued national investments in and reforms of the national R&I ecosystems. Reaching the 3% R&D intensity target remains quintessential in our opinion as well as Member States creating locally more appropriate framework conditions tailored to their national context. In that context, we strongly believe that European Structural and Investment Funds are a very relevant instrument to close the R&I divide while effective synergies should be further developed.

Budget and Synergies

In recent years, we have seen an increase in added priorities within Horizon Europe, sometimes even without clear connections to R&I. This has made the programme overly complex, and fragmented the budget due to the political urgency of these new priorities. FP10 funding for R&I as a response to extraordinary crisis situations should be used cautiously.

A stable budget should guarantee the attractiveness and success of the programme. Acceptable success rates are necessary to maintain its attractiveness. The Belgian R&I administrations propose that the percentage of the total budget of the next Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027 to be allocated to FP10 reflects the high level of ambition thereof. Regarding the distribution of funding among pillars, Belgium believes the current division should be respected as much as possible.

European funding programmes should be designed in a synergetic way from the outset, with improved coordination by the Commission, across all initiatives, to create a holistic European funding ecosystem. This comprehensive vision will facilitate a greater potential for synergies and impact between the various EU sectoral programmes and the next Framework Programme. Also, a harmonised set of indicators could also contribute to fostering synergies across programmes.

Effective coordination of ambitious EU and national R&I priorities is essential. This requires an early and improved consultation process involving Member States and European Economic Area (EEA) Countries, and all relevant stakeholders from industry, policy, society as well as R&I experts. Belgium emphasises the need to acknowledge the diversity of R&I policies across EU Member States, which may include a division of labour with regional governments where applicable.

Finally, it is essential to reduce the significant administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries in general, but in particular when they try to combine different funding sources. Hence, we endorse Commissioner Zaharieva's proposal⁵ to enhance the use of digital tools, including AI, and to promote simplified funding options (refer to section two of this paper for more details). These simplifications can already be introduced in the remaining part of Horizon Europe.

⁵ European Commission (2024). Questionnaire to the Commissioner-Designate Ekaterina ZAHARIEVA. Startups, Research and Innovation. https://hearings.elections.europa.eu/documents/zaharieva/zaharieva_writtenquestionsandanswers_en.pdf .

Structure and Actions

To ensure stability and simplification for participants, Belgium proposes that FP10 retains the existing structure of Horizon Europe. It is vital to strike an effective balance between curiosity-driven basic research, applied and mission-oriented R&I, and support for all types of innovation, including social innovation. Belgium advocates for more effective synergies between the pillars and supports the current approach of integrating technology development with the societal context in which it will be implemented. In this regard, we emphasise the added value of open collaborative calls in tackling the global challenges. These offer opportunities for academia, industry, policy and society to collaborate in relevant issues, enabling knowledge transfer and leading to tangible socio-economic impact in the short to medium term.

Introducing research actions (RA) focused on strategic, exploratory research within Pillar 2 of FP10 can expand the knowledge base of specific thematic areas and foster new insights and strategies at the European level. These RA can thus provide PoC, which could be further developed through successive calls. This 'sequence' in programming - from RA to Research and Innovation Actions (RIA) or Innovation Actions (IA), where relevant - would significantly enhance the coherence of the Framework Programme, acting as a robust innovation pipeline. Such a RA should include a plan or agenda outlining the next R&D steps in a specific domain as part of the deliverables for such actions.

Innovation

In line with the Draghi report⁶, supporting innovative SMEs, start-ups, and scale-ups through an attractive ecosystem that improves access to critical and emerging technologies such as AI, biotech and advanced materials, remains a top priority for EU competitiveness. FP10 should build on the track-record of the EIC and improve its leverage tools, particularly in the area of blended finance, to provide SMEs with easier and faster access to tailored funding solutions. Additionally, insights should be drawn from the portfolio approach to enhance its effectiveness in prioritising and addressing key EU challenges while preserving the EIC's overall bottom-up nature. In line with the Heitor report⁷, we believe the EIC should be strengthened by mobilising significantly larger private investments to secure the risk mitigation of highly innovative investments. Belgium believes that it is essential to explore further synergies between national and regional public and private investors and the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Investment Fund (EIF), and InvestEU instruments, etc. particularly to increase financial support for innovative scale-up companies.

