

POSITION PAPER TOWARDS FP10

CZECH NATIONAL CONTACT POINTS

PRAGUE, NOVEMBER 2024

The position paper of the Czech NCPs on the future framework programme is based on the experience of the NCPs gained during the implementation of the Horizon Europe. The goal is to point out some aspects of the functioning of the framework programme that might be useful to reflect and consider in the future programme.

COOPERATION OF NCPs AND EUROPEAN COMMISSION

- As National Contact Points we aim to provide the public, potential proposers and beneficiaries, with comprehensive and high-quality information regarding European research and innovation calls. Our mission is to enhance the quality of submitted proposals and to provide supportive assistance throughout the project implementation process. To fulfil our role as effectively as possible, we highly appreciate **the training, consultations and NCP meetings** organized by the European Commission that focus on EU framework programme issues. We advocate for the continuation of this practice. Furthermore, we would like to highlight the significant **importance of NCP network projects**. These projects foster enhanced cooperation among NCPs, help to bridge gaps in the services offered across Europe, and provide support to stakeholders, including pre-proposal evaluations.

INCREASE IN OVERALL BUDGET

- We emphasize **the need for an increase in the overall programme budget**. This increase would allow for more substantial support for research and innovation, which is key to maintaining competitiveness and developing a knowledge economy in Europe.

CORPORATE APPROACH

- We recommend **continuing with the current corporate approach** established during the 2021-2027 programming period to simplify and harmonize processes and rules across various directly managed EU programmes (including Horizon Europe). This approach, which includes a unified Model Grant Agreement (harmonized contractual terms) and other harmonized documents (such as forms, templates, and guidelines) and tools (including IT tools and platforms), significantly contributes to streamlining administrative processes across all directly managed EU programmes and improving system efficiency.
- However, it is essential to ensure the **effective functioning of this system**, as the current collaboration between multiple Directorate-Generals of the European Commission, which is understandably less agile, causes delays in the creation of documents and responses to questions. For example, it is unacceptable that the interpretation of the rules in the Annotated Model Grant Agreement (AGA) becomes fully available only halfway through the programme. Therefore, faster and more efficient administrative support is necessary.

- This corporate approach further connects the activities of National Contact Points (NCPs) for directly managed programmes. We have noticed that some beneficiaries in directly managed EU programmes (outside Horizon Europe) would appreciate more support, particularly in terms of rule interpretation and advice on implementation aspects. To address this, it is worth considering whether **each programme should have its own financial and legal NCP or whether these services should be provided across all directly managed programmes**. Both approaches have their benefits and challenges, but it is essential to ensure a unified European-level approach reflected in the NCP mandate, supported by appropriate training and resources.

SUPPORT FOR SIMPLIFIED FORMS OF FINANCING

- We recommend maintaining continuity between Horizon Europe and FP10. **We support funding in the form of lump sums**. This approach was tested in Horizon Europe, and according to the EC's report on lump sum funding in H2020 and Horizon Europe, it successfully meets the set goals and could be utilized in FP10 to the same or even a greater extent. Higher usage has the potential to eliminate implementation issues encountered in grants based on actual costs (e.g., the excessive complexity of personnel cost eligibility).
- **Using a flat rate for indirect costs also seems effective**, and we support its continuation under the same conditions as in Horizon Europe (with the possibility of increasing the percentage rate).
- As for **unit costs for personnel costs**, the idea is sound, and we recommend the possibility of maintaining them. However, it is essential to **establish more effective/favourable implementation rules**, especially the possibility of increasing the rate over time. Without flexibility and a willingness to revise the pilot version of unit costs, this option will not significantly simplify the rules or reduce error rates.
- On the other hand, due to the low error rates and clarity of the current Horizon Europe rules for travel expenses, we **do not support the introduction of unit costs for travel**, which, while not part of Horizon Europe, is known from other directly managed programmes.

PERSONNEL COST SYSTEM

- We need a system for calculating eligible personnel costs that is simple yet takes national and institutional specifics into account and ensures fair and motivating remuneration. The current system is too complex, unclear, administratively burdensome, and does not consider national and institutional specifics. **Significant simplification in this area is crucial**. The alternative unit personnel costs introduced by the European Commission in May 2024 in its current form is not suitable for most Czech beneficiaries. Therefore, it does not have the potential to simplify the calculation system. From our perspective, it is worth considering whether the actual simplification would come from eliminating the concept of standard and project remuneration and introducing a single approach where FP10 projects apply rates corresponding to the usual practice and average remuneration of a person during the reporting period.
- A unified **corporate approach to personnel costs and eligibility rules across all directly managed programmes** is important.

FTOP IT PLATFORM

- We commend the functioning of the FTOP IT platform. This platform has proven to be an effective tool for the entire project lifecycle and a valuable source of information. We would

certainly **welcome the continuation of its use and further improvement** to ensure maximum efficiency and user-friendliness for all participants across all directly managed programmes.

- We recommend the improvement of the search facility in the open calls implemented by projects under the cascade funding (financial support to third parties).

ERC

- The European Research Council (ERC) is greatly appreciated in the research community for its bottom-up approach and the scientific independence it offers thanks to the grant portability, low administrative burden and the funding rates available. In recent years, however, the attractiveness of ERC grants has been hampered by the surge of prices and inflation, making individual grants not sufficient enough in some areas of research. Provided the ERC receives a higher budget in FP10, **an increase of the individual grant sizes ought to be considered** to ensure the ERC remains competitive.

