

STUDY

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# Exploring synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy



Policy Department for Transformation, Innovation and Health  
Directorate-General for Economy, Transformation and Industry (DG ECTI)

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PE 754.234 - February 2025



EN



# Exploring synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the evolution and the current status of the implementation of synergies between Horizon Europe and the Cohesion Policy funds for research and innovation activities. It provides insights into the main barriers and drivers for the uptake of these synergies, along with possible pathways forward to achieve greater innovation outcomes.

This document was provided by the Policy Department for Transformation, Innovation and Health (DG ECTI) at the request of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).

This document was requested by the European Parliament's committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).

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Manuscript completed: January 2025

Date of publication: February 2025

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This document is available on the internet at:

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For citation purposes, the publication should be referenced as: Segal L. J., Griepink M., Boschetti A., Marchioni M., Vilajosana Guillén X., Riera Duran M., and Lupiáñez-Villanueva F., 2025, *Exploring synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy*, Publication for the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE), Policy Department for Transformation, Innovation and Health, European Parliament, Luxembourg.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CCDRC</b>	Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Centro
<b>CF</b>	Cohesion Fund
<b>CoP</b>	Community of Practice
<b>CORDIS</b>	Community Research and Development Information Service
<b>CP</b>	Cohesion Policy
<b>CPR</b>	Common Provisions Regulation
<b>DG REGIO</b>	European Commission Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy
<b>DG RTD</b>	European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation
<b>DUT</b>	Driving Urban Transitions
<b>ECA</b>	European Court of Auditors
<b>EDIHs</b>	European Digital Innovation Hubs
<b>EIC</b>	European Innovation Council
<b>EIE</b>	European Innovation Ecosystems
<b>EIS</b>	European Innovation Scoreboard
<b>EIT</b>	European Institute of Innovation & Technology
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>ERA</b>	European Research Area
<b>ERC</b>	European Research Council
<b>ERDF</b>	European Regional Development Fund
<b>ESF+</b>	European Social Fund Plus
<b>ESIF</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FP(s)</b>	Framework programme(s)

<b>GBER</b>	General Block Exemption Regulation
<b>GDP</b>	Gross domestic product
<b>H2020</b>	Horizon 2020
<b>HE</b>	Horizon Europe
<b>HE Regulation</b>	Horizon Europe Regulation
<b>I3</b>	Interregional Innovation Investments
<b>ITRE</b>	European Parliament Committee on Industry, Research and Energy
<b>JRC</b>	Joint Research Centre
<b>JTF</b>	Just Transition Fund
<b>JU</b>	Joint undertakings
<b>KIC</b>	Knowledge and Innovation Communities
<b>MA/MAs</b>	Managing authority/authorities
<b>MFF</b>	Multiannual financing framework
<b>MS(s)</b>	Member State(s)
<b>MSCA</b>	Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions
<b>NCP(s)</b>	National contact point(s)
<b>NEIA</b>	New European Innovation Agenda
<b>R&amp;I</b>	Research and innovation
<b>REA</b>	European Research Executive Agency
<b>REGI</b>	European Parliament Committee on Regional Development
<b>RIMA</b>	Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network
<b>RIVs</b>	Regional Innovation Valleys
<b>RRF</b>	Recovery and Resilience Facility
<b>S3</b>	Smart specialisation strategies

<b>SIA</b>	Strategic Innovation Agenda
<b>SMEs</b>	Small and medium-sized enterprises
<b>SoE</b>	Seal of Excellence
<b>STEP</b>	Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform
<b>TFEU</b>	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
<b>THCS</b>	Transforming Health and Care Systems

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of the study conducted on exploring the synergies between the Horizon Europe research and innovation funding programme (**HE**) and the funds and programmes underpinning the European Union's (**EU**) Cohesion Policy (**CP**)<sup>1</sup>, as requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (**ITRE**).

### Background

HE and CP are the two main sources of funding supporting research and innovation (**R&I**) in the EU. The **synergies** between the funding programmes of these two types of EU instruments, which **result from specific operational mechanisms that allow for identifying, pooling and exploiting funding complementarities between them**, have the potential to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of R&I funding, ultimately achieving greater impact in terms of innovation outcomes.

In the 2014-2020 programming period, the relevant legal frameworks explicitly required to explore and establish synergies between the HE and CP funds for the first time. Although some progress in synergies implementation was noted, the European Court of Auditors' Special Report 2022/23 on *Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds* found that these **were not yet used to their full potential**.

In view of the grand societal challenges faced by the EU and a growing consensus on the key role of innovation, the budget for R&I was significantly increased for the current 2021-2027 programming period and the corresponding regulations were revised. As a result, **the updated legal framework placed even more focus on synergies between HE and CP instruments and introduced new mechanisms to facilitate their uptake**. However, the impact of the changes has not been comprehensively assessed so far, and key uncertainties remain about the driving factors and barriers to the implementation of such synergies, and on their role in regions with differing R&I capacities.

### Aim

In this context, this study aimed to **explore the evolution of synergy mechanisms and the degree of their implementation to date, as well as the persistent barriers and key accelerators, considering the existing regional disparities in R&I performance and funding concentration across the EU**. Building on the achievements and pitfalls of the operationalisation of synergies in the 2014-2020 programming period and assessing both the framework updates and the implementation status of those pursued for the 2021-2027 period, this research sought to provide a clearer understanding of the progress made. Furthermore, the most relevant instrumental drivers and obstacles to the creation of synergies were identified, while useful lessons learnt and specific forward-looking directions were extracted to inform the design of upcoming policy measures on this topic.

To obtain these insights, this study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining extensive desk research and a comprehensive policy review alongside interviews conducted with key stakeholders. Particularly, access to primary sources enabled the research to partly overcome the challenge posed by the persistent lack of quantitative monitoring data on synergy mechanisms, which was found to be a significant barrier both for the current study and, more broadly, for the effective unfolding of synergies.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, the HE and CP (or HE and CP funding programmes, funds or instruments) terms are broadly used to refer to both the respective EU funds –Horizon Europe's direct management funds and Cohesion Policy's shared management funds– as well as to their corresponding programmes, including all relevant programmatic and implementation instruments as defined in the applicable legislation.

## Key Findings

Despite some noticeable progress as compared to the end of the 2014–2020 programming period and the previous framework programme for R&I, to date, **the uptake of synergies between the HE and CP funds remains slow in the current period 2021-2027, with significant persisting strategic and operational gaps**. While certain synergy mechanisms are increasingly being deployed, particularly in widening countries, significant barriers remain, especially for stakeholders with fewer resources.

Furthermore, **the degree of implementation of different types of synergy varies**, with some mechanisms showing more progress than others:

- **Seal of Excellence (SoE):** SoE-supporting schemes are expanding at national and regional levels while implementation is growing due to improved state aid rules and data availability. However, challenges remain with funding, strategic alignment, and administrative duplication;
- **Transfers from ERDF to HE:** Successfully implemented in the cases of Malta and Lithuania, these transfers offer practical solutions for authorities and researchers with relatively less capacity by reducing administrative burden, as well as long-term benefits thanks to the integration of institutions into the R&I environment. Challenges include complex and lengthy coordination processes and lack of experience;
- **Cumulative funding:** This mechanism aims to allow the pooling of resources from different sources, yet its uptake still faces challenges due to distinct eligibility rules and lack of data on usage and impact. Recent initiatives like the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (**STEP**) aim to enhance their adoption;
- **European partnerships:** Being implemented in at least five Member States (**MSs**), they are however found to be hindered by differing rules, timing misalignments, and documentation requirements;
- **Combined funding (Teaming):** Expanding with new initiatives like the Regional Innovation Valleys (**RIVs**), combined funding faces barriers like timing issues, funding delays, and regulatory misalignment; and
- **Upstream and downstream synergies:** Upstream synergies are active in many MSs, but downstream synergies are notably underutilised. Recent initiatives like the Pathway to Synergies HE call aim to address this gap.

As is evident, **a number of key drivers and barriers influence the implementation of synergies between HE and CP funds**. One of the main instrumental factors is the alignment of objectives and governance models between these two types of EU funding. In practical terms, differing policy and programme objectives and timing cycles between them create challenges in aligning strategic priorities with funding opportunities in advance, as required by the relevant regulations. **Although advancements have been achieved in regulatory alignment and simplification as compared to the 2014–2020 programming period, more legislative adjustments and coordination between implementing institutions at different levels are essential to maximise the implementation of synergies and their impact.**

Another key factor is the collaboration between EU, national, and regional authorities, all of which retain important competences in the synergistic processes. These collaboration spaces are, however, deemed to be still in their early stages, highly Commission-dependent, and limited to certain stakeholders. Moreover, the frequent involvement of various authorities from different governance levels within the same MS leads to increased complexity and inefficiencies due to overlapping roles and differing expertise and administrative capacities.

The visibility of synergy opportunities has improved, but the capacity to successfully identify available opportunities remains limited for many stakeholders, while the lack of interoperability between different databases remains a barrier to implementing and monitoring them. Additionally, several interviewees noted the complication posed by the current “siloed approach”—the relatively independent proliferation of multiple, potentially complementary and sometimes overlapping initiatives, each with their own rules and conditions.

To overcome the identified barriers and enhance the implementation of synergy mechanisms, policymakers, authorities, and researchers could collaboratively maximise synergies and improve innovation outcomes through the following actionable steps:

- **Pursue further regulatory simplification and harmonisation across funding programmes** to minimise administrative burdens and foster the efficient uptake of R&I funding instruments and their potential synergies;
- **Develop a unified strategic framework involving stakeholders from all relevant fields of competence at the EU, national and regional levels** to better align policy and programme objectives and procedures;
- **Continue enhancing formal mechanisms for coordination and cooperation among authorities at all governance levels**, such as the RIMA network, to reduce overlaps and foster synergies;
- **Implement targeted capacity-building initiatives and provide comprehensive guidance** to increase awareness and technical ability to leverage opportunities for synergies; and
- **Enhance data collection and dissemination practices** to generate performance and impact indicators for synergies outcomes.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Scope and objectives

The European Union (EU) has long recognised the critical role of research and innovation (R&I) in driving economic growth, enhancing competitiveness, and addressing societal challenges. As the EU moves forward with its twin digital and green transitions while facing disrupting challenges such as advanced technologies development, health crises and geopolitical instability, the prioritisation of Europe's science and technology-based innovation is increasingly seen as a crucial foundation for the EU's capacity to thrive in its human-centred, sustainable, and resilient future (Draghi, 2024; European Commission, 2024b; Letta, 2024). In such context, R&I became a cornerstone of the EU's political priorities for the coming years, as stated by the President of both the 2019-2024 and the 2024-2029 Commissions Ursula von der Leyen, who recently called to place R&I "at the heart" of the EU's future-oriented economy, and announced plans to further increase R&I spending to strengthen the EU's competitiveness and relative standing in the global scene (European Commission & Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, 2020; Von der Leyen, 2024).

