

Maltese position on the 10th European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2028-2034

Introduction

The 10th European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10), which will span from 2028 to 2034, is poised to play a crucial role in shaping the future of European research and innovation (R&I). As we transition from Horizon Europe, it is imperative that FP10 addresses the evolving societal challenges and seizes opportunities to reinforce Europe's position as a global leader in R&I.

R&I are pivotal for Malta's ability to effectively undertake the green and digital transitions. In the face of rapidly changing geopolitical, economic, and environmental landscapes, a renewed EU Framework Programme for R&I must help to leverage sustainable and technologically advanced solutions to enhance the competitiveness and resilience of all countries, including those with smaller economies like Malta.

While Malta's performance in Horizon Europe has seen improvement compared to its predecessor, the country's overall participation rate remains modest, particularly in key instruments such as the European Research Council (ERC), the European Innovation Council (EIC) and the Pillar II clusters.

Malta, as the EU's smallest Member State, brings a unique viewpoint to the discussion on FP10. Our experience underscores the importance of Widening measures and ensuring that each individual Member State can contribute to and benefit from European R&I initiatives. By addressing the specific needs and challenges of smaller and emerging innovators, FP10 can create a more balanced and effective R&I ecosystem across the Union.

Vision for FP10

FP10 should build on the successes of previous Framework Programmes while addressing their limitations. It must focus on strengthening basic research, supporting burgeoning innovations, fostering synergies with other programmes and ensuring that the benefits of R&I are widely and fairly distributed.

This vision is guided by the key political guidelines for R&I outlined for the next European Commission (2024-2029), the priorities of the EU Commissioner-designate for Start-Ups, Research, and Innovation, as well as insights from the Draghi and Letta reports on the Union's competitiveness. Malta envisions an FP10 that is inclusive, accessible, open, and adaptable, capable of responding to both current and future challenges.

This paper presents a preliminary Maltese perspective on FP10, ahead of the official launch of negotiations at the European level and without prejudice to Malta's position/s during these negotiations.

Key Messages

- 1. Widening measures under Framework Programme 10 should be expanded and receive a substantial expansion of funding allocation from the general FP budget.**

The new Framework Programme must urgently address the lack of participation from the smaller EU Member States. More efforts are needed across the programme, compared to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme, to further interconnect innovation ecosystems and level the research and innovation playfield across the EU. FP10 should significantly expand and embed a larger financial allocation for Widening measures to close the innovation gap, harness the potential of all innovation ecosystems actors and develop and attract talents. Specific grant schemes for Widening countries should be introduced, ensuring that researchers can participate fully and benefit from ERC and EIC instruments. It is crucial that Widening instruments continue to be funded under FP10.

Although other funding streams, such as EU Structural Funds, would not provide the right framework for organic growth and development of countries with less mature R&I ecosystems, they could complement the funding provided by the Framework Programme. Initiatives like the

Seal of Excellence should be further promoted and leveraged to ensure that excellent proposals from Widening Member States receive the necessary support.

- 2. The application process for FP10 calls and its structure should be simplified, clearer, more transparent, and less administratively burdensome.**

A fifth of the Maltese researchers indicated in a national Horizon Europe survey conducted in June 2024 that the complexity, length and lack of clarity of the current application process are significant barriers to participation. Furthermore, the calls' structure, focus and instructions were perceived as broad and ambiguous. The upcoming FP10 should strive to address these issues to allow for greater participation, understanding and equal opportunities for all researchers, ensuring the best ideas can come forward, irrespective of origin.

- 3. The funding allocated to collaborative calls under Pillar II should be retained and expanded to effectively address complex societal challenges that require a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach.**

To maximise the impact of FP10, it is essential to retain and increase the share of funding assigned to the collaborative calls under Pillar II within the overall budget of the EU's research programme. These calls are instrumental in fostering cooperation among diverse consortia composed of R&I stakeholders across multiple countries, enabling them to tackle complex issues collectively. Expanding this funding will enhance the participation of smaller Member States like Malta, supporting them to contribute meaningfully to collaborative projects and benefit from the exchange of expertise, knowledge and resources.