Strengthening capacities to connect stakeholders in the European innovation ecosystem is needed to close the innovation divide and investment gap across Europe, but also to foster interregional collaboration and connect regional ecosystems across the EU, building on complementarities between smart specialisation strategies. The design of innovation ecosystems requires more streamlining and

⁶ Draghi, M. (2024). The Future of European Competitiveness. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en.

⁷ European Commission (2024). Align, act, accelerate. Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2f9fc221-86bb-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

coordination as calls from different instruments⁸ confuse applicants and cause fragmentation of efforts. Similar topics should be less fragmented in future programming.

Belgium recognises the added value of the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) and its Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) – already three of the KICs have become financially self-sustainable⁹– but advocates for a better alignment with other Horizon Europe instruments supporting innovation, in particular the EIC. We are also in favour of a better cooperation of the EIT with relevant partnerships of Pillar 2. In addition, given its knowledge triangle set-up, the KICs play a key role in building ecosystems that can contribute to a successful roll-out of the Horizon Europe missions. Nevertheless, there is still room for reduction of administrative burden and a higher transparency, in particular the information flow towards Member States (eCorda data). In addition, the EIT and its KICs should strike an appropriate balance between sustainability requirements and the attractiveness of membership and their (service) model for a broad range of partners.

European Research Area

We consider it is important to better align the Framework Programme with the policy framework of the European Research Area (ERA). To achieve this, Belgium recommends:

- Defining the interaction(s) between ERA Actions and FP funding at the outset and presenting this information in a timely manner to the relevant groups, including the ERA Forum, ERAC, and the Widening participation and spreading excellence (WIDERA) configuration of the FP Programme Committee.
- Clarifying the distinction between the ERA component of FP10 and the ERA Policy Agenda to prevent confusion regarding calls that fall outside the Policy Agenda and those that directly address it.
- Better aligning the link between the ERA Policy Agenda and the WIDERA component, particularly through Coordination and Support Actions that support ERA Actions. This alignment would be beneficial for Member States/Associated Countries and the ERA overall, as ERA Actions are intended for joint activities that might not otherwise occur or achieve the same scope and impact.

A special role can be attributed to University Alliances in the implementation of the fifth freedom (see Letta report¹⁰) within the knowledge triangle. Therefore the cooperation between the Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) and DG RTD needs to be strengthened to enhance synergies between the European Education Area (EER) and the ERA, e.g. by exploring joint support modalities and options for the research agenda of University Alliances.

⁸ Such as European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE), European Regional Development Fund - Interregional Innovation Investments (ERDF-I3), Widening participation and spreading excellence (WIDERA).

⁹ European Commission (2024). Performance of European Partnerships. Biennial monitoring report 2024 on partnerships in Horizon Europe. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/8f71dfd0-76fe-11ef-bbbe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> .

¹⁰ Letta, E. (2024). Much more than a market. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf> .

Research Infrastructures and Technology Infrastructures

Both research infrastructures (RIs) and technology infrastructures (TIs) serve different purposes and stakeholders. Research infrastructures primarily aim to conduct and support excellent science research and advance knowledge (cf. Letta). Technology infrastructures, on the other hand, are market-oriented, supporting and directly leading to innovation and economic growth. Both types of infrastructures are complementary and should be considered as part of the same ecosystem. It is essential to develop a European strategy to enhance pan-European connectivity and establish cross-border infrastructure networks.

Our priorities for FP10 in this domain can be summarised as follows:

- We are advocating for the development of a coordinated strategy for RIs and TIs.
- The consolidation of the RI landscape should be addressed at every stage of the RI lifecycle. Proposals for new RIs must demonstrate the scientific need for their establishment and explain why the proposed services, data, or facilities cannot be integrated into existing RIs (such as ESFRI RIs, intergovernmental organisations, or national RIs). Incentives should be provided to encourage the merging or consolidation of existing RIs whenever feasible and relevant.
- A balanced approach should be maintained between support for challenge-driven and curiosity-driven access to RIs. Regarding access and training for RI personnel, synergies with MSCA could be strengthened while ensuring complementarities.
- Continued support for the development of joint technology roadmaps produced by RIs should be expanded to new fields, including not only accelerators and detectors but also technologies for greening RIs, as well as the introduction of AI and other relevant tools for data analysis, visualisation, and interpretation.
- Support for transnational access to RIs should continue, including co-funding at both the RI and funding agency levels. Transnational access is strongly endorsed by the scientific community.
- Calls in Clusters of Pillar 2 should, where relevant, reference existing RIs to reinforce and incentivise the use of relevant services and data provided by these infrastructures, recognising ESFRI RIs as significant assets for ERA cluster project beneficiaries.
- State aid rules can have different implications for RIs and TIs. Generally they apply only to TIs. Guidance on the application of state aid rules for TIs should be developed, to ensure consistent application by all Member States.
- Support for TIs should be closely aligned with the recommendations of the Industrial Technology Roadmaps (cf. ERA Action 19-20, ERA Policy Agenda 2020-2022), the report from the European Commission Expert Group on Technology Infrastructures, private-public partnerships, New Industrial Deal alliances and smart specialisation strategies. This ensures effective technology development and deployment by industry.