The commitment to this vision at the EU level is reflected in the substantial financial allocations to excellence-based R&I initiatives across multiple programming periods, with the current 9<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP) - Horizon Europe (HE) - boasting an unprecedented budget of EUR 95.5 billion for 2021-2027, a significant increase compared to its predecessor, Horizon 2020 (H2020), which had a budget of EUR 77 billion in the 2014-2020 multiannual financial framework (MFF). In addition, such a budget has been further complemented by contributions from other programmes providing significant funding for R&I activities despite not being purely research-oriented, namely the EU4Health, the Programme for Environment and Climate Action – LIFE, Interreg and the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which together amount to more than EUR 50 billion extra in the current 2021-2027 MFF (Mileusnic, 2024).

Concurrent with this focus on and support of R&I excellence, the EU has maintained its dedication to regional development and cohesion through its Cohesion Policy (CP). For the 2021-2027 period, the EU allocated EUR 392 billion to CP funds, representing about a third of the total EU budget. Roughly 58% of such CP funds correspond to the European Regional and Development Fund (ERDF), which is simultaneously the main CP instrument supporting R&I activities (European Commission, 2024h). Acknowledging the large persisting differences between regions, this substantial investment underscores the EU's simultaneous objectives of reducing disparities and fostering R&I development across the EU, in line with Articles 174 and 179 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

The intersection of these two major policy areas –strengthening R&I and EU cohesion–, which have both common and different objectives, presents both challenges and opportunities. In order to enhance the strategic alignment, efficiency and impact of R&I funding to address societal challenges while reducing regional disparities, the EU has for some time now emphasised **the importance of creating synergies between the FPs and the CP instruments**<sup>2</sup>.

Such **synergies**, in the context of the intersection of the HE and CP funding programmes, are understood in this study as **the result of specific operational mechanisms that allow for identifying, pooling and exploiting funding complementarities between such programmes, thereby increasing**

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<sup>2</sup> [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/2122 of 26 November 2021](#) on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe (2021), [Prague Declaration on Synergies in the Research and Innovation Funding in Europe](#) (2022).

**the effectiveness and efficiency of both and ultimately achieving greater impact in terms of innovation outcomes**<sup>3</sup>. While synergies can therefore take different operational forms, they help overall to bring R&I and cohesion policy goals closer together<sup>4</sup>.

Building on the experiences and lessons learnt from the previous funding cycles and FPs, in the current MFF EU policymakers have undertaken policy and regulatory adjustments to strengthen the existing and introduce new operational mechanisms to enhance such synergies. However, challenges and barriers in their practical implementation seem to persist. In such context, this study aims to explore the evolution of synergy mechanisms and the degree of their implementation to date, as well as the persistent barriers and identified accelerators, taking into account the existing regional disparities in R&I performance and funding concentration across the EU. By analysing the achievements and pitfalls of the operationalisation of synergies in the 2014-2020 programming period and the status of those pursued for the 2021-2027 period, this research seeks to provide a clearer understanding of the progress made, identify key success factors and obstacles, and derive lessons in view of the design of future policy measures in this regard.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses, among others, the following research questions:

- How have synergies between HE and CP evolved to their current status, and what changes have been introduced to improve their implementation?;
- What are the key drivers and barriers of synergies between HE and CP instruments?; and
- What lessons can be drawn to improve synergies between HE and CP, while continuing to address regional inequalities?

This report is structured as follows: After a summary of the methodology used for the research activities conducted (Section 1.2), Section 2 provides an overview of the main features of HE and CP in relation to synergy mechanisms, and depicts their potential to address regional disparities and innovation gaps. Section 3 then zooms into both the evolution and the current state of the implementation of synergies. Section 4 presents the drivers and barriers to the uptake of synergies. Section 5 concludes with the lessons learnt and proposes future directions to improve the implementation of synergies and achieve greater innovation outcomes while continuing to address regional inequalities.

## 1.2. Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was employed for this study, combining desk research and policy review with interviews conducted in November 2024. This comprehensive methodology ensured a robust foundation for understanding both the policy context and the challenges for the practical implementation of synergy mechanisms.

The desk research drew on a variety of sources, including legal and policy texts, programme-specific data, academic literature, auditing reports, and previous policy evaluations and studies. Key datasets and resources such as CORDIS, Kohesio, the Horizon Dashboard, and the European Innovation Scoreboard (**EIS**) served as primary sources of information.

These were complemented by strategic documents like the Smart Specialisation Strategies (**S3**), the Operational Programmes, and the HE Work Programmes.

Next to the desk research, this study greatly benefited from the willingness and valuable contributions of more than ten interviewees, whose identities have been kept confidential to protect the privacy of

<sup>3</sup> Authors' own working definition based on [Commission Notice - Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes 2022/C 421/03 of 4 November 2022](#) (hereinafter "*Commission Notice on Synergies*") and European Court of Auditors, 2022b, para. 03.

<sup>4</sup> *Commission Notice on Synergies*.

their input and ensure an unbiased, objective data-gathering process. Stakeholders interviewed included representatives of the European Commission, the Joint Research Centre (**JRC**), the European Court of Auditors (**ECA**), managing authorities (**MAs**) of selected Member States (**MSs**) and European regions, networks of R&I beneficiaries, and individual beneficiaries. While many of the findings drawn in this report are strongly informed by the insights provided by the interviewees, they are solely attributable to the authors.

The interviews were conducted under a semi-structured approach, i.e., following customised guidance questionnaires of which an example is provided in Annex 3 Semi-structured interview guide example. Each interview was tailored to the stakeholder's role and expertise, yet common topics discussed across all interviews included the evolution and implementation of synergy mechanisms, the drivers and barriers for synergies, the intra-European national and regional disparities in R&I access and performance, practical experiences with the HE framework and projects management, and potential areas for future improvements.

Combining such primary and secondary data collection techniques, we were able to explore the operational characteristics, challenges, and achievements of the synergy-making framework. To complement and better illustrate the findings, we relied on a number of demonstrative cases showcasing experiences in synergy implementation and supporting initiatives. These cases were selected based on the information gathered through the desk research and the interviews.

As part of the research process, we attempted to provide an updated version of the analysis performed by the ECA to assess synergies in the 2014-2020 programming period. We intended to reproduce the text-mining exercises conducted in the ECA Special Report 2022/23 on *Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds – Not yet used to full potential* (2022b) to evaluate the planned and implemented synergies in the 2021–2027 period. Although we were successful in obtaining full access to the methodology used in that audit thanks to the ECA's helpful collaboration, we were ultimately unable to access the key data necessary to complete the exercise –namely the HE Grant Agreements– which remain restricted to public authorities or accessible only through specific requests due to reasons of confidentiality, intellectual property concerns, or administrative limitations.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Horizon Europe, Cohesion Policy and synergies overview

FPs and CP funding programmes share the overarching objective of fostering sustainable growth, competitiveness and innovation across the EU. However, they differ significantly in their scope, implementation mechanisms, and main target beneficiaries. FPs are centrally managed by the Commission and focused on enhancing excellence in and strengthening R&I, promoting international collaboration and addressing grand societal challenges as identified by the Commission in its political priorities and specific strategic plans<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, CP funds, mostly managed under shared governance with Member States (**MSs**) and regions, prioritise place-based policies, which aim to face specific needs and seek to reduce regional disparities by strengthening local capacities.

The HE programme is the 9<sup>th</sup> R&I FP. Set to run from 2021 to 2027, its general objectives and structure were established by the Horizon Europe Regulation (**HE Regulation**)<sup>6</sup>, and its detailed rules for implementation defined through the adoption of the corresponding Specific Programme<sup>7</sup>. Next to this legislation, the Commission published a complementary Implementation Strategy, along with several other supporting documents and activities to provide further guidance on the practical aspects of the programme's unfolding from the outset (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

For its part, the CP for the 2021-2027 MFF is implemented through four different shared management funds: the above-mentioned ERDF, the European Social Fund Plus (**ESF+**), the Cohesion Fund (**CF**) and the Just Transition Fund (**JTF**). Importantly, out of these, the ERDF is both the biggest (accounting for about 59% of the CP total budget) and the main fund supporting R&I activities (with roughly EUR 56 billion allocated for 2021-2027) (European Commission, 2024h). All CP funds are governed by a single "rulebook", the Common Provisions Regulation (**CPR**)<sup>8</sup>, although the specific objectives and scope of support of each of them are provided in complementary legislation<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Von der Leyen (2024), [Horizon Europe strategic plan 2021-2024](#) (2021) and [Horizon Europe strategic plan 2025-2027](#) (2024).

<sup>6</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/695 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021](#) establishing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

<sup>7</sup> [Council Decision \(EU\) 2021/764 of 10 May 2021](#) establishing the Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Further complementary instruments include, inter alia, [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2085 of 19 November 2021](#) establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe; [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/819 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021](#) on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology.

<sup>8</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021](#) laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy.

<sup>9</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021](#) on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund, [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021](#) establishing the European Social Fund Plus, [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1056 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021](#) establishing the Just Transition Fund.

