

COMMENT | Horizon Europe



What went wrong?

Horizon Europe looks top-heavy with strategic priorities and light on basic research

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In June 2018, Carlos Moedas, then the EU's Commissioner for research, presented the Commission's proposal for the next Framework Programme, dubbed Horizon Europe and covering the years 2021-27. The suggested budget was €94 billion. Big players in European research policy were quick to request €100bn as the bare minimum, and €120bn as adequate in light of the challenges ahead.

Thirty months later, after painful negotiations between the Commission, member states and the European Parliament, a deal seems within reach. The budget looks set to be €84bn. So what went wrong?

The first thing to note is a paradox of the Framework programme. Normally, the effects of public spending cuts quickly become obvious. An underfunded motorway project will leave taxpayers stuck in traffic jams. Yet even with double-digit percentage cuts to the originally proposed budget—as also happened to the current Horizon 2020 programme—Horizon Europe will be implemented in full, with no activity line dropped.

Of course, there will be fewer projects funded and fewer researchers involved, but the consequences remain invisible

to the outside world. Unless the Commission publishes a brochure titled 'Great ideas we could have supported had the member states given us the means to do so', few will notice Horizon Europe's missing €10bn. This makes the Framework programme an easy target for more cuts in the future.

Recent years have seen Europe's research and innovation community become increasingly confident in its growing political relevance. The bitter truth is that member states preferred to invest elsewhere.

Allies gone AWOL

National research ministers are supposedly Horizon Europe's closest allies, producing dozens of statements every year highlighting the importance of European research. But they were virtual spectators in the budgetary negotiations—remaining silent, probably for good domestic reasons, when finance ministers seemed willing to take Horizon Europe's budget as low as €80bn.

Indeed, after this rout it was the German research minister Anja Karliczek, speaking in September on behalf of her nation's EU presidency, who asked for an end to the time-wasting and a quick adoption of the revised budget. One might call this

German pragmatism, but with friends like these, EU research funding doesn't need enemies.

The European research community blames the defeat on the Commission and member states—not the European Parliament, for once. But this might also be a moment for critical self-reflection.

These days, nobody could be against innovation, but it is another question whether it was wise to so fully embrace the Commission's reorientation of the Framework programme from research towards research and innovation.

The hope was that this would result in a much bigger budget, including more funding for innovative activities in research organisations. But this did not happen: there is not substantially more money available, and the innovation part of Horizon Europe is focused on small businesses and possible unicorns. Beyond all the warm words about linking research and innovation lies the hard fact that, within Horizon Europe, a euro spent on innovation is a euro less spent on research.

Finally, the smaller Horizon Europe's budget gets, the more its strategic priorities will come to dominate the programme's direction. When Moedas presented Horizon Europe in

2018, his priorities were what he called the three Os—open access, open innovation, open to the world—along with expanding the European Innovation Council and launching a mission-oriented policy as a new and powerful coordination mechanism for bringing research to bear on the really big issues.

Too much overhead

In 2019, the new Commission under its president Ursula von der Leyen introduced the Green Deal as an overarching strategic orientation, especially for Horizon Europe. In 2020, combating Covid-19 became the top priority, while European technological sovereignty, reducing dependence on innovation from elsewhere, has also moved to the top of the political agenda. None of these is wrong per se, but together they are a mixed bag, and might be simply too much overhead for a programme that has not even started.

Strange as it may sound, the real top priority for the years to come should be to protect enough funding for basic research and pursuing ideas outside the mainstream. These are likely to be the most valuable assets of Horizon Europe, beyond all the current and any future strategic priorities. ✪



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