

The Guild: Commission's proposal for the post-2027 MFF: a promising first step towards the next Horizon Europe

On 16 July, President Ursula von der Leyen presented the European Commission's proposal for the post-2027 multi-annual budget of the European Union: the multiannual financial framework (MFF). In line with her ambition to put research and innovation (R&I) at the heart of Europe's economy, the next framework programme for R&I keeps its name – Horizon Europe – and its distinct budget and legal basis.

The Commission proposes a budget for the next Horizon Europe of € 175 billion in constant prices or € 200 billion in current prices. We urge the European Parliament and the Council to agree on this amount or on a higher financial envelope. Mario Draghi's report on the future of European Competitiveness, as well as the expert group led by Manuel Heitor for the interim evaluation of the ongoing Horizon Europe, highlighted that such an increase in the framework programme's budget is critical to boost Europe's scientific and industrial leadership. This is also the reason why The Guild and the League of European Research Universities (LERU) called for doubling Horizon Europe's budget in [their joint recommendations for FP10](#) in June 2023.

We are happy to see that the European Commission has followed another of our core recommendations: to safeguard the programmes with proven success. The European Research Council (ERC) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Action (MSCA) already demonstrated their effectiveness in pushing the frontier of knowledge and in attracting research talents to Europe. Because these objectives are even more relevant today than they were in the past, the European Commission made wise decisions to significantly increase the budget of ERC and MSCA and maintain their focus on scientific excellence. The Guild will remain attentive to make sure that the model underpinning the success of these programmes is also safeguarded: their bottom-up nature and, for the ERC, the autonomy of its Scientific Council.

The EIC Pathfinder and Transition are other instruments with proven success rightfully maintained in the Commission's proposal. We welcome the recognition of the need to strike a balance between open and challenge calls to foster the development of innovations crucial for Europe's present and future competitiveness. It is important that universities remain eligible for these instruments.

The European Commission also safeguarded the integrity of Horizon Europe by including collaborative and challenge-oriented R&I in the next Horizon Europe. It is indeed critical to support cross-sectoral, -border and -disciplinary research to develop the most innovative solutions and support Europe's industrial competitiveness. Furthermore, the proposal puts in place relevant instruments to leverage researchers' creativity in collaborative R&I: balance in terms of technology readiness levels and less prescriptive calls. The European Commission also acknowledges the need to support, in a bottom-up manner, collaborative research to address societal global challenges. We urge the Council and the Parliament to further reinforce the budget for R&I on global societal challenges and to ensure that Horizon Europe is synergistically connected to the European Competitiveness Fund and not subdue to it.

Finally, the European Commission keeps Horizon Europe open to collaboration with non-EU partners, including associated countries. It is important that the proposed

provisions on knowledge security enable international collaboration in the new geopolitical context instead of preventing or limiting it. Europe cannot address global challenges alone nor build its competitiveness isolated from the rest of the world, which is why we welcome synergies between Horizon Europe (and Erasmus) and the Global Europe part of the next MFF.

[Commission's proposal for the post-2027 MFF: a promising first step towards the next Horizon Europe - The Guild](#)

Horizon Europe's retention is good news - but the fight isn't over yet

By Jan Palmowski, Secretary General of The Guild, 22 July 2025

After a year of anxiety about the future of European Union-funded research and innovation, it is excellent news that Horizon Europe is set to continue as the continent's flagship funding programme until at least 2035.

The European Commission had previously suggested that it might prefer to roll research and innovation funding into a broader fund to boost Europe's industrial competitiveness. However, the commission's proposal for the tenth Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10), which will retain the Horizon Europe brand, envisages research and innovation remaining a stand-alone programme.

As part of the commission's Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the proposal will now go through a two-year negotiation process between the commission, the European Council (national ministers) and the European Parliament, before the beginning of the EU's next spending period in 2028. However, since the council and parliament have always been supportive of an independent research funding programme, there seems unlikely to be any shift on that.