Table 1: Key differences between objectives and governance arrangements of HE and CP funds

Horizon Europe	Funds implementing Cohesion Policy
<b>Objectives</b>	
To <b>enable and improve scientific excellence</b> .	To strengthen economic, social and territorial cohesion across the EU by <b>reducing disparities</b> between MSs and regions.
<b>Management</b>	
Managed <b>directly and centrally</b> by the Commission, specifically by the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation ( <b>DG RTD</b> ) through calls for projects at <b>EU level</b> .	Under <b>shared management</b> by the Commission, specifically by the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy ( <b>DG REGIO</b> ) and the <b>national/regional managing authorities</b> , through calls for projects and other funding schemes at <b>national/regional level</b> . Mostly administered at the regional level.
<b>Implementation</b>	
Implemented via <b>multi-annual work programmes</b> , prepared by the Commission. More than 20 different implementing bodies are involved, including European Executive Agencies.	Implemented via, Operational Programmes prepared by national/regional MAs and approved by the Commission.
<b>Priority setting</b>	
The funds are to be spent according to the programme's <b>main priority areas</b> , developed by the Commission, which are translated into five concrete missions.	The funds for R&I are to be spent according to <b>Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3)</b> <sup>10</sup> , developed by the MSs or regions.
<b>Allocation of funds</b>	
Distributed on a <b>competitive basis</b> , not place-based and project oriented (i.e. based on excellence criteria through pan-European schemes).	Allocated using <b>geographical criteria</b> (i.e. regional GDP per capita) to distribute the funds to where support is most needed, usually in a non-competitive manner.
<b>Project databases</b>	
CORDIS (incl. Horizon Dashboard)	KOHESIO platform

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In spite of their differences, both HE and CP relevant regulations contain specific provisions aimed at promoting synergies between their respective funding mechanisms. As stated in the introduction, **synergies** in the context of this study are understood as the result of those specific operational mechanisms that facilitate funding complementarities between the two funding sources, thus enabling a more efficient and effective use of resources to reach a common goal: achieving greater innovation outcomes (Box 1).

<sup>10</sup> S3 enable regions to identify their unique strengths and focus investments in specific R&I areas, thereby linking CP funding to HE's excellence-driven objectives. These were introduced as mainstream practice in 2014 to reinforce long-term planning and enhance more result-oriented approaches. Support from ERDF should be based on S3, which "set priorities at national or regional level, or both, to increase their competitive advantage by developing and matching research and innovation strengths with business needs and necessary skills through an entrepreneurial discovery process" (Regulation (EU) 2021/1058, Recital 14, see above footnote 9).

The definition provided below draws on the strategic relevance of synergies in enabling such outcomes, reflecting the interlinked objectives of HE and CP, while aligning with the EU's key priority of enhancing competitiveness. Leveraging synergies, in this view, would allow the EU to elevate the overall quality and impact of R&I investments, driving innovation and fostering economic development across its regions.

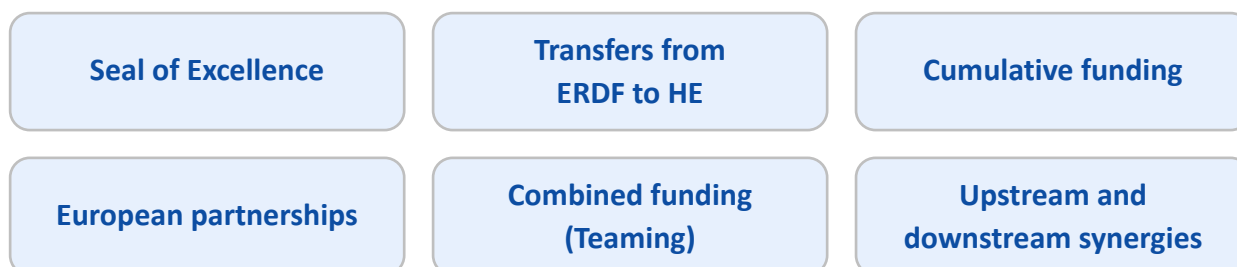
#### Box 1: Synergies - A working definition

Synergies are defined as the result of specific operational mechanisms that allow for identifying, pooling and exploiting funding complementarities between HE and CP funding programmes, thereby increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of both and ultimately achieving greater impact in terms of innovation outcomes.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the *Commission Notice on Synergies* and ECA (2022b).

Synergies between HE and CP funds can take different forms, by which the alignment of strategic priorities, the combination of funding mechanisms and complementary programmes are operationalised. The six different types as outlined in the *Commission Notice on Synergies* are presented in Figure 2 **Error! Reference source not found.** below. In Section 3, a detailed description of the synergy types is provided and the evolution and the concrete implementation of the synergy mechanisms between HE and CP are explored, followed by an analysis of the factors that effectively instrumentalise or hinder them in Section 4.

Figure 1: Simplified overview of the six types of synergies



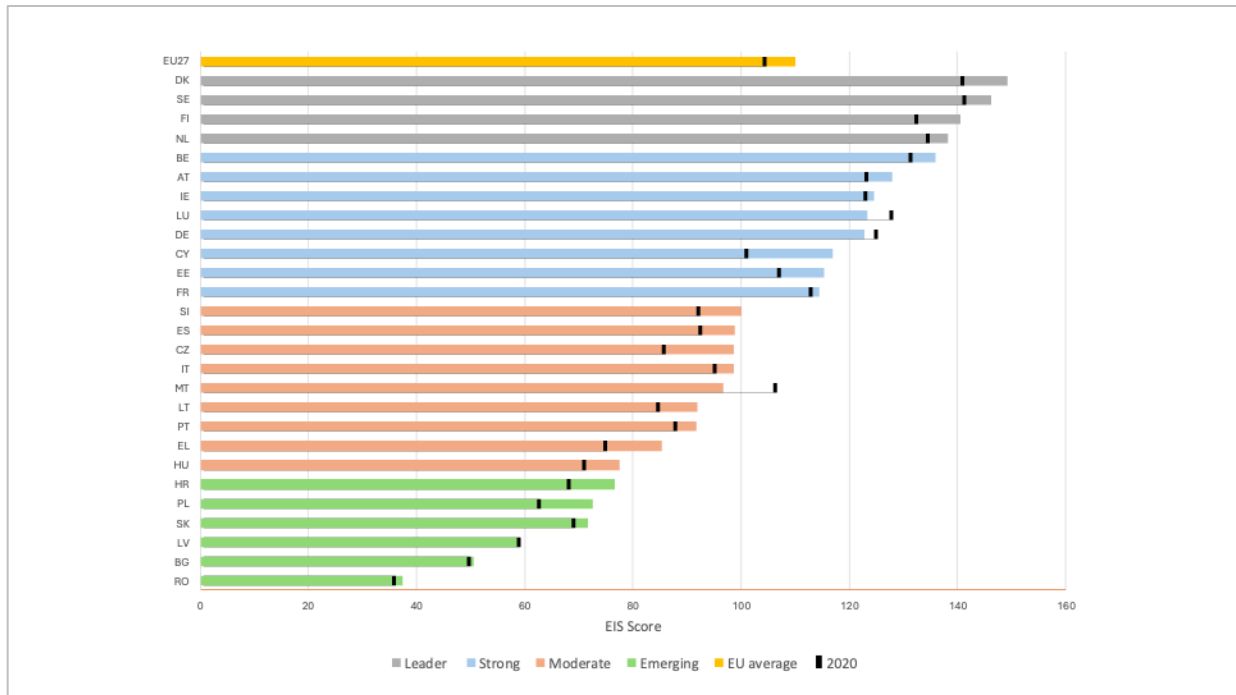
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the *Commission Notice on Synergies*.

## 2.2. Research and innovation territorial divides

While convergence and general performance in R&I are noted to have significantly progressed across Europe over the years, regional disparities persist (European Commission, 2024j). Inequalities in terms of research infrastructure, innovation capabilities, and access to funding reveal marked R&I divides in Europe, both at MS and regional levels.

The European Innovation Scoreboard (**EIS**) is a composite index pooling 32 performance indicators that cover framework conditions, investments, innovation activities and impact to benchmark national innovation ecosystems. Their most recent data show that northern and western countries are leading in innovation performance, while southern and eastern MSs (with the notable exception of Cyprus), lag behind, with innovation ecosystems mostly regarded as moderate or emerging (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: EU Member States Summary Innovation Index (EIS) in 2024 and 2020

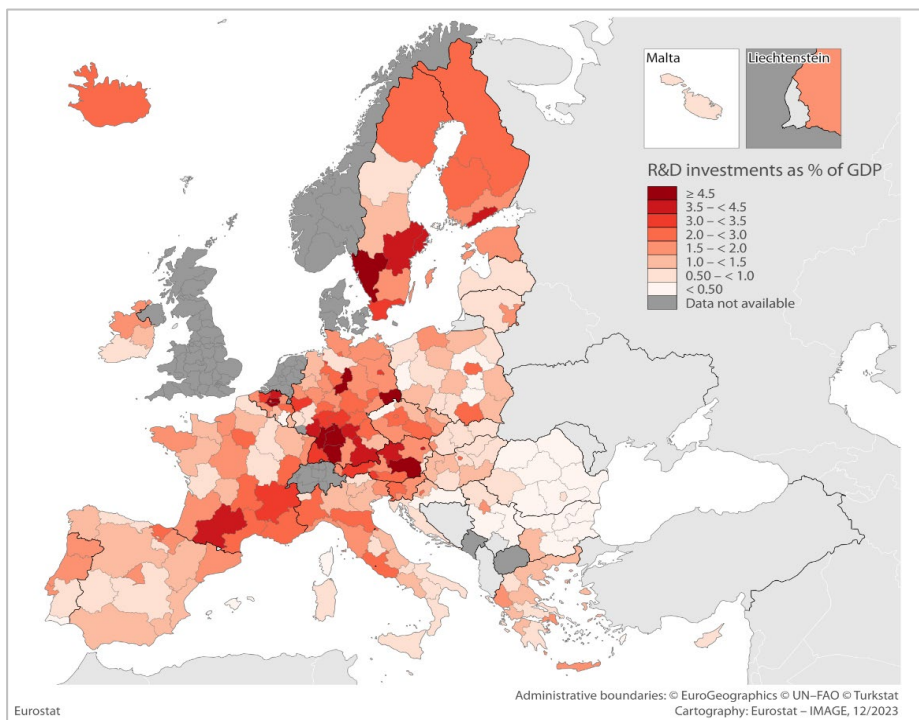


Source: Authors' own elaboration, based on EIS data for 2024 (bars) and 2020 (marker).

