FP10 must deliver for Europe: The Guild urges Members of the European Parliament to back the Rapporteurs' compromise

On 10 November, the European Parliament's ITRE committee will vote on the compromise amendments to the regulation and specific programme for the next Horizon Europe framework programme (FP10). We urge the Parliamentarians to give the Rapporteurs the strongest possible majority, enabling them to begin negotiations promptly with the Commission and Council on a framework programme that is geared towards research excellence and remains open to the world.

Over the past months, the Rapporteurs, Christian Ehler and René Repasi, together with their Shadow Rapporteurs, have crafted a strong compromise. It reinforces what the next Horizon Europe framework programme (FP10) critically needs to boost Europe's scientific leadership and deliver a wide range of the EU's priorities, from industrial competitiveness to food sovereignty, climate and societal resilience, and social cohesion. We welcome the amendments that ensure FP10 focuses on research excellence, remains open to the world in the current geopolitical context, and works independently of the European Competitiveness Fund but with appropriate connections to enable a knowledge-based model of competitiveness for Europe.

We commend the Rapporteurs and the Shadow Rapporteurs for listening to research organisations and critically discussing our proposals. The proposed compromise is largely backed by recommendations that The Guild formulated individually or jointly over the last year, including our joint proposals for amendments to the European Commission's proposal for FP10 [1], our call for a budget of at least €200 billion, our proposal for Scale-Up Research Actions (SUPRA), our joint idea with LERU to create "Challenge Managers" to bridge FP10 and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), our recommendation for research security and dual-use research, and our commitment to strengthening scientific collaboration with low- and middle-income countries, especially in Africa.

We urge the ITRE committee and the European Parliament to back the compromise with a large majority. The Commission, the Council and the Parliament must urgently negotiate to ensure a timely launch of the next Horizon Europe programme.

An ambitious budget

The Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs show a clear understanding that Europe must urgently put research and innovation (R&I) at the heart of its economy. This is essential not only to its long-term

[1] Together with CESAER, the Coimbra Group, EUA, EU-LIFE, LERU and YERUN, and with the support of ALLEA, the Aurora Universities Network, ECIU, ISE, MCAA, UNICA and the Young Academy of Europe. Link to the full set of proposed amendments.

industrial competitiveness, but also to its prosperity, security and resilience. Therefore, we strongly welcome that the compromise confirms the call for a €200 billion budget (in current prices), in line with Mario Draghi's recommendations. We also support the amendments to better ring-fence the total budget and the budgets of the individual instruments, through the obligation to reuse financial decommitments—preferably for the same objective—and a cap on transfers between pillars.

Emphasis on research excellence

We strongly welcome the strengthening of research excellence in the compromise amendments. The Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs have rightfully included the explicit objectives to "develop, promote and advance scientific and technological excellence" and to "strengthen excellent basic and frontier research" in their text. These clear references to excellence are notably absent from the Commission's proposal. More importantly, the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs translate these objectives into concrete framework conditions by retaining excellence as an award criterion, emphasising that it must also apply to European Partnerships calls for proposals, and reinstating evaluation by independent external experts.

The compromise also reinforces the instruments that have proven effective in advancing research excellence and attracting top researchers to Europe: the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). We strongly welcome the transparency proposed for their budgets and the commitment to protecting their curiosity-driven nature against any directionality. It is also crucial that the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs reinstate provisions safeguarding the autonomy of the ERC Scientific Council and ensuring its members—especially the ERC President—have the means and resources to fulfil their missions in the interests of the ERC and, more broadly, frontier research in Europe.

We also commend the Members of the European Parliament for their efforts to achieve a better balance between low- and high-TRL research within Pillar II. The proposed research actions and the piloted Sectoral Plan could create opportunities to support collaborative, bottom-up R&I projects, which are absent in the Commission's proposal.

Impactful and appropriate connections to the European Competitiveness Fund

Rightfully recognising that the European Commission's proposed links between FP10 and the ECF may affect Europe's capacity to develop long-lasting knowledge-based competitiveness, the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs offer a more balanced and sensible approach. The amendments to remove references to the ECF's economic security rules and redesign the priority-setting and programming of Pillar II are critical steps. We strongly welcome the compromise's position that the FP10 Programme Committee must be responsible for Pillar II work programmes to ensure that calls for collaborative, challenge-oriented projects are scientifically relevant and focus on innovative solutions rather than being directed by the interests and short-term priorities of industry and policy leaders.