Partnerships

Belgium views European Partnerships as an effective mechanism for aligning Member States, industry, research centres, academia, and the European Commission around specific sectors and strategic themes. This instrument acts as an ecosystem catalyst and should be present in FP10, but in a streamlined form. We present some challenges that need to be addressed:

- **Reducing the number of partnerships:** Belgium strongly supports the rationale/requirement – already expressed in the Horizon Europe Regulation – that partnerships should deliver results or value not achievable through existing Work Programmes. The strategic coordination process should be more strict in upholding this rationale, eventually not only reducing the number of partnerships but also avoiding unnecessary duplication and fostering synergies between the different partnerships.
- **Rationalising the partnership instrument:** The legal flexibility afforded to individual partnerships leads to considerable variation and complexity. While the Commission aims to streamline processes, divergent rules for project submissions and complexity increase a risk of fragmentation and duplication in research efforts. It is essential to continue efforts to streamline the partnership ecosystem, enhancing openness, coherence, and simplicity.
- **Building sustainable ecosystems:** Partnerships should actively foster sustainable ecosystems within their areas of expertise to promote broader adoption of scientific knowledge. They can serve as platforms for developing knowledge and innovative methodologies, bridging the technological ‘valley of death’ by connecting cutting-edge research with business initiatives. Partnerships should also align with policy and industrial ecosystems to enhance research dissemination and increase societal and economic impact. Moreover, they can offer critical insights for policymaking, leveraging their networks and experiences to enrich stakeholder engagement. A stronger role for and by Member State Representatives Groups may also lead to stronger linkages with national/regional ecosystems and policy initiatives.

EU Missions

Belgium recognises the significant added value of the mission approach as a catalyst for change and a transversal tool for EU policies, effectively leveraging the research outcomes developed by European researchers. However, it believes that the potential of a whole-of-government portfolio approach, as part of a strategic coordination process, remains underutilised, impeding successful implementation. Belgium therefore sees potential in the approach taken by the New European Bauhaus which integrates R&I with practical implementation and relies on cooperation between different policy domains. What is missing is a clear governance with a bird’s-eye to coordinate instruments with different finalities, i.e. focusing on R&I activities on the one hand and implementation activities on the other. Coordination is essential to ensure follow-up from R&I to implementation.

Belgium recommends reorienting missions as a coordinated strategic planning process that leverages the full spectrum of existing programmes and instruments within the European funding ecosystem, extending beyond Horizon Europe. To align with the ambitious and measurable objectives of each mission, an operational plan should be developed that outlines all necessary steps for achieving those goals, translating them into calls across relevant programmes. This approach would utilise existing budgets rather than requiring additional funding, though it would necessitate close monitoring and evaluation. Budget from the Framework Programme should exclusively be dedicated to R&I activities.

Finally, it is important to note that, like partnerships, missions should not be viewed as a ‘silver bullet’ and should only be established for challenges where a mission-driven approach provides added value beyond existing instruments. The regular Work Programmes of FP10 should remain the core of the mission initiative, and limiting the number of missions would help avoid the dilution of efforts. Each

mission should have a defined timeframe for achieving its objectives and should be designed to conclude gracefully, including mechanisms for knowledge transfer to FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable and re-usable) data repositories.

International Cooperation and Knowledge Security

In general, Belgium adheres to the principle of ‘as open as possible and as closed as necessary’, as outlined in the European Commission's Communication on the Global Approach to R&I, the Council Recommendation on a Pact for R&I in Europe and the Council Recommendation on Research Security.