Even better, the commission proposes to increase funding for Horizon Europe by about 90 per cent in real terms. Pillar III, focused on innovation, is the biggest winner, with its budget proposed to increase from the current €13 billion (£11.3 billion) to €38.8 billion. But Pillar I (excellent science) also does well. On a like-for-like basis, it increases from €22 billion to €41.5 billion.

The breakdown between the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) has not yet been made public, but these broad brushstrokes are hugely welcome. We must do everything we can to defend these budgets against cuts that the council may wish to make.

The draft MFF also makes clear that scientific excellence will remain the overarching objective of the whole programme, as well as the sole criterion on which MSCA and ERC funding is distributed; as currently, excellence, impact and implementation will be the evaluation criteria for the other two pillars. The articles that make this clear (3.1, 9.1 (SP) and 25 respectively) will be important references for future discussions because the commitment to scientific excellence is not so clear in many details, particularly in relation to the ERC.

For instance, the ERC will be required to respect the “corporate policies” of the commission. But what are those policies? Is this just a catch-all phrase to potentially limit the authority of the ERC’s Scientific Council and president (whose terms will be reduced from 4+4 years to 2+2, potentially putting off outstanding candidates)?

Moreover, in establishing an overall scientific strategy, the Scientific Council is obliged to have regard to opportunities and “European scientific needs”. Who will determine these needs – the Scientific Council or the commission? If excellence really is the overall goal, any clipping of the ERC’s wings would be counterproductive and must be challenged by the parliament and the European Council.

As for the MSCA, it will remain a bottom-up instrument, but “if specific needs arise”, it may target specific thematic priorities, geographical locations or objectives “in the pursuit of the Union strategic autonomy”. Again, the question is who would decide on such needs. It is critical that MSCA focus on the long-term interest of European research and innovation, not on the short-term reactions of policymakers to immediate challenges.

There is a strong appreciation in the draft MFF of the value of permitting third countries to associate to Horizon Europe, and existing association terms are proposed to roll over into the next programme. But the association regulation also explicitly states that it will be possible to exclude third countries (with the exception of EEA countries) from parts of the programme. This already happens, but it hadn’t previously been codified.

In a major shift, defence and dual-use research is no longer specifically excluded. One priority of Pillar II (global challenges and industrial competitiveness) is “defence industry and space”. And the European Innovation Council (EIC, part of Pillar III) is charged, among others, with supporting high-tech dual-use and military start-ups. But Horizon Europe became one of the EU’s strongest brands (as the draft regulation notes) as a civilian programme, addressing challenges that brought researchers together worldwide. It is not set up to be a funder of military research, which often involves very different players with very distinct infrastructures. So even if dual-use potential of research is permitted, it will be essential for the commission to ensure that the civilian focus of Horizon Europe prevails.

One of the biggest open questions is the relationship between Pillar II and the separate European Competitiveness Fund (ECF). It is a significant victory for the R&I community that Pillar II will follow the rules (such as those around excellence) of Horizon Europe, rather than the ECF. Also welcome is the fact that Horizon Europe will not be used to cross-subsidise the (expensive) deployment of new technology. But €68.2 billion in collaborative research will be dedicated to research priorities that shadow those of the ECF.

A Competitiveness Coordination Tool will apparently ensure synergies across both instruments and with national member states – but what is this tool? Who is in charge? According to which criteria will research priorities be set? And over what timelines? Pillar II’s capacity to genuinely push scientific boundaries is vital to delivering on the imperative to energise Europe’s R&I base, attracting the best researchers and high-performing third countries.

The commission's proposal is a good place to start negotiations, with a strong budget, an appreciation of international collaboration and at least a rhetorical commitment to excellence across the board. Commissioner Zaharieva, director-general Lemaître and their teams clearly fought hard and well.

But now the real work begins of making sure that, over the next two years, the proposals' clarity and ambitions are strengthened rather than weakened.

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This article was originally published in Times Higher Education.