We are pleased that the Rapporteurs maintained their initial idea of expert-led programming. This approach is crucial to keep FP10 and its Pillar II call topics at the knowledge frontier and enable them to respond nimbly to new scientific and technological developments. We believe the compromise

respects the Commission's and Member States' role in setting priorities while devolving the definition of call topics to those with demonstrated expertise and, therefore, the ability to identify promising new research avenues. We also welcome the proposal to appoint Lead Experts to consult the stakeholder community, propose call topics, and, equally importantly, strengthen links between the two programmes by facilitating the uptake and exploitation of FP10 project outcomes through the ECF support schemes.

The proposal of the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs could further strengthen connections between FP10 Pillar II and the ECF through mirrored policy windows. While retaining the FP10 Programme Committee's role in programming calls for collaborative R&I, their compromise interestingly mirrors the ECF's policy windows in FP10. They also propose restructuring Pillar II's Society Component into policy windows focused on societal challenges in the same areas as the ECF. We also welcome a more strategic approach to framing the critical need for research led by social sciences, arts and humanities, and ensuring it not only addresses key societal challenges of the coming years, but is also fully integrated into the wider ambitions of FP10.

Open to the world

Another set of critical amendments provides a strong legal basis for strengthening international R&I collaboration and adapting it to the new global order. We clearly support the explicit provision that any legal entity, regardless of its location, can participate in FP10 projects in line with the ambition to build a "trusted and equitable partnership" and the European Framework for Science Diplomacy. The value and strength of international cooperation will also be reinforced with the relevant and welcome addition of the programme objective to cooperate with universities and other organisations in low- and middle-income countries.

The Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs propose better-balanced research security measures. This is critical to keep Horizon Europe open to the world. We welcome the amendments that remove references to the ECF's European preference rules, which focus on economic security, are ill-suited to R&I, and can therefore disproportionately affect these activities. We agree it could be more appropriate to allow "duly justified and exceptional" restrictions on actions involving critical knowledge and technologies when they threaten the EU's defence, security and economic interests. The introduction of provisions requesting consideration of the impact of not collaborating when assessing risks in international collaboration is also an extremely positive development.

The Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs also rightfully recognised that the European Commission's proposal to remove the provision restricting funding eligibility to civilian-only projects creates many uncertainties and risks shifting parts of the FP10 budget towards defence projects. We strongly support their position that FP10 must focus exclusively on civilian research, without excluding projects that, while being civilian, could have outcomes relevant for the defence sector. This keeps FP10 focused on research excellence while encouraging the use of other EU programmes to finance the further development of these defence applications and support the goal of strengthening Europe's security.

We warmly welcome the amendments that will make association more attractive to third countries and enable closer collaboration with them. The creation of a dedicated category of associated countries for Switzerland and the United Kingdom is an important and long-awaited step towards recognising

and leveraging the European Union's already close ties with the R&I systems of these two countries. It is also important that the provisions make clear to associated countries what association entails. The proposed creation of a “trusted partner” status, which would protect such labelled associated countries from exclusion from projects involving critical technologies unless the European Commission demonstrates that they should no longer be regarded as “trusted partners”, would be a clear improvement.

Simplification for researchers’ benefit

The Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs rightfully orient the simplification efforts so that they primarily benefit researchers—whether applicants or project participants—and the research organisations that employ them. We welcome the balanced provisions on funding forms, recognising that lump-sum funding can effectively reduce administrative burdens, but is not the only option. As the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs stated, it is critical that funding be “provided in a manner that is most suitable for the relevant action and beneficiary involved”.

For the sake of simplification, we consider it a very positive development to require that a model grant agreement be provided when the corresponding calls for proposals are published. Project holders should also have early access to European Commission officials for help preparing the grant agreement and handling other administrative aspects of their projects. In addition, the Rapporteurs and Shadow Rapporteurs introduced the interesting and very relevant idea that project holders should be able to request revisions to their grant agreements when exceptional circumstances require them to adapt their projects to scientific and technological developments. This flexibility must also be considered a form of simplification.