Note: The scores are indexed to the EU average performance in 2017 (=100). Performance groups are defined as per EIS criteria and refer to 2024 data. Leaders include MSs whose performance is above 125% relative to the EU average. Strong innovators perform between 100% and 125% relative to the EU average. Moderate and emerging innovators perform respectively between 70% and 100% and below 70% relative to the EU average.

Showing the divergences in R&I investment intensity at the regional level, Figure 3 below demonstrates that many of the regions with the highest R&I investment as a percentage of GDP are also mostly found in the north-central and western MSs.

Figure 3: R&amp;D intensity (investments as percentage of GDP) per EU NUTS 2 region, 2021



Source: European Commission (2024j) based on Eurostat.

This geographical divide is also reflected in the concentration of FP allocations. Previous studies have found that funding under the EU's FP concentrates in regions with robust R&I ecosystems, i.e., with higher R&I intensity rates, quality institutions and human resources in science and technology<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, the data for H2020 show that the northern and western regions achieved the highest success rates (France, Netherlands, Austria, Sweden), while the lowest could be found in southern and eastern areas (south of Italy, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria). The competitive excellence-based nature of FPs plays a key role in this distribution, in that it favours rewarding those applicants with more advanced infrastructure, skilled personnel, and established track records. Countries or regions lacking comparable resources thus face significant challenges in competing for these resources, which suggests that the excellence-driven focus of FPs may contribute to creating a "closed-club" effect thus deepening the R&I divide if not balanced by effective complementary policies and funding mechanisms (Molica & Marques Santos, 2024).

In this vein, CP funds, and particularly the ERDF, play a critical role in supporting R&I systems in regions that struggle to compete for FP funding. This aligns with one of the key principles of the HE programme, which is to increase participation, promote the broadening of geographical coverage and foster collaborative links especially with the designated "widening" or "low R&I performing" countries as listed in the HE Regulation<sup>12</sup>. Thus, the complementary CP funds provide essential resources to enhance the research infrastructures, institutional capacities, and innovation ecosystems of these widening MSs.

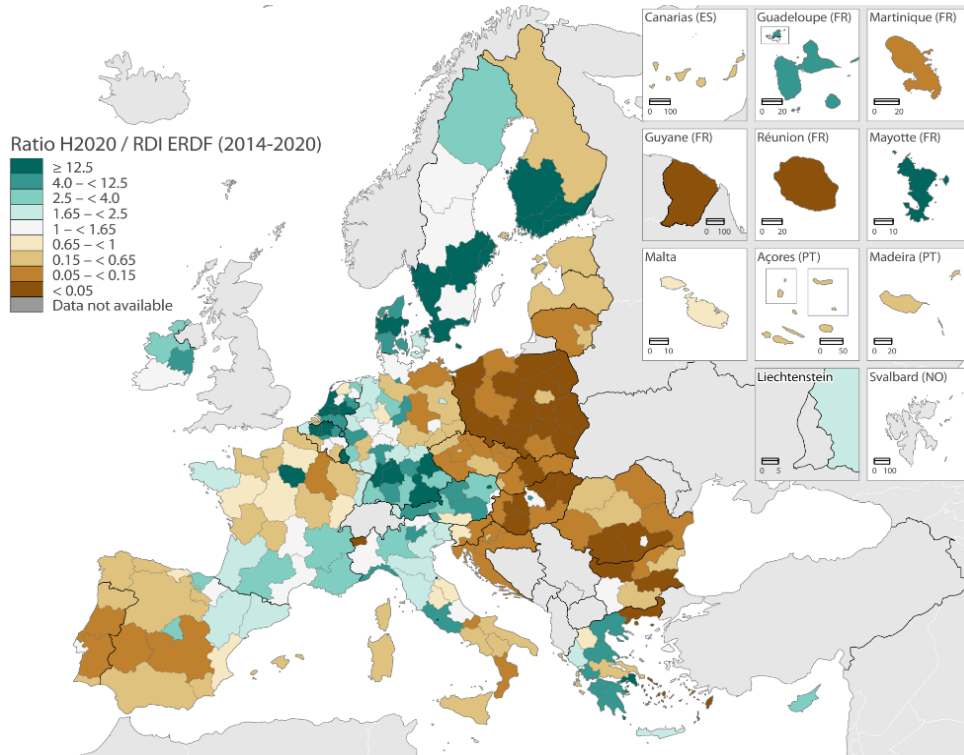
<sup>11</sup> See Peiffer-Smadja et al. (2023). Moreover, for the 2014-2020 period the ECA found positive correlations at MS level between R&I investment per capita and R&I performance (as reflected by the EIS), as well as between R&I investment per capita and allocated H2020 funding (European Court of Auditors, 2022a, Appendix III). On the concentration of ERDF and H2020 funding in specific key enabling technologies and societal challenges, see Doussineau & Bachtrögler-Unger (2021).

<sup>12</sup> See HE Regulation, Article 7 (5). The "widening" or "low R&I performing" countries as defined in Article 1 (17) of the HE Regulation for the 2021-2027 period are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Indeed, Figure 4 illustrates how several eastern and southern European regions predominantly relied on ERDF funds for R&I funding in the 2014-2020 programming period as compared to H2020 funds.

In Annex 1 HE and CP funding contextual data below, more contextual figures on HE and CP funding distribution are provided, including the net EU contribution per MS, the ERDF contribution to R&I per MS and the total costs per participant per MS for HE and H2020.

Figure 4: Ratio of use of Horizon 2020 funds to cohesion policy funds (only the R&I part of ERDF funding) across EU NUTS 2 regions, 2014-2020



Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat  
Cartography: Eurostat – IMAGE, 11/2023

Source: European Commission (2024j) based on Territorial Economic Data viewer and Marques Santos et al. (2023).

In the context described above, the synergies between FPs and CP funds emerge as a promising tool for addressing regional disparities and innovation gaps (Doussineau & Bachtrögler-Unger, 2021). CP investment for R&I in lower-performing regions is key to ensuring their capacities and long-term growth prospects, as well as to overcoming the concentration risks of the FP excellence-driven approach. By providing incentives and mechanisms to authorities to combine the high-quality criteria of FPs with the inclusive and capacity-building focus of CP, a balanced and therefore more competitive EU R&I landscape can be fostered (Durán Laguna et al., 2024; European Commission, 2024b).

### 3. SYNERGIES - EVOLUTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

In the following subsection, the evolution of synergetic mechanisms between HE and CP instruments is assessed, tracing their development through key policy and regulatory updates. Drawing on previous policy evaluations and literature, an overview of the main achievements and pitfalls of the 2014–2020 programming period is provided, as well as of the updates introduced, objectives pursued, and remaining challenges in the 2021–2027 period. Subsequently, the different types of synergies as outlined in the 2022 *Commission Notice on Synergies* are examined one by one in the subsection on implementation of synergies. Their current status based on available data is assessed and selected demonstrative cases to illustrate their practical applications and impact are presented.

#### 3.1. Synergies evolution

##### 3.1.1. Synergies in the 2014-2020 period: achievements and pitfalls

**The role of synergies between R&I programmes and CP was firstly mentioned in the 2007 Commission Communication on Competitive European Regions through Research and Innovation<sup>13</sup>,** which presented the existing synergies “of design” between the funding instruments for R&I and the cohesion policies for the 2007-2013 programming period. This instrument aimed to pave the way for the subsequent generation of synergies “of action” by national and regional authorities. **However, it was not until the following programming period (2014-2020) that the corresponding updated instruments formally included legal provisions specifically requiring implementing bodies to establish any such synergies.** At this point, the creation of a more integrated strategy across EU funds and policies to address fragmentation by emphasising complementarities of structural funds and other EU policies (including the R&I FPs), was one of the objectives set from the outset in the 2014-2020 MFF legislative proposals on the matter (Mendez et al., 2012).

Indeed, as a result, Regulation (EU) 1303/2013 (the ESIF Regulation) explicitly made a call to build “close synergies [...] between the [European Structural and Investment Funds – **ESIF**] and Horizon 2020 in all relevant programme priorities” and provided for initial rules and guidelines to coordinate funding schemes and deploy such synergies<sup>14</sup>. As for the synergy-creating mechanisms, the ESIF Regulation generally established project eligibility and cumulative funding criteria, as well as requirements to develop key strategic documents (S3) to set R&I priorities at the national or regional level, in line with EU policy objectives.

For its part, **the regulation establishing the 8<sup>th</sup> FP for R&I, Horizon 2020 (the H2020 Regulation), addressed the programme’s aim to promote synergies with cohesion policy and particularly with ESIF,** in order to strengthen R&I capabilities and contribute to closing the R&I divide in Europe<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> [Communication from the Commission of the 16 August 2007 COM\(2007\) 474 final](#) on Competitive European regions through research and innovation - *A contribution to more growth and more and better jobs*.

<sup>14</sup> See inter alia Article 37 and Annex I - 4.3, of [Regulation \(EU\) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013](#) laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (Common Provisions Regulation for the 2014-2020 programming period).

<sup>15</sup> See inter alia Article 21 and Recital 33 of [Regulation \(EU\) 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013](#) establishing Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020). Note also the complementary [Regulation \(EU\) 1290/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013](#) laying down the rules for participation and dissemination in "Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020)".

The H2020 Regulation also reflected the possibility and set criteria to use cumulative funding between ESIF and H2020<sup>16</sup>, and explicitly stressed the key role of S3 in aligning resources with local needs and fostering synergies between funding mechanisms.

Following these legislative updated mandates, the Commission soon issued a first Guidance for policy-makers and implementing bodies to support them in better understanding the rules and principles for achieving synergies and for successfully combining funds, along with recommendations for stakeholders and other support tools (European Commission, 2014). **That 2014 Commission Guidance document included examples of project formats, possible funding combinations schemes, and additional guidance on financial instruments for beneficiaries of EU programmes.** In particular, complementary (ERA Chairs, Teaming and Twinning), sequential (upstream/downstream) and alternative (Seal of Excellence - **SoE**) funding mechanisms and their implementation pathways were described in detail.