Science diplomacy and the exploration of new avenues to facilitate R&I cooperation with countries outside the EU favour the circulation of world-class talent and knowledge. At the same time, the EU should build on existing de-risking strategies, such as export control, which have implications for R&I, particularly in sensitive and dual-use technologies. In addition, Belgium welcomes a science diplomacy initiative to create a permanent structure for (i) providing an evidence base for strategic decisions in various policy fields, (ii) delivering strategic intelligence for that purpose, and (iii) developing methods to evaluate impact and monitor science diplomacy practices.

Efforts to enhance strategic autonomy are best pursued in a ‘Team Europe’ spirit, not only within the EU but also in collaboration with third countries and global actors by preference who share our values and principles and can be considered as ‘like-minded’. At the individual level, the EU could proactively enhance international brain circulation schemes. At the national level, prioritising strategic partnerships is recommended in areas where the EU is lagging or to bolster the resilience of its strategic value chains. This focus on international cooperation complements efforts aimed at EU R&I collaborations that address various global challenges, such as global health, climate resilience, biodiversity preservation, energy and food security, and challenges to democracy - even with countries that may not share all EU values.

In all cases, the desire for collaboration is to be balanced with concerns about knowledge security, including the mitigation of potential risks, while also weighing the costs of non-cooperation. For example, if a less like-minded country leads in a technology vital to Europe, the consequences of not engaging must be carefully considered.

For FP10, Belgium proposes that each public body, higher education institution (HEI) or research organisation from EU Member States and Associated Countries draws up a knowledge security action plan, similar to a Gender Equality Plan, outlining how knowledge security is managed within the organisation. This plan should be published and included in the administrative information maintained by the Legal Entity Appointed Representative (LEAR), allowing individual applicants to forgo including it in their proposals. This measure would enable the European Commission to establish a standard and create a level playing field for all European R&I actors, incorporating quality control checks to ensure consistency in how different partners in a consortium address third-country involvement. However, the needs of HEIs with fewer resources must be considered as well to avoid imposing a framework that is overly stringent or creates an excessive administrative burden, which could hinder their participation in FP10.

Dual Use

To enhance innovation, particularly in the current geopolitical climate, dual-use technologies can be a valuable means to address some of today's challenges. Measures implemented in Horizon Europe to promote synergies between defence-related research and civilian research have yielded promising results. However, at this stage, Belgium urges:

- The Commission to reach clear decisions on a common definition of dual use, based on Article 2(1) of the Dual Use Regulation 2021/821. This definition should be universally recognised by all stakeholders involved in dual-use issues, including the European Commission, the EIB, and export control entities.
- The Commission to further explore the options outlined in the White Paper on Enhancing R&D Support Involving Technologies with Dual-Use Potential¹¹, particularly options 1 and 2. It is important to avoid adding excessive complexity and instruments to the R&D funding landscape.
- To foster synergies, continuous dialogue, and information sharing between funding bodies, and entities involved in knowledge security measures, and export controls.

Belgium also highlights that research on technologies with dual-use potential would likely lead to an increase in calls that restrict access to third countries, limiting universities' and research institutes' opportunities to collaborate with peers outside the European Union.

In response to the Heitor report¹², Belgium acknowledges the ubiquitous nature of many new technologies and the ethical and legal challenges this brings with it, but highlights the importance of the dual-use label for purposes such as export control obligations and due diligence.

Gender Equality and Inclusiveness

Belgium considers inclusive Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) a mandatory eligibility criterion for EU funding. These plans have demonstrated their capacity to drive institutional change across Research Performing Organisations and provide a way to address the underrepresentation of women and minority groups. Moreover, the inclusion of the four recommended thematic areas in GEPs might be made obligatory where applicable: work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content; measures against gender-based violence including sexual harassment. Meticulous monitoring and evaluation of inclusive GEPs and other inclusivity policies is necessary, as are compliance checks of the GEP eligibility criterion.

We also support that GEPs should be made mandatory for large private sector enterprises in order to actively involve this sector, which employs over half of researchers, in the inclusivity effort. A study should be launched on the impact a GEP eligibility criterion for SMEs would have on the administrative burden.

¹¹ European Commission (2023). White paper on options for enhancing support for research and development involving technologies with dual-use potential. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1a54ebcd-bb98-11ee-b164-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> .

¹² European Commission (2024). Align, act, accelerate. Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2f9fc221-86bb-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> .

