



Opinion of the Partnership Knowledge Hub on the European Partnerships under the Second Strategic Plan



Independent
Expert
Report

Research and
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Opinion of the Partnership Knowledge Hub on the European Partnerships under the Second Strategic Plan

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OPINION OF THE PARTNERSHIP KNOWLEDGE HUB ON THE EUROPEAN PARTNERSHIPS UNDER THE SECOND STRATEGIC PLAN OF HORIZON EUROPE

The Partnership Knowledge Hub (PKH) is a Horizon Europe Commission expert group set up in 2021 to advise the Commission in the implementation of the strategic coordinating process for EU R&I partnerships, and to provide a forum for coordination and cooperation with Member States and related stakeholders, in line with Article 6(5) of the Council Decision (EU) 2021/764 of 10 May 2021 establishing the Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe Specific Programme.

The following Opinion of PKH is addressed to the European Commission. With this Opinion, the PKH supports the Partnership selection process of new European Partnerships under the Second Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe (2025-2027). Further, this Opinion takes into account learnings from the implementation of partnerships under the First Strategic Plan (2021 – 2024) but does not discuss the new policy approach on partnerships.

The Opinion includes three parts. The first part recalls the main requirements concerning the selection of European Partnerships with the different legal bases, notably Horizon Europe for co-programmed and co-funded partnerships and the different legal bases for institutionalised partnerships.

The second part presents the conclusions on the selection of the first batch of European Partnerships, launched under the first Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe. It summarises the main experiences from the selection phase of the first batch of European Partnerships and builds on available evidence, in particular the work of the Commission Expert Group on the first Biennial Monitoring Report published in May 2022, on discussions within the PKH, including the ad hoc Working Group established for this Opinion, as well as on the feedback received during the hearing with the Partnership representatives that took place on 17 April 2023.

The third part includes the recommendations for the selection of European Partnerships to be launched under the Second Strategic Plan. It builds upon available evidence, especially the first Biennial Monitoring Report (2022) and the Expert Group recommendations, the work of the Partnership Knowledge Hub, and the feedback from the European Partnerships during the hearing of 17 April 2023.

1. Preliminary considerations

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- RECALLS that European Partnerships are initiatives where the EU together with private and/or public partners commit to jointly support the development and implementation of a programme of research and innovation activities. They should play an important role in achieving the common strategic objectives of accelerating the twin transitions towards a green, climate neutral, and digital Europe, while strengthening the resilience and competitiveness of European industry, as expressed in the key strategic orientations.
- RECALLS that Horizon Europe (HE) introduces a more strategic, coherent and impact-driven approach to European Partnerships. They should be established only in cases where they will achieve objectives of HE more effectively than what can be achieved by other activities of the Framework programme.
- RECALLS that the requirements for set-up and functioning of European Partnerships stem from different pieces of legislation, in particular Horizon Europe Regulation, the Single Basic Act (SBA), Council Regulation establishing the EuroHPC JU, Decision on the participation of the Union in the European Partnership on Metrology, and the EIT Regulation¹;
- UNDERLINES that in addition to the HE selection criteria (Art. 10 (2) and Annex III of the Horizon Europe Regulation), the other legal and administrative documents include additional issues to be considered, notably
 - a. the specific requirements for the set-up of Joint Undertakings (see SBA), in particular the **long-term perspective**;
 - b. the specific requirements for the set-up of a **European Partnership on Metrology**, notably the intention to be a more effective means of delivery than traditional calls for proposals or co-funded Partnerships;
 - c. the avoidance of **unnecessary duplication** between Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) and other instruments in the same field, in particular other European Partnerships;

¹ REGULATION (EU) 2021/695 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 28 April 2021 establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, laying down its rules for participation and dissemination, and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1290/2013 and (EU) No 1291/2013 [Publications Office \(europa.eu\)](#)

COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2021/2085 of 19 November 2021 establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe and repealing Regulations (EC) No 219/2007, (EU) No 557/2014, (EU) No 558/2014, (EU) No 559/2014, (EU) No 560/2014, (EU) No 561/2014 and (EU) No 642/2014 [SBA \(europa.eu\)](#)

Council Regulation on establishing the European High Performance Computing Joint Undertaking and repealing Regulation (EU) 2018/1488 [pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