In 2016, a research study commissioned by the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development (**REGI**) to assess the evolution of synergies in the 2007-2013 programming period and the pursuit of them in the 2014-2020 period found that some progress had been achieved in policy alignment and observed a growing number of synergies compared to the previous period. In spite of this, challenges stemming from pending regulatory and strategic alignment, and governance and implementation arrangements were found to persist (Ferry et al., 2016)<sup>17</sup>. To illustrate the consequences of such challenges, the study indicated that for the 2007-2013 period, **synergies seemed to respond more to *ad hoc* initiatives of engaged individuals than to the outcomes of systemic approaches to synergy operationalisation**, an observation which was later echoed by other studies examining the implementation of synergies in the subsequent period 2014-2020 (Joint Institute for Innovation Policy (JIIP) et al., 2017).

In fact, the **difficulties in combining various funding sources due to differing institutional and governance settings creating administrative and procedural complexities** were again regarded as one of the main barriers to implementing synergy mechanisms between H2020 and structural funds at the individual project level (Doussineau & Bachtrögler-Unger, 2021). Specific obstacles included requirements for two distinct Grant Agreements, incompatibilities stemming from differing regulatory frameworks for each funding source, the absence or lack of clarity of co-funding rules, and mismatches in funding cycles and grant timelines (CARSA et al., 2023). **The H2020 ex-post evaluation by the Commission also noted the very limited use of ESIF/ERDF funding to exploit the results of Horizon 2020 (downstream synergies), as well as gaps in systematic coordination and information**, which altogether hampered synergies and better innovation outcomes (European Commission, 2024f).

On the other hand, **cumulative funding mechanisms in the context of partnership-based instruments, and upstream synergies such as support in application processes, were found to be more frequently and efficiently implemented** (CARSA et al., 2023; European Commission, 2024d; European Court of Auditors, 2022b). **The SoE quality label's positive potential for supporting alternative funding facilitation was also pointed out, although it was noted that during the Horizon 2020 period its impact remained heavily constrained by the conflict its implementation faced with state aid rules.** Moreover, the lack of systematised information on the proposals awarded the label was indicated as another factor hampering further synergy creation out of SoE.

<sup>16</sup> As provided in Article 21 of Regulation (EU) 1291/2013 and relevant provisions of Regulation (EU) 1290/2013.

<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that the synergies analysed in the study reached beyond the corresponding R&I FP programme.

The findings of **two key retrospective audit studies on the 2014-2020 period** conducted by the ECA in 2022 highly corresponded to the above conclusions. **The ECA stressed that certain instrumental factors in the creation of synergies “were not yet fully in place”, in spite of the regulatory updates.** Among the highlighted issues, the ECA pointed to the **lack of interoperable databases between projects funded by H2020 and ESIF**, and to the **absence of a synergies monitoring tool.** Furthermore, the limited inclusion of references to Horizon 2020 in S3 and Operational Programmes and the insufficient implementation of synergy measures by MAs were identified as persisting barriers to optimising funding schemes in R&I (European Court of Auditors, 2022b, 2022a).

At the same time, **the ECA highlighted the promising results of tools such as SoE and Teaming, both as a means of enhancing co-funding possibilities and of positively impacting on lower-performing countries and regions.** Among the recommendations put forward by the ECA in those reports it is worth noting those of improving cooperation with and between MAs, setting key performance indicators and monitoring processes for both widening measures and synergies, and continuing to simplify administrative arrangements. The Commission took note of the gaps and recommendations and committed to several of the identified points, highlighting in its final ex-post evaluation of H2020 its objective of “unlocking more synergies” in the following period (European Commission, 2022a, 2022b).

### 3.1.2. Synergies in the 2021-2027 period: updates and open points

**With the 2021-2027 programming period and the 9<sup>th</sup> FP looming, several lessons were reportedly learnt from the outcomes of the previous period, prompting various adjustments.** The mandate to further pursue and reinforce synergies between the FP and CP was not only embodied in the new legislation itself, but also referred to in other instruments, including political declarations and priority setting communications by different EU institutions. For instance, the new European Research Area (**ERA**) Communication (2020), the Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe (2021), the recent Prague Declaration on Synergies (2022) and the Communication on a New European Innovation Agenda (2022) all consistently expressed, in one way or another, the importance of strengthening synergies between EU programmes under direct and shared management, and accounted for the strategic role they play in fully capitalising on R&I investment and outcomes<sup>18</sup>.

In any case, **the main regulatory developments in relation to synergies for the 2021-2027 period were inserted in the core regulations for R&I, the HE Regulation and the CPR.** These included adjustments and new mechanisms developed in reaction to feedback from previous programming periods and were **designed to improve legal clarity and strengthen alignment between programmes.** A number of other key pieces of legislation complemented them<sup>19</sup>. DG RTD and DG REGIO reportedly worked hand in hand in the legislative proposal process to ensure the maximum possible alignment, which in fact resulted in some key mirrored provisions.

As regards specific synergistic processes, **the HE Regulation outlined more mechanisms for pooling resources and promoting complementarities in the form of alternative, combined and**

<sup>18</sup> [Communication from the Commission of the 30 September 2020](#) COM/2020/628 final - A new ERA for Research and Innovation, [Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/2122 of 26 November 2021](#) on a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe, [Prague Declaration on Synergies in the Research and Innovation Funding in Europe](#) (2022), [Communication from the Commission of the 5 July 2022](#) COM(2022) 332 final - A New European Innovation Agenda.

<sup>19</sup> See, inter alia, [Council Decision \(EU\) 2021/764 of 10 May 2021](#) establishing the Specific Programme implementing Horizon Europe – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/819 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021](#) on the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, [Council Regulation \(EU\) 2021/2085 of 19 November 2021](#) establishing the Joint Undertakings under Horizon Europe.

**cumulative funding, or via the transfer of resources.** For instance, Articles 7(7) and 15 of the HE Regulation provide for the opportunity to implement synergies with other EU funding programmes, “while aiming for maximal administrative simplification”. For its part Annex IV further provides details on how to operationalise the implementation of synergies with other EU funds (including ERDF and other CP funds), requiring for instance arrangements to bridge S3 with excellence in R&I—a requirement also mirrored in the CPR<sup>20</sup>. The HE Regulation further introduced new synergy mechanisms, such as the transfers of ERDF resources to HE and the European partnerships (see 3.2.2 and 3.2.4 below for more details).

**The CPR, for its part, introduced complementary “user-friendly” funding mechanisms**—such as flat rates recognition for eligible costs from HE and combined funding from different EU instruments clearance— while avoiding double financing. Furthermore, as set in Article 73, the CPR facilitated the funding of proposals with a SoE or that were co-funded by HE, ensuring that conditions already assessed at the EU level were not to be reassessed, thus simplifying both the eligibility and selection criteria and the process. As was the case with the HE Regulation, **the CPR also set out a series of requirements on consistency with S3 priorities to allow for ERDF funding of R&I projects**, including the mandatory reference to the expected synergies in partnership agreements and cohesion programmes<sup>21</sup>. **Together, these efforts on simplification and alignment sought to reduce administrative burdens and accelerate project implementation.**

Another key development, in response to stakeholders' claims pointing to it as a major obstacle to synergies implementation in the previous programming period, was **the amendment of the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER)**—via the Commission Regulation (EU) 2021/1237<sup>22</sup>. **The changes made allowed for compliance with state aid rules for those projects benefiting from both HE and CP funds**, matching and simplifying the processes to deploy synergy mechanisms such as the SoE, combined funding or the European partnerships.

Adding to these regulatory updates, **the Commission published in 2022 the already mentioned Commission Notice on Synergies**<sup>23</sup>, a key instrument in which it provided **legal and practical implementation details for achieving operational synergies in the 2021-2027 regulatory context**. The six identified “types” of synergies included the SoE, resources transfers from ERDF to HE, cumulative funding, co-funded and institutionalised European partnerships, combined funding (Teaming), and the upstream/downstream synergies (see below Figure 5). In addition to facilitating practical details and answers to key questions on each of the synergy mechanisms, the *Commission Notice on Synergies* contained the main legal provisions relevant to each of them and a description of their potential interaction with HE missions. Stakeholders involved in the management of European R&I funds and project-level proposals who participated in the interviews in this research unanimously rated this guidance document as highly useful.

<sup>20</sup> An assessment comparing 1018 priorities areas set in 185 regional and MS S3, found linkages to HE key funding areas for 91% of the priorities, although the vast majority corresponded to low relevance topics (European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy et al., 2022).

<sup>21</sup> See in re Article 3(1) of Regulation (EU) 2021/1058.

<sup>22</sup> [Commission Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1237 of 23 July 2021](#) amending Regulation (EU) No 651/2014 declaring certain categories of aid compatible with the internal market. See in re Recital 73 of the [Communication from the Commission of the 28 October 2022 2022/C 414/01](#)- Framework for State aid for research and development and innovation.

<sup>23</sup> *Commission Notice on Synergies*.

Figure 5: Overview of the types of synergies

<p><b>Seal of Excellence</b></p> <p>A Seal of Excellence is awarded to projects that have been positively evaluated under HE and ranked above a predefined quality threshold but were not funded by HE due to insufficient budgetary resources. MAs can choose to support SoE-awarded projects with CP funds.</p>	<p><b>Cumulative funding</b></p> <p>Cumulative funding allows pooling funding from HE and CP funds in the same project.</p>	<p><b>Combined funding (teaming)</b></p> <p>Teaming actions support the establishment or modernisation of a centre of excellence in a widening country by teaming it up with a leading research institution (advanced partner) in a different country. This action requires complementary funding, for example, from the CP funds.</p>
<p><b>Upstream and downstream</b></p> <p>Upstream synergies occur when CP funds build the R&amp;I capacities needed for successful participation in Horizon Europe (HE), while downstream synergies leverage CP funds to capitalise on HE project results and support their national and regional uptake.</p>	<p><b>Transfers from ERDF to HE</b></p> <p>Member States may request the transfer of up to 5 % of their resources under shared management to any other EU fund(s) or instrument(s) under direct or indirect management.</p>	<p><b>European partnership</b></p> <p>European partnerships are collaborations between the EU and private and/or public partners that support the development and implementation of R&amp;I strategies. ERDF can be used as a Member State contribution to HE partnerships.</p>

Source: Authors' own elaboration. Adapted from the *Commission Notice on Synergies*.