With specific reference to Partnerships, the process of forming partnerships should be streamlined to ensure alignment with the specific requirements of various R&I stakeholders, while also enhancing clarity for all participants. Additionally, new partnerships should only be established where clear gaps exist that cannot be adequately addressed by Pillar II's collaborative regular Horizon Europe calls. This targeted approach will ensure that European partnerships are both effective and necessary, avoiding redundancy and maximising the impact of collaborative efforts.

- 4. The overall number of FP calls should be reduced by the elimination of calls with similar objectives. A balanced approach is required, with support given to projects with Lower Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs).**

A significant number of excellent Horizon Europe applications with very high evaluation scores do not receive funding due to oversubscription and lack of appropriate financial allocations to the calls. To address this, FP10 should focus on reducing the number of calls and increasing the number of funded projects per call, thereby consolidating and maximising budgets to enhance impact and efficiency of the programme. FP10 should also ensure support mechanisms for projects with lower TRL levels. A balanced approach is essential to ensuring that the full spectrum of R&I activities is supported, including fundamental research, applied research, experimental development, and innovation, as well as top-down and bottom-up projects.

- 5. Successful FP instruments, like the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA), should be strengthened and receive increased budgetary support.**

Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) is one of the EU's R&I Framework Programme's flagship instruments, allowing thousands of researchers to expand their professional connections and international collaboration opportunities, hone new skills, and develop their careers. Despite its success, the current financial allocation to the MSCA is not sufficient to fund all excellent applicants. To address this gap, increased budgetary support and improved

mobility assistance and enhanced training opportunities are needed. Furthermore, to boost participation from researchers from Widening countries, the development of special and targeted instruments such as ERA Fellowships, should be prioritised through larger budgetary allocations. Augmenting the funding for ERA Fellowships under Widening measures, along with establishing tailored and complimentary instruments, would significantly increase opportunities for researchers from countries with lower R&I intensity levels.

6. The ERC and EIC need to be made more accessible to the researchers from Widening Member States.

The ERC and EIC instruments are less accessible to Widening applicants. Current funding distribution is highly skewed towards more advanced Member States and a revision is necessary to promote inclusivity and excellence across all countries. Specific grant schemes for Widening countries should be introduced, ensuring that these researchers can participate fully and benefit from these prestigious instruments.

7. Missions require reconsideration to ensure impact, relevance, long-term value, and effectiveness.

The Framework Programme's novel R&I Missions in their present form experience difficulties with fulfilling their targeted objectives. Lack of accessibility, the question of impact and relevance, limited flexibility to adapt to diverse R&I contexts, excessive number of objectives and priorities, and ineffective governance structures are some of the intrinsic issues the Missions continue to face. The continuation of Missions in FP10 should be contingent on demonstrating their long-term value to R&I stakeholders from across the EU. Future Missions need to diversify funding sources beyond the Framework Programme and ensure further synergies with other EU instruments. If this is not possible, the EU Missions should be considered for shifting from FP10 to the Multiannual Financial Framework, with funding from FP10 provided only for those activities explicitly focused on research.

8. Expanding and leveraging international partnerships and collaborations.

FP10 should continue to capitalise on Horizon Europe's broad association policy. Research and innovation international collaborations and joint efforts not only strengthen European competitiveness, but also enhance knowledge valorisation, and bring distinctive outlooks and valuable experiences of partner countries into the Framework Programme. While strategic partnerships with like-minded countries are important, access to the Programme should also be extended to countries with strong R&I capacities. Restrictions should be applied only in exceptional circumstances, ensuring that the Programme remains open. The EU's safety, security and strategic autonomy needs to be balanced with an appropriate and pragmatic level of openness.