More and better quality data for the monitoring of gender participation in the next Framework Programme is needed, including (preferably non-binary) data on the composition of research teams.

Regarding gender in research content, inclusive gender analysis should be an obligatory element in FP10, with a robust and comprehensive rationale provided in case this is deemed irrelevant. This rationale should be evaluated by gender experts.

Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities

Social Sciences, Arts, and Humanities (SSAH) play a crucial role in identifying and addressing societal issues and providing input to policymaking across Europe. The necessary focus on people in defining societal challenges and the importance of SSAH in addressing these was highlighted during the Belgian Presidency¹³ and also emphasised in the Heitor report¹⁴. Belgium believes that FP10 should be structured to explicitly recognise and incorporate SSAH expertise throughout the Programme as part of an overall strategy to foster interdisciplinary cooperative R&I activities. To achieve this, we propose the following steps:

- **Integrate SSAH across FP10:** While the new framework should continue to support SSAH research and innovation in a dedicated section (such as the current Cluster 2 of Horizon Europe), SSAH expertise and participation should, where applicable, also be explicitly requested in all relevant R&I topics. This approach will help us better understand the societal context and adopt human-centric solutions to complex challenges facing Europe. SSAH should not simply be an add-on to STEM projects but be integrated into the development of call topics from the outset.
- **Monitor SSAH in FP10:** We recommend extensive and continuous monitoring of how SSAH is incorporated within the programme, funded projects, and their research outputs. Mixed-method approaches, such as combining textual analysis with bibliometrics, should be employed to evaluate SSAH's integration. Attention should be given to the level of involvement from SSAH researchers and the disciplines represented.
- **Ensure inclusive expert selection:** To guarantee diverse representation in expert panels responsible for drafting research programmes and evaluating proposals, it is essential to consider factors such as age, gender, geography, and disciplinary backgrounds, particularly from various SSAH domains, see also part two of this paper. However, excellence should remain the primary criterion for selection.

¹³ See for instance the conference organised in May 2024 under the Belgian Presidency of the European Union dedicated to this topic (#StrongerTogether: SSAH and the future of evidence-informed policymaking).

¹⁴ European Commission (2024). Align, act, accelerate. Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/2f9fc221-86bb-11ef-a67d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> .

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement should be actively promoted whenever appropriate. This involves actively involving relevant stakeholders within the quadruple helix, including end-users, in the co-creation, co-design, co-implementation, co-monitoring, and co-evaluation of projects – albeit from various perspectives and with a varying degree of involvement.

Engaging citizens - whether through citizen science initiatives or multi-actor approaches - can also boost the impact of science, address current distrust in science and contribute to a healthier democracy.

Furthermore, Belgium highlights the relevant role of local authorities such as regions or cities as potential key project partners in R&I projects related to major societal transitions, e.g. Mission Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities, Mission Adaptation to Climate Change, New European Bauhaus projects and R&I on SSAH and democracy. Cities are uniquely positioned to implement new approaches at the local level and tailor policies to address specific needs and challenges. Through collaboration with local university research groups and the R&I departments of companies within their regions, cities can effectively integrate research and innovation results. This allows them to translate new knowledge into practical applications, improving citizens' daily lives while enhancing the dissemination, impact, and visibility of innovative solutions.

Finally, effective science communication is essential and should be reinforced throughout every stage of the innovation value chain, and hence be considered by all FP10 project proposals. Such efforts enhance the credibility, relevance, legitimacy, and overall quality of research outcomes.

Open Science

Belgium supports the continuation in FP10 of the Open Science principles and practices that are being applied in Horizon Europe. FP10 should keep research outputs as open as possible, while also considering research security. Additionally, these outputs should adhere to the FAIR principles, in line with the developments of the European Open Science Cloud.

Furthermore, the Open Access requirements for scientific publications in FP10 should contribute to the development of a rich and just ecosystem of high-quality open-access journals. Open Access obligations should be aligned with legal possibilities to implement diverse Open Access strategies, including green Open Access in an institutional repository. Researchers funded under FP10 should be stimulated to avoid transferring copyright to publishers to ensure free and timely distribution of published results.

FP10 Implementation

For the implementation of FP10, the following key points are crucial for us and will be consistently highlighted throughout this section:

- Reduce the administrative burden and simplify processes for applicants and beneficiaries.
- Enhance transparency and harmonise communication, providing clear guidelines (including a proper briefing to the evaluators) for the implementation of new initiatives.
- Design calls to ensure they are accessible to a broader range of especially newcomers from all types of R&I actors.

Priority-setting and Comitology

Priority-setting needs to be transparent, based on clearly described and evidence-informed needs and opportunities. To realise this, a holistic approach including all relevant perspectives (industry, academia, society, policy) and prioritising the EU added value is essential. Herein Member States should have the opportunity to transparently share their planned priorities and activities before the European Commission submits its initial proposals for Strategic Plans and Work Programmes, ensuring alignment on FP priorities.

Belgium advocates for a more selective approach to prioritisation, which would enable more funding per priority and generate a more significant impact in each domain. Operationally, this would lead to more broadly defined calls, allowing for a wider range of projects to receive funding and giving the European Commission the chance to fully harness the bottom-up creativity of applicants.

It is important to maintain a clear distinction between the responsibilities of the strategic configuration of the Programme Committee and the thematic configurations. We recommend keeping as much decision-making as possible related to Clusters and other sections of the next FP within the remit of the thematic configurations, since these consist of experts and R&I specialists in the relevant fields. Also for specific matters such as missions and the selection of partnerships, the appropriate expert sub-groups and/or thematic configurations have to be consulted, while final approval rests with the strategic configuration. To facilitate this, and even as a general practice, documents need to be shared well in advance of meetings.

On the topic of Space R&I, Belgium recommends the establishment of a configuration of the Programme Committee specifically dedicated to this area. The integration of Space R&I into Horizon Europe's Cluster 4 complicates comitology and hinders effective communication between the European Commission and Member States regarding strategic Space R&I needs. Currently, Cluster 4 Programme Committee meetings address a wide array of topics, resulting in an increase in informal ad-hoc meetings. While these discussions can provide valuable insights on Space R&I, they often lack a formal structure. To enhance synergies, the focus should be on aligning with the EU Space Programme, the European Defence Fund, and the European Space Agency, rather than with other sectors within Cluster 4.

Belgium supports the testing of innovative measures or pilot instruments/initiatives to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the programme. However, there needs to be increased transparency regarding their implementation as well as a proper evaluation in relation to their objectives. Currently,

stakeholders and National Contact Points (NCPs) do not always have adequate information on these instruments. It is important for the relevant committees to be involved at every stage of the development and implementation of these tools. Excluding them hinders thoughtful reflection and strategic planning across the various clusters. Finally, the pilots should be dealt with in a more time-effective and smarter manner so that outcomes are implemented without much delay.

Application

Streamlining the application process makes the programme more attractive and accessible for applicants, and is particularly important to enhance participation of SMEs. While previous simplification efforts, such as reducing the page limit for collaborative proposals, are appreciated, they are complicated by the growing number of transversal elements that need to be addressed in applications. As a general principle, we should not hesitate to phase out instruments and requirements that are deemed as no longer relevant or effective based on objective criteria. Belgium recommends the following:

- Engage NCPs for proposals on further simplification, ensuring they are consulted in a systematic manner.
- Provide timely, clear, comprehensive and detailed guidance documents for applicants and beneficiaries from the outset of the programme.
- For mandatory items like GEPs, Communication and Dissemination Plans, as well as ethics and open science, offer templates as a support for applicants.
- Improve the online findability and accessibility of funding opportunities.
- Ensure timely openings of calls and maintain predictability of the timeline of ensuing processes, both of which will enhance programme accessibility.
- Use clear language in calls and programme materials, avoiding jargon that may confuse applicants (e.g. the term 'destination' can have different meanings in EU jargon versus everyday language). Also, avoid using the same term for different concepts, such as 'associated partner' and 'associated country'.
- Currently, too many aspects have to be taken into account while building proposals – the key strategic orientations (KSOs), expected outcome and impacts, Horizon Europe Strategic Plan, the several topics and destinations. To better address this, the European Commission should consider consolidating all expectations into a single document, where all relevant information is provided for applicants' reference.
- Calls that fund only one project should be exceptions, as this can discourage applicants, especially first-time applicants.
- Move item tables regarding subcontracting costs, purchase costs, and in-kind contributions from the implementation section (B) to a separate, unrestricted section or to the A-forms alongside the budget template. This adjustment would ensure that all consortia, regardless of size, have a similar amount of space to describe excellence and impact.
- Apply a similar approach to issues like ethics, 'do no significant harm', AI trustworthiness, open science practices, and FAIR data management. These topics should be addressed through a combination of tick boxes and text boxes in part A of the proposal.

Evaluation

The evaluation of proposals must adhere to the highest standards, reflecting the excellence of the projects being funded. Special attention is needed for the following points:

- **Diversity of evaluators:** To promote transparency and detailed reporting on the results and process of the proposal evaluations, it is useful for the Commission to provide – within comitology – an overview of the diversity of evaluators involved not only in terms of geography, gender but also in terms of a detailing of SSAH profiles (or background expertise in general) among evaluators. For SSAH-flagged topics, it is essential that at least one evaluator has a proven excellent scientific background in the specific SSAH domain that needs to be evaluated. Evaluators on expert panels should also possess the necessary expertise to assess interdisciplinary projects effectively.
- **Call requirements:** The evaluators' profiles must align with the call requirements, and the evaluators should receive proper briefings.
- **Evaluation instructions:** It is crucial that evaluators are adequately trained to consider all aspects outlined for applicants. Clear and transparent instructions for evaluation should be provided to both expert evaluators during the proposal phase and project officers during execution. These instructions should be consistent with the ones given to applicants. In particular, the correct interpretation when assessing lump sums remains a source of considerable worries with Belgian stakeholders.

Moreover, the complexity of calls should be minimised, as this places an undue burden on evaluators and increases the likelihood of redress procedures, thereby increasing the administrative burden. Greater transparency regarding the workings of the Programme Committee and the selection of projects from the reserve list would be highly beneficial in this regard.

Project Management and Reporting

Simplification efforts should focus on various aspects of project management, including amendment mechanisms (particularly for co-funded partnerships), budget transfers, periodic reporting, assessments, and the auditing process. Some initiatives have been implemented in line with this recommendation, such as financial reporting; these should at least be maintained in FP10 and reviewed as necessary.

In terms of administrative support from the European Commission, Belgium appreciates the efforts made during info days and NCP training sessions. However, Belgium recommends better alignment between NCP trainings and the general info days organised by the Commission. Holding NCP trainings before the general info days would allow for specific questions to be raised and addressed. Additionally, NCP trainings should emphasise added value and provide more detailed information relevant to the various clusters, enabling NCPs to better inform their stakeholders. This is particularly important given the decreasing capacity of the European Commission to manage such tasks. Other suggestions to improve project management and reporting include:

- **Uniformity:** More uniform rules for projects funded under different funds.
- **Increased reporting flexibility:** Allowing a reporting timeframe of 60 to 90 days would ease the burden on project managers and financial departments, as many deadlines are currently set by executive agencies on the same date.

- **Direct access for NCPs:** NCPs should have direct access to all functionalities of the participant portal as applicants, providing them with essential insights and tools to support stakeholders in project management.
- **Indicative audit programme:** An indicative audit programme should be available from the start of FP10, allowing applicants to prepare their administration for reporting efficiently. Additionally, the Annotated Model Grant Agreement should be finalised by the beginning of FP10.

Specifically for partnerships:

- **Simplification:** Efforts to simplify the project management aspects of partnerships and other instruments are crucial. In particular, the obligation to submit several proposals should disappear (or adapted in such a way that only a minimal administrative effort is needed). Moreover, the overly restrictive administrative and legal framework hinders financial management across the entire partnership lifespan and prevents the reallocation of funds between different 'proposal periods'. These and other complaints already discussed several times within the strategic configuration of the Horizon Europe Programme Committee and the Partnership Knowledge Hub should be solved even before the new FP starts (and preferentially as soon as possible).
- **Consistent management:** Effective management by European executive agencies must be consistent over the various executive agencies with a clear need for flexibility in addressing unforeseen challenges within partnerships. Administrative rigidity can deter potential contributors, especially in co-funded partnerships. We advocate for a partnership coordination team that unites all executive agencies, including DG RTD representatives, to ensure uniformity in managing partnerships (e.g. regarding contributions in kind and conflict of interest). Partnerships experiencing administrative challenges should have access to rapid responsive support.

Conclusion

In line with Belgium's active participation to the Framework Programmes in the past, we intend to continue our involvement and look forward to further discuss our vision and priorities on FP10 as outlined in this paper with the European Commission, the other Member States, Associated Countries, and with all stakeholders involved.

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