Moreover, **as part of the implementation of the different pillars of HE and following the New European Innovation Agenda (NEIA) approved in 2022, additional efforts have been deployed to accelerate innovation and reduce regional disparities**<sup>24</sup>. For instance, several initiatives under HE Pillar III seek to promote and leverage synergies between HE and CP funds to achieve their objectives. Examples include the European Innovation Ecosystems (**EIE**), which supports the ERDF in backing interregional partnerships and innovation ecosystems<sup>25</sup>; the Strategic Innovation Agenda (**SIA**) of the European Institute of Technology (**EIT**), which calls for the generation of synergies between Knowledge and Innovation Communities (**KIC**) and CP funds<sup>26</sup>; and the European Innovation Council (**EIC**) Forum, which functions as a key exchange platform for best practices and possibilities for synergies with, among others, the ERDF<sup>27</sup>. Additionally, the recently deployed initiative of the Regional Innovation Valleys (**RIVs**) combines funds from HE and the Interregional Innovation Investments (**I3**) instrument, which is part of the ERDF.

While stressing that synergies between HE and CP represent a crucial aspect of the EU's strategy to maximise the impact of R&I investments and foster innovation in the NEIA, the Commission emphasised in its *Notice on Synergies* that **the effective utilisation of synergy mechanisms would rely heavily on the awareness and knowledge of R&I national or regional MAs of the new administrative and collaboration possibilities**. In the Commission's view, the MAs are the ones in

<sup>24</sup> Communication from the Commission on A New European Innovation Agenda (see above footnote 18).

<sup>25</sup> See "[European Innovation Ecosystems – Policy, strategy, how to apply and work programmes](#)". Last accessed: 2 December 2024.

<sup>26</sup> [Decision \(EU\) 2021/820 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021](#) on the Strategic Innovation Agenda of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (**EIT**) 2021-2027.

<sup>27</sup> See "[EIC Forum - Improving coordination between innovation programmes. What the forum is, next steps, contact information](#)". Last accessed: 2 December 2024.

the position to actually implement the available synergy mechanisms in view of the priorities and objectives of both policy programmes and the S3 of their respective regions. To foster such implementation, multi- and bilateral **dialogue channels were created between the Commission and the MSs, and a series of initiatives were launched to create spaces for the exchange of experiences, coordination and administrative support.**

Among these initiatives, the “R&I and Cohesion Managing Authorities” (**RIMA**) network stands out. RIMA was formed in 2023 as a dedicated subgroup within the ERA Forum, as part of the work stream on Access to Excellence. R&I and cohesion policy funding management bodies from the MSs and regions are part of it, as well as representatives of both DG RTD and DG REGIO. RIMA’s declared objective is to become “a platform to enhance dialogue and coordination between the Commission and Member States to ensure synergies across all relevant funding sources and boost scientific and innovation excellence throughout Europe” (European Commission, 2023; Tilman & Schenk, 2023). Interviewees with knowledge of RIMA highlighted the value of the space for exchange and networking. However, unresolved issues in terms of internal organisation, representativeness and transparency were also noted. Notably, RIMA is currently working on a document which assesses, from the MAs point of view, the results of and challenges on synergies between HE and ESIF<sup>28</sup>.

Other recently established initiatives with complementary aims in terms of synergies facilitation and a thematic focus are the recent S3 Community of Practice (**CoP**) and the EIC Forum referred to above, which build on the lessons learnt from the SoE CoP, established already in 2015. In particular, the S3 CoP aims to congregate “guidance, networking, support and peer-learning on S3”<sup>29</sup>, to support its development and implementation. As noted above, S3 became crucial and unavoidable instruments in synergy-seeking in the current period due to the new legal alignment requirements. However, **despite S3 being regarded as “excellent reference points for developing complementarities”, the mandatory alignment has received mixed views in terms of implementation** (European Commission, Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy et al., 2022; European Court of Auditors, 2022a). On the one hand, stakeholders point to the difficulties presented by the different time cycles of each of the required documents and the diverging objectives of cohesion and excellence programmes in R&I, as well as to the risks of over-concentration of investment in one sector over another. Other stakeholders however, referred to the mandatory alignment requirement as a possibility to enhance communication with relevant authorities and ensure that projects align with national or regional goals.

On a separate note, in its *Replies* to the ECA’s reports on the 2014-2020 period, the Commission noted its **recent progress in the face of the data gaps identified** (European Commission, 2022b). **Some information was made openly available** in the data.europa.eu, CORDIS, Kohesio and the Horizon and SoE Dashboard sites, **although to date the formatting remains largely mismatched and the type of available data limited.** Furthermore, as an HE novelty, the e-Grants platform facilitates the identification of HE beneficiaries receiving co-funding from other European programmes.

However, access to the platform is restricted and so far, such functionality only works for those other funds also managed within e-Grants<sup>30</sup>. The Commission acknowledged these limitations for synergies assessment and monitoring yet stressed that the current mechanisms were in full compliance with the

<sup>28</sup> During the research activities of this study the authors were unofficially given access to a preliminary, unpublished draft of the RIMA Report on European Synergies of Funds, with its use authorised by the manuscript’s authors. The report was ultimately made public, with no significant changes from the draft, on March 2025 at the RIMA page on the Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities (Subgroup code E03833/2). All subsequent references to the report in this study were therefore adjusted after its publication.

<sup>29</sup> See “[S3 Community of Practice – The central knowledge and information hub for Smart Specialisation](#)”. Last accessed: 2 December 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Erasmus+, DIGITAL, LIFE, Creative Europe, SMP, I3, ISF, EMFAF, ESF, INNOVFUND, EURATOM, and EU4Health.

regulatory requirements in place. The lack of systematic reporting obligations to the implementing authorities (and thus the voluntary nature of much of the data collected) was also cited as a key determinant by the Commission itself in the interviews conducted for this study.

### 3.2. Synergies implementation

The aforementioned public information gaps and the lack of a unified and systematic synergies monitoring tool made the task of generating a fully comprehensive account of the degree of implementation of synergy mechanisms a challenge. While generating a quantitative data-based mapping of all planned or implemented synergies between HE and CP funds proved to be unfeasible, there were still useful indications in openly available data and complementary literature that allowed for an initial assessment of the implementation of each synergy type. Indeed, although not comprehensive of the totality of synergies taking place, the following Table 2 illustrates the figures retrieved from sources identified in this research.

Table 2: Overview of synergies implementation per type of synergy

Type of synergy	Overview of available implementation data (2021-2027 programming period)
Seal of Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5,659 out of 84,845 (6.7%) of the high-quality proposals not granted funding received a SoE certificate.</li> <li>5 of the 17 MSs with funding schemes supporting MSCA SoE awarded projects use CP funds for this.</li> </ul>
Transfers from ERDF to HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 of the 16 MSs self-reported having transferred funding from ERDF to HE.</li> </ul>
European partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 of 16 MSs self-reported to have used ERDF funds as a national contribution in co-funded or institutionalised partnerships. In addition, 3 MSs are considering implementing this synergy.</li> </ul>
Combined funding (teaming)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are 52 ongoing Teaming projects.</li> </ul>
Downstream synergies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 out of 16 MSs self-reported implementation of downstream synergies.</li> </ul>
Cumulative funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>N/D</i></li> </ul>
Upstream synergies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>N/D</i></li> </ul>

Sources: Seal of Excellence – Updated aggregated figures for H2020 and HE provided by the European Commission based on the Horizon Dashboard and European Commission. (2024i); Transfers from ERDF to HE – RIMA (2025); European partnerships – RIMA (2025); Combined funding (teaming) – Rzhelikna. (2024) and European Commission. (2024k); Downstream synergies – RIMA (2025).

The data captured in the Table above can be complemented by other secondary sources that help build a more complete overview. Notably, in a recent large-scale study to support the interim evaluation of HE initiated by DG RTD, several aspects on the overall generation of synergies between HE and other European programmes, including CP funds, were also analysed (European Commission, 2024i).

Based on more than 200 interviews and 9 surveys with different stakeholder groups, that study reported that synergies had been found between HE and 13 out of the 21 EU programmes envisaged in Annex IV of the HE Regulation as potentially complementary, including CP funds such as ESF+ and ERDF. Overall, it was noted that the use of synergy mechanisms such as the SoE, the transfer of funds,

cumulative funding, and combined funding instruments like Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (**MSCA**) COFUND, Teaming, and Excellence Hubs were escalating. Moreover, initiatives like the “Pathways to Synergies” call envisaged in the HE Work Programme and launched in March 2023 and the RIVs were highlighted as two recent good examples of synergy stimulation and successful implementation efforts respectively.

In the following subsections, the modalities and main implementation features and hurdles for each of the six synergy mechanisms outlined in the 2022 *Commission Notice on Synergies* are individually assessed. Each synergy type is examined, combining publicly available quantitative and qualitative information with the perspectives shared by the interviewed stakeholders. Specific demonstrative cases to illustrate key practical details are also presented.

### 3.2.1. Seal of Excellence

The SoE, introduced in 2014 during H2020, is a quality label awarded to those project proposals that meet high evaluation standards in an HE call but are not funded due to budget constraints. The SoE is a crucial synergies facilitator, by warranting a proposal's value and thus enabling SoE holders to obtain funds from other sources –including from ERDF and ESF+– more easily. It also helps other funding bodies take advantage of the HE evaluation process, thus decreasing the administrative burden. The SoE is currently awarded to proposals that apply under five HE instruments<sup>31</sup>.

The ECA (2022) identified two main administrative barriers for the SoE tool to reach its full potential: divergent state aid rules and the limited availability of information on projects that have received the SoE label.

Divergent state aid rules were an issue for potential beneficiaries as under H2020 they could get significantly higher grant rates compared to ESIF, discouraging the latter (European Court of Auditors, 2022b). In response, the Commission amended the GBER<sup>32</sup>, allowing MAs to support SoE-awarded projects directly (without technical re-evaluation) and apply the categories, maximum amounts and methods of calculation of eligible costs under HE. Even though these amendments to the GBER were a step forward, several challenges remain. First, in many cases there is no funding basis to finance these projects due to a lack of budget or because the timing and preparation of programming documents (HE and ERDF) are not aligned (RIMA, 2025). This lack of alignment in timing and preparation creates funding challenges, as SoE projects that do not align with national or regional OP/S3 priorities cannot be funded through ERDF. In addition, as different evaluation rules sometimes apply at European, national or regional levels, MAs often request SoE holders to submit a new proposal, offsetting the efficiency gain.