MSCA

- Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), the EU's flagship instrument for training and career development of researchers, have undisputably proven their added value and should remain one of the main elements of the next framework programme. Though there is an overall satisfaction with all five MSCA schemes, we believe there is a room for **simplification, especially regarding the MSCA Staff Exchanges**. The scheme remains administratively complex, especially as far as synergies with other sources of funding at the EU or national levels are concerned. We appreciate **regular updates of MSCA unit contributions** to ensure they remain relevant and competitive. This tradition should be kept for FP10. Provided the success rate is not severely affected by such an increase, also institutional contributions ought to be revised. Though they turn out to be insufficient to fully cover the costs, the most recent revision kept them unchanged.
- Additionally, the strict 1.0 FTE limit for those employed under MSC actions is difficult to comply with in countries like Czechia, where employers are legally unable to regulate their employees' parallel external contracts. Greater flexibility in these rules and alignment with the national legislation would be beneficial.

RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURES

- Research infrastructures (RIs) are vital components of the European research and innovation ecosystem as they provide the necessary support to scientists and researchers enabling them to push the boundaries of our knowledge. The potential reduction in the budget allocated for RIs poses a risk to the future of scientific progress and innovation. To ensure the long-term prosperity of research infrastructures, it is essential to **enhance synergies** and complementarities between the framework programme and national and regional funding models of RIs.
- We emphasize the importance of integrating the services and access costs of RIs in other parts of the programme to increase the effectiveness of RIs. To adequately reflect the European RIs landscape, we propose **more topics to be targeted at supporting RIs** that have already entered the implementation or operation phase.

PARTNERSHIPS AND MISSIONS

- **The Pillar II partnerships** offer an opportunity for EU added value by supporting international cooperation on innovation across professional fields. Co-funded partnerships, even though being not a sufficiently homogeneous instrument both in their preparation phase and during their operation, offer an inclusive opportunity for newcomers to Framework programmes. **Unifying their implementation** would be beneficial both for the applicants and funding providers. Co-programmed partnerships on the other hand remain in many cases rather closed clubs which are difficult to penetrate for newcomers for whom **increased openness and inclusivity** would be helpful.
- **EU missions** defined as portfolios of actions with clearly defined goals achievable within a given time horizon require a comprehensive approach and coordinated management to apply synergies with other programmes that contribute to the fulfilment of their goals. In our opinion, the potential of the missions cannot be optimally fulfilled in their current form so that their ambitious goals are achieved. It would be appropriate to **integrate the mission's research and innovation activities into clusters or similar ones** in FP10 and to connect the mission as a whole more with relevant existing programmes and initiatives. From the point of view of implementation, it would be useful and transparent for the applicants to include calls contributing to mission goals in the standard work programmes of the future framework programme, e.g. as „**mission flagged**“. The implementation process will require detailed monitoring and evaluation.

EIC

- We appreciate that the **EIC support covers all stages** of development of an innovation and ventures even into high-risk projects. It is also appreciated that the EIC brings **new approaches** to the Framework programme, such as the role of Programme managers and the portfolio approach, the investment type of funding or providing the beneficiaries with Business Acceleration Services. A **combination of open calls and top-down calls** with specific topics is positive.
- We would welcome **more clarity for applicants** in terms of rules and possibilities to participate to the EIC programmes or services (the system of direct calls, fast-tracks and plug-in schemes with different conditions makes the overall ecosystem confusing). Less overlap or clearer distinction between support provided by the EIC (BAS) and the EIT KICs is needed. In relation to the increasing importance of the support to innovators and start-ups in the EU, we strongly support an increase of the EIC budget which would allow an improvement in the success rate across all EIC calls. The system of several cut-offs along the year is something to be kept (the number of cut-offs could be increased). More funding available to projects at lower TRLs (especially at the stage of Proof of Concept) would be welcomed. Based on the feedback from applicants, we would strongly recommend a review of the evaluation process.

EIT

- The EIT as an autonomous body of the EU could operate **separately from FP10**. In case it **will continue to be funded within the FP10, then it will be necessary to link its activities more closely with the EIC** to enable synergies and prevent overlaps. On top of that, moving the EIT under DG RTD umbrella would be a step in the right direction. We appreciate establishing the EIT Community RIS Hubs lead by ECO (EIT Community Officer) in each RIS country and this practice should continue in the next programming period. More efforts should be done by EIT and the KICs in awareness raising and transparency of its operations and activities, fully aligning its participation (financial) rules with FP10.

WIDENING

- Widening instruments (currently WPSE - widening participation and spreading excellence) should be separated from the ERA part (Reforming and enhancing the European R&I system) as the current status quo is misleading and confusing the applicants. Widening instruments as such proved to be **effective and efficient and should remain to be incorporated in a separate programme and be fully bottom up**. At the same time, appropriate new Widening measures should be spread across other parts of FP10, e.g. the Hop On. We would like to see the **revision of some Widening instruments** like EEI (European Excellence Initiative) as it very similar to TWINNING and to the University Alliances under ERASMUS+ programme. Some instruments, like Excellence Hubs and ERA Chairs, should enable funding of more projects as they are popular and on high demand. Support to SMEs (pre-accelerator) and the regions (recently Widening Regional Innovation Valleys) should not be part of Widening programme. Finally, **Widening measures should support the group of relevant countries, not the regions**.

DATA ON PARTICIPATION

- The Czech NCPs encourage **improvements in the quality and accuracy of data in the eCorda system**. This mainly involves Horizon Europe Pillar 3 data for the EIT and EIC. The eCORDA system should also be expanded to include data on participation in the COFUND Joint Calls. Reliable and accurate data on projects, proposals, investigators and applicants are the basis for all national analyses and evaluations of FP participation.

Czech NCPs based in the Technology Centre Prague have been the primary national contacts for more than 30 years providing guidance, practical information, and assistance to the Czech participants in the EU Framework programmes for research and innovation.

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