[DECISION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the participation of the Union in the European Partnership on Metrology jointly undertaken by several Member States](#)

REGULATION (EU) 2021/819 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 20 May 2021 on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology [Publications Office \(europa.eu\)](#)

- d. the specific requirements set out in the **Memoranda of Understandings** of the Co-programmed European Partnerships, in particular pursuing a long-term common vision, providing the general, specific and operational objectives, defining key performance indicators and additional activities of the Co-programmed European Partnerships;
 - e. the specific requirements for the set-up of co-funded Partnerships as laid down in the respective Partnerships' Grant Agreements, in particular the monitoring frameworks, the lifecycle approaches and the envisaged synergies with relevant European Partnerships, Missions and other instruments;
 - f. the possibility to **use in-kind contributions** as basis for the involvement of Member States, stakeholders and industry in all three types of European Partnerships;
 - g. the need to integrate a **broad spectrum of actors** across value-chains and ecosystems for a coordinated implementation of activities;
 - h. existence of **complex cross-border challenges** that require an integrated EU level approach;
 - i. to strengthen **international cooperation** in support of Union policy objectives and international commitments;
 - j. **the political desire to enable additional joint activities beyond joint calls**;
 - k. **broader investments beyond the contributions from partners** and triggered by the Joint Undertakings that contribute to achieving their objectives to facilitate the acceleration of market uptake of innovative solutions;
 - l. to **encourage exploitation of research and innovation results** and actively disseminate and exploit results, in particular for leveraging private investments and for policy development;
 - m. to reinforce **the link between research, innovation and, where appropriate, education, training and other policies**, including complementarities with national, regional and Union research and innovation policies and activities;
 - n. to increase **public awareness and acceptance**, respond to demand and encourage the diffusion and uptake of new solutions by involving, where appropriate, citizens and end-users in co-design and co-creation processes;
- RECALLS the need to establish a streamlined monitoring and evaluation framework that is well integrated in the overall HE framework while also meeting the specific requirements laid down in the different legal documents, and takes into consideration the specificities of each type of partnership;
 - RECALLS that the selection of new KICs follows the strategic planning of HE and the criteria set for the selection of European Partnerships, in particular openness, transparency, Union added value, contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), coherence and synergies, and shall take into account the contribution of the Governing Board. New KICs may be selected if budget allocations additional to those currently allocated to the EIT become available;
 - RECALLS that a second new KIC, in the field of Water, Marine and Maritime Sectors and Ecosystems (WMM), is proposed to be launched in 2026, with a call for proposals to be published in 2025 as agreed in the legal base of the EIT.

2. Conclusions

2.1. On whether the selection process for the first batch of European Partnerships met the legal requirements and ambitions, and the expectations of partners other than the Union

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- i. ACKNOWLEDGES that the selection process corresponded to the ambitions and requirements from the relevant legislation;
- ii. UNDERLINES that **the new policy approach on European Partnerships starts to take shape**, in particular with respect to **additionality** (EUR 9 billion public partner contributions for the first batch of HE European Partnerships and EUR 22.4 billion from partners other than the Union), **directionality** (digital and green transition and strategic approach), and planned **synergies and cooperation between Partnerships**;
- iii. ACKNOWLEDGES that **the first batch of Partnerships builds largely on predecessors under Horizon 2020** and that the desired coherence between Partnerships and other HE initiatives was limited due to the parallelism of many preparatory processes (more or less simultaneous adoption of MFF, HE, HE Specific programme, strategic plan and HE work programmes) and a pandemic situation;
- iv. WELCOMES that **the Strategic Programme Committee will remain the main discussion forum** also for the second batch of European Partnerships – that proved to be an effective and efficient approach ensuring a maximum coherence of the overall partnership portfolio;
- v. UNDERLINES that **broader interests of all partners** in European Partnerships should be better acknowledged in the spirit of a joint endeavour;

2.2. On the lessons learnt from the application of the Horizon Europe selection criteria that should be considered for the upcoming Partnerships under the Second Strategic Plan

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- i. **Concerning effectiveness:** WELCOMES the additional HE requirements for the selection phase of European Partnerships as a substantive contribution of an increased effectiveness, in particular through **cross-partnership cooperation** with additional joint activities for better up-take of R&I results, including policy uptakes;
- ii. **Concerning synergies and coherence:** CALLS on the COM to **substantially improve guidance and service** for European Partnerships to fully exploit potential synergies with other partnerships, with EU missions and ESIF and WELCOMES the improved overall positioning of European Partnerships in the overall HE Portfolio when compared to Horizon 2020;
- iii. **Concerning transparency and openness:** WELCOMES the new measures and requirements that have been introduced in all the different legal bases

that provide for a substantive probability of **improved transparency and openness**; in particular the following measures seem to work in practice: accessibility of SRIAs, defining Partnership priorities and openness of calls for proposals, information on governance structures, open policy of participation;

- iv. **Concerning additionality and directionality:** HIGHLIGHTS the general limits for an ex-ante assessment of many aspects of these criteria in the field of R&I and **WELCOMES the fiches provided by COM as a basis for decisions on the individual Partnerships** that proved to meet largely the requirements from the legal base, with two exceptions notably **'flexibility of implementation' and 'exit strategies'**. While it is important to reflect these two criteria from the beginning, real progress will only be possible during implementation; **CALLS on all parties concerned to closely follow the experiences of the three KICs from the first wave that will phase-out from EIT funding by the end of 2024 when designing appropriate exit strategies.**

3. Recommendations

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- CALLS on the COM to further deepen and explore the Partnership portfolio approach and present an analysis of gaps (including topics and actors), synergies and potential overlaps within and cross clusters, when presenting its proposals for future partnerships under the 2nd Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe;
- RECOMMENDS to focus more on lifecycle considerations when preparing the fiches for candidate European Partnerships;
- CALLS on the COM and partners other than the Union to jointly seek better integration of Partnerships in Missions implementation, where appropriate;
- CALLS on the COM to better prepare already during the selection phase for the subsequent implementation. HIGHLIGHTS that executive agencies need more and better ex-ante horizontal guidance from COM services in order to ensure a coherent interpretation of requirements and legal provisions and meet the needs of all partners other than the Union;
- CALLS on the COM and partners other than the Union to ensure more creativity and focus on the planning and implementation of additional joint activities in order to improve the uptake of results including policy uptake;
- URGES the COM to ensure that the spirit of joint endeavour and joint ownership for European Partnerships of the Union and partners other than the Union is overall strengthened and in particular during the selection and preparatory phase;
- CALLS on all parties involved to seek a balanced approach concerning the participation of partners from third countries in Partnerships, which should have a clear added value in line with overall agreed political orientations. WELCOMES that relevant partners from third countries often use a participation in a Partnership as first milestone for a broader participation in the Framework Programme;
- CALLS on the COM to provide clear and transparent horizontal guidance to candidate Partnerships with respect to the opportunities and limits of third country participants in European Partnerships;
- CALLS on the COM to work closely with the Strategic coordinating process and in particular with the PKH when elaborating and implementing measures to gradually phase out Horizon Europe funding;
- CALLS on the COM and MS to carefully consider the most appropriate type of partnership when proposing new partnerships;
- Calls on MS and AS to support the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in national processes with regard to the identification of and participation in future Partnerships;

- CALLS on the COM and the EIT to ensure a better integration of the EIT-KICs in the overall HEU portfolio and in particular the Partnership portfolio. UNDERLINES the need to fully reflect the learnings from the BMR and other evidence, including the HE interim evaluation, when designing the second EIT-KIC on water;
- INVITES the EIT to actively contribute to the analysis of gaps, synergies and potential overlaps as part of the overall rationale for the selection of new Partnerships under the second Strategic Plan.
- Calls on the COM to ensure a high quality and inclusive discussion process and allowing sufficient time to jointly reflect on the proposals for new Partnerships, e.g. in the SPC and in the PKH.

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The Opinion of the Partnership Knowledge Hub on the second batch of European Partnerships aims at giving advice to the European Commission on the selection of new candidate partnerships under the second Strategic Plan of horizon Europe, notably on the interpretation and the relevance of Horizon Europe selection criteria for Partnerships, as well as the relevance of additional issues to be considered in the selection process, on lessons learnt from the selection process of the first batch of European Partnerships, and on how to better design the selection process for European Partnerships.

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