Moreover, in many cases, small and medium-sized enterprises (**SMEs**) are not eligible as SoE holders, as this depends on which region they are based in (European Court of Auditors, 2022b).

The second administrative barrier –the limited availability of information on SoE awarded projects– poses a problem in that it makes it difficult for research funding organisations to identify potential opportunities.

To overcome this issue, the Commission has included basic SoE awarded projects details in the Horizon Dashboard (European Commission, 2022b). Although this has been considered a positive step forward, stakeholders have expressed interest in receiving more detailed information than is currently available in the dashboard (RIMA, 2025). In addition, the Horizon Dashboard excludes information on EIC

<sup>31</sup> These 5 HE instruments include the European Innovation Council (EIC) Accelerator and Transition projects, the MSCA postdoctoral fellowship and COFUND, Teaming actions under Widening, HE Mission on Adaption to Climate Change, European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept.

<sup>32</sup> Commission Regulation (EU) 2021/1237 (see above footnote 22).

proposals awarded with a SoE, as these typically contain confidential information from start-ups. In this regard, the Commission is reportedly working on a second dashboard that will soon be accessible by MAs to see which EIC projects have been awarded a SoE. Currently, 100 users have registered to access the dashboard, and the Commission keeps on promoting it via networks like RIMA. Apart from the dashboards, the SoE CoP is considered a valuable source of information, where relevant data and best practices are shared between the Commission, MAs, National Contact Points (**NCP**) and other stakeholders at the EU and MS level (European Court of Auditors, 2022b).

To measure the impact of the SoE it would be essential to count the number of SoE projects that found alternative funding sources. However, such data is currently not available, mainly due to the absence of a legal reporting requirement. The Commission representatives participating in the interviews stated that they were highly interested in collecting more information on funded SoE projects. However, this remains challenging due to the shared-management nature of the alternative funding sources. In order to obtain some data, the Commission has included a voluntary reporting mechanism in the new aforementioned EIC dashboard, which aims to monitor the number of SoE awarded projects that have achieved alternative funding sources.

With the available information on awarded SoE, it is possible to note that under H2020, 11.1% (31,378 out of 283,133) of high-quality proposals that were not granted funding received a SoE certificate. Under HE, up to November 2024 **6.7% (5,659 out of 84,845) of the high-quality proposals not granted funding received a SoE certificate**<sup>33</sup>. To date, the majority of SoE have been awarded to MSCA projects. More figures and the distribution of SoE per HE instrument and per funding period can be found in Annex 2 – Awarded Seals of Excellence per programming period.

Taking a closer look at the MSCA case, it is noticeable that the number of institutional, regional and national-level schemes supporting SoE awarded projects under HE compared to H2020 is growing (European Commission, 2024i). Despite these positive developments, it is important to note that most countries finance the MSCA SoE awarded projects from national funds rather than CP funds, as the procedure to use national funds is less complex and gives more flexibility. Under HE, only 5 of the 17 MSs with funding schemes in place make use of HE funds to support the MSCA SoE awarded projects (European Commission, 2024i)<sup>34</sup>.

The Italian Province of Bolzano and the Bulgarian Ministry of Innovation and Growth are two examples of authorities making use of the SoE through national/regional funding schemes, as further elaborated in Box 2 below. Moreover, to further improve the SoE-facilitated synergies, the RIMA report suggests enlarging the delivery of SoE certificates to other mono-beneficiary schemes like the European Research Council (**ERC**) and to award the seal to *a*//MSCA projects that pass the quality threshold.

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<sup>33</sup> Updated aggregated figures for H2020 and HE were provided by the European Commission based on the Horizon Dashboard.

<sup>34</sup> Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, France and Lithuania (as of April 2024).

## Box 2: Using the Seal of Excellence in Bolzano (Italy) and Bulgaria

**Case 1: Seal of Excellence in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano**

The Autonomous Province of Bolzano has been launching an annual call for proposals since 2018 to promote the mobility of researchers active in South Tyrol (“outgoing researchers”) and to attract researchers from other areas to the region (“ingoing researchers”). The province established the “Provincial Criteria for financing of excellent European projects (SoE)” and **aligned these criteria** with the provisions of the MSCA European Postdoctoral Fellowship to take advantage of the high-quality evaluation of HE by supporting projects awarded with the SoE. With the transition from H2020 to HE the MSCA evaluation criteria were updated. Therefore, the Province decided to **update the Provincial Criteria accordingly** to continue taking advantage of the SoE synergy. Projects submitted to the MSCA and awarded with a SoE are directly eligible for a provincial contribution similar to the MSCA funding, the only condition being that the research should be carried out at one of the South Tyrolean research institutions.

In 2020, Bolzano funded four SoE projects, with eight more in 2021, totalling nearly EUR 2 million. These projects span multiple fields, from bioinformatics to social sciences, and involve researchers from diverse countries, including Japan, Bolivia, China, and Italy.

**Case 2: Seal of Excellence in Bulgaria**

The Bulgarian Ministry of Innovation and Growth established a national scheme under the ERDF program “Research, Innovation and Digitalisation for Smart Transformation” to support projects that have received a SoE under the EIC Accelerator. The total allocation from the ERDF amounted to EUR 50 million.

In March 2024, the Ministry launched a [call](#) under this national scheme to provide funding to SoE-awarded European Digital Innovation Hubs (**EDIHs**). The Ministry aimed to establish a national network of EDIHs for services related to digital and green technologies for SMEs and public organisations, focusing on enhancing capacities in high-performance computing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, digital skills, and the effective use and interoperability of digital technologies. 80% of the budget allocated to the different projects under this call was sourced from the ERDF, while the remaining portion funded by national budgets.

Bulgaria is not the only MS that made use of the opportunity to support SoE-awarded EDIHs proposals. In fact, **73 of the current 419 EDIHs established across the EU have been funded after receiving a SoE.**

Sources: Case 1 – Provincia autonoma di Bolzano-Alto Adige. (June 14, 2022). [Seal of Excellence: Adeguati i criteri per il finanziamento. Provincia autonoma di Bolzano](#); GIURI. (2022). [Le sinergie tra Fondi Strutturali e altri programmi di finanziamento UE](#); Case 2 – (European Commission. (n.d.). [EIC Seal of Excellence opportunities](#); Bulgarian Ministry of Innovation and Growth. (2024). [BG16RFPR002-1.002 Funding of European Digital Innovation Hubs selected by the European Commission, awarded the "Seal of Excellence"](#); European Commission. (n.d.). [European Digital Innovation Hubs Network - EDIH Catalogue](#).

**3.2.2. Transfers from ERDF to HE**

The option to transfer funds from ERDF to HE is a new synergy introduced in the current programming period, and as such has been operational since 2021. This mechanism allows MSs with traditionally low participation and success rates in HE to strengthen their participation by simply reallocating cohesion funds.

It allows these MSs to boost projects in priority areas as per their S3, and to reduce administrative capacity needs, as the implementation burden moves to the Commission under HE rules and is no longer carried by the MAs (European Commission, 2022).

Malta was the first MS to make use of this possibility in 2022, asking for a transfer of EUR 5 million to support single-beneficiary projects stemming from HE. This resulted in five Maltese ERA fellowships, that would otherwise not have been financed (European Commission, 2024g). Later, in 2023, Lithuania became the second country to make use of this possibility; its experience is presented in Box 3. So far, **Malta and Lithuania are the only countries that have used this opportunity**, for a total amount of EUR 23.5 million.

As reported in an interview, the case of Lithuania is a paradigmatic example of the long-term benefits that well-thought synergies can provide for lower-performing regions. The transfer of ERDF resources to Horizon Europe was strategically designed to encourage Lithuanian institutions to actively engage with and integrate into the Horizon ecosystem, laying the groundwork for a future where they can independently access such research and excellence networks. In this manner, the synergy not only allows for increasing value and enhancing the results of the currently funded research but is also instrumental for the creation of long-lasting and potentially sustainable R&I capacities.

Some of the main barriers to making use of this transfer opportunity include lack of experience and uncertainties about the applicable legislative framework and boundary conditions (RIMA, 2025). In addition, MAs need to plan for this synergy at an early stage, for it is more difficult to implement once the Operational Programmes are established. Furthermore, the implementation process has been regarded as quite lengthy—for instance, in the case of Lithuania it was reported to take one full year. The efficient cooperative spirit of several authorities was reportedly crucial for success, which may be feasible in relatively small or politically centralised countries, yet more complicated in larger countries with more complex governance structures. A shorter and more efficient process would potentially make the use of this synergy more appealing.

Another action that could be taken to increase the use of such transfer opportunity is to promote it more frequently, highlighting the benefits through clear examples and data. Additionally, since the transfer must be explicitly indicated in the Partnership Agreement, the Commission could play a role in reminding MSs of this opportunity in a timely manner (RIMA, 2025).

## Box 3: Transfers from ERDF to HE in Lithuania

In 2023, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of Lithuania (**SMSM**) requested an amendment of the Lithuanian 2021-2027 OP, reallocating EUR 18.5 million from ERDF to HE. With the transfer, the SMSM aimed to **increase the participation** of the country's researchers and businesses in international HE projects, and **raise their profile** and their **international recognition**, thus gradually **decreasing the dependency** on ERDF funds for R&I activities. Although Lithuania's HE participation and success rate are rising, high competition and limited funding spots leave well-evaluated proposals unfunded. The transfer of funds allows the SMSM to support these high-quality Lithuanian projects. Additional advantages of the transfer include:

- **Lower administration burden for MAs**, as there is no need to resubmit the proposal to alternative national funding schemes, and the projects are implemented by the Commission;
- **Capacity building** in HE project management skills for beneficiaries;
- **Higher financing rates** for beneficiaries; and
- **Low risks** as unspent funds can be recovered within two years and the funds are solely available for Lithuanian projects without replacing the general HE funding.

As a result of the transfer, eight Lithuanian projects submitted under HE have secured funding in 2024. From this experience, SMSM reported that **once beneficiaries are introduced to HE projects, they are very likely to participate in a future HE project**. Therefore, it is important to recognise that the opportunity provided by the transfer likely has a **sustainable effect on HE participation**.

Despite the advantages, it was reported that the process to implement the synergy was highly **bureaucratic and time consuming**; it required the involvement and cooperation of three ministries, followed by a one-year negotiation process with the Commission. Ideally, this process would be simplified and completed in a much shorter timeframe. An additional difficulty is that MAs have to **plan early** for these synergies, as they are difficult to implement once the Operational Programmes are finalised.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on insights from the interviews and Lithuanian news agency ELTA (May 31, 2023). "[Lietuva skiria 18,5 mln. eurų Lietuvos mokslo ir verslo proveržiui „Europos horizonte“](#)".

### 3.2.3. Cumulative funding

Cumulative funding allows the pooling of resources from two different sources into one project. Through this approach, the Commission aims to provide MAs with the opportunity to strengthen links between the complementary R&I priorities of HE calls and ERDF programmes (and related S3). Unfortunately, to date, there is no public data available on the frequency of use or the impact of the cumulative funding synergy mechanism. One example of how cumulative funds can be utilised is to support the aforementioned European Digital Innovation Hubs (**EDIHs**) (see Box 4).

One challenge in implementing this synergy is that each fund has distinct rules for the eligibility of costs (RIMA, 2025). These differences can prevent beneficiaries from using pooled resources effectively, as entire cost categories might be excluded due to differences in accounting and settling the project expenditure.

A recent initiative by the Commission, the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (**STEP**)<sup>35</sup>, aims to mobilise funding across EU-financed programmes, including HE and CP funds and to enable individual projects to benefit from cumulative funding. Hereby the Commission aims to strengthen the EU's industrial competitiveness and boost investment in critical technologies, thereby reducing external dependencies (European Commission, 2024a). STEP focuses on the digital and deep innovation tech, clean and resource efficient tech, and biotech sectors. The platform will mobilise funding across 11 existing programmes financed by the EU, including HE and the CP funds, and aims to become a one-stop shop for project promoters, MAs and investors to obtain key R&I information on the three previously mentioned sectors. It is estimated that the platform will boost investments up to EUR 50 billion through existing EU instruments, combined with other public and private funds.

To foster synergies between the funds, the platform uses the STEP Seal of quality label. The label functions similarly to the SoE, but is only awarded to projects that support the STEP sectors and address the STEP objectives. The projects awarded the STEP Seal are published on the [STEP portal](#), which is maintained and updated by the Commission. Under ERDF and ESF+, MAs can, under certain conditions in accordance with Article 73(4) of the CPR, directly award projects that received a STEP Seal.

The Commission has published a brochure for NCPs<sup>36</sup> and MAs, and a Guidance Notice<sup>37</sup> providing information about the practical elements to facilitate implementation at a national level. One of the chapters is dedicated to STEP under CP funds. Furthermore, in April 2024 the Commission organised a [STEP Q&A webinar](#) to address any (interpretational) question related to the implementation of STEP.

#### Box 4: Cumulative funding to establish European Digital Innovation Hubs

European Digital Innovation Hubs (**EDIHs**) aim to boost the digital transformation of industries and public services across Europe by supporting organisations to respond to digital challenges and become more competitive. EDIHs combine the benefits of a regional presence while being part of a pan-European network. In 2023 the Commission (DG Connect in collaboration with DG Regio) organised a webinar providing information on how to use funding from DIGITAL Europe and the ERDF programmes to finance EDIHs<sup>38</sup>; in other words, on how to make use of cumulative funding.

Currently there are **419 EDIHs established across the EU of which 148 have been co-funded by the Commission and the MSs** (with regional or national funds). However, there is no publicly available information on the extent to which CP funds have been used to support these 148 EDIHs.

Source: European Commission. (February 02, 2023). [Synergies between DIGITAL and the European Regional Development Fund \(ERDF\) programmes](#); European Commission. (n.d.). [European Digital Innovation Hubs Network - EDIH Catalogue](#); European Commission. (2024). [European Digital Innovation Hubs](#).

### 3.2.4. European partnerships

A European partnership is a collaboration between EU private and/or public partners that jointly support the development and implementation of a R&I programme addressing the EU policy priorities. The implementation of European partnerships is mostly realised through the HE Work Programmes and their calls for proposals.

<sup>35</sup> [Regulation \(EU\) 2024/795 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 February 2024](#) establishing the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP).

<sup>36</sup> See [Brochure for STEP National Contact Points and Managing Authorities](#) (2024, last accessed: 15 January 2025).

<sup>37</sup> [Communication from the Commission of the 8 May 2024 2024/C 3148](#) - Guidance Note concerning certain provisions of Regulation (EU) 2024/795 establishing STEP.

<sup>38</sup> [Webinar on synergy grant guidance \(Catherine Wendt REGIO\) 0803-1](#) (1 February 2023).

Each partnership submits a proposal to the Commission in response to the call topic, and the resulting grants for the partnerships are fully funded by HE. There are three types of European partnerships:

- **Co-funded European partnerships**, where the EU joins forces with national and regional entities and provides co-funding to a R&I programme implemented by national entities;
- **Co-programmed European partnerships**, which are partnerships between the Commission and private and/or public partners where the Commission provides funding while partners manage their activities independently; and
- **Institutionalised European partnerships**, which are formal joint undertakings (**JU**) with their own legal identity that have a structured governance and a long-term focus.

Since 2021, the Commission allows contributions from ERDF programmes to be recognised as national contributions in **co-funded** and **institutionalised** partnerships. This facilitates pooling ERDF and HE funds in co-funded European partnerships, enabling regions to collaborate across the EU on related smart specialisation priorities. It also provides less developed MSs and regions with opportunities to engage in transnational partnerships. Currently, **five MSs have reportedly implemented this synergy using ERDF funds and three other MSs are considering doing so**, although the MSs involved are not disclosed in the sources consulted (RIMA, 2025).

MSs face several challenges in implementing European partnerships involving CP funds. First, although the three different types are well defined, each one has its own specific rules, which in all cases differ from the ERDF rules, thus making alignment challenging. Second, the different nature of the objectives of HE and CP and the unaligned timing to submit the documentation (calls from EC proposals are not aligned with ESIF programming period) create further difficulties. Additionally, the CPR mandates that only designated intermediary bodies can implement the Operational Programmes, which turns out to be a major barrier in using ERDF funds to finance partnerships.

To overcome these barriers several measures are proposed in the RIMA report:

- **Clarify the financial rules** and implement a single approach to financial management across the partnership types. This would simplify aligning with the CP funds as well as the financial management and reporting;
- **Establish a single Grant Agreement** for the whole programming period, which will be more efficient for both the Commission and the MSs; and
- **Report the resulting projects into the HE database**. Currently, projects supported under co-financed partnerships do not appear in the HE database, meaning that these projects are not reflected in the HE statistics and are not visible for others seeking potential synergies.

## Box 5 : CCDRC implementation of the European partnership synergy

Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Regional do Centro (**CCDRC**) is a public organisation in Portugal responsible for integrating various public policies to promote the integrated development of Portugal. CCDRC is the Portuguese MA for several CP funds, including ERDF, ESF+ and JTF. The possibility for contributions from ERDF to be recognised as national counterpart in co-funded European partnerships allowed CCDRC to participate in three HE partnerships: Driving Urban Transitions (**DUT**), Sustainable Blue Economy Partnership and the Transforming Health and Care Systems (**THCS**).

However, Portugal's highly centralised governance model creates challenges to integrating EU instruments with regional needs. Unlike other EU countries with autonomous regional budgets, Portugal's Partnership Agreement governance operates under central control, limiting the flexibility required to tailor funding strategies to regional specificities. CCDRC is currently the only regional entity in Portugal actively engaging in synergies through European partnerships, which has led to a lack of interest in amending national regulatory frameworks to adapt to regional needs. Additionally, CCDRC expresses concerns that success in securing funding through these mechanisms might result in reduced national funding allocations for CCDRC beneficiaries.

In the process of using ERDF funds as contribution to the HE partnerships, CCDRC faced four concrete challenges:

- **Misalignment between the timing of regional calls and HE calls**, creating difficulties in synchronising funding opportunities;
- **Appointing an intermediate body was challenging but necessary**, as only such entities are authorised to implement operational programmes;
- **Existing supporting information systems were not fully adequate** to meet specific rules and requirements; and
- **The absence of a common payment authority** for all programmes added further administrative complexity, complicating the financial management of synergy projects.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Jorge (2023).

### 3.2.5. Combined funding (teaming)

Teaming actions under HE allow projects to obtain complementary funding from ERDF for a set of eligible costs that are separate from the costs covered by HE. Such actions support for instance the establishment or modernisation of a centre of excellence in a widening country, by teaming up with a leading institution in a different country. In this way, teaming actions are part of the widening measures proposed by the Commission to reduce R&I disparities across the EU and expand the participation in HE among stakeholders from lower-performing countries. The European Research Executive Agency (**REA**) is in charge of managing most of the widening measures, including teaming actions.

Under H2020, EUR 935 million was committed to widening measures (1.2% of all H2020 commitments), and 25 Teaming projects were funded. The widening measures budget was tripled under HE, to reach EUR 2.95 billion (3.3% of all HE commitments). The biggest share (EUR 744 million) is set to be allocated to Teaming projects (European Court of Auditors, 2022a). As of May 2024, there were 39 ongoing Teaming projects under HE (Rzhevkina, 2024) and 13 more Teaming projects were set to start in January 2025 (European Commission, 2024k), adding up to **52 ongoing Teaming projects**.

### Box 6: Centre of Excellence in Maritime Robotics and Technologies for Sustainable Blue Economy (CoE MARBLE)

The CoE MARBLE project aims to establish the first Croatian centre of excellence in Maritime Robotics and Technologies for Sustainable Blue Economy. The initiative was one of the 13 selected projects of the 2023 Teaming for Excellence call, and was set to officially get started in January 2025. The six-year project is coordinated by the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing of the University of Zagreb (UNIZG-FER), in strategic partnership with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and the National Research Council of Italy.

The project focuses on enhancing Croatian R&I in four key areas: maritime robotics, green endurance, Internet of Things for maritime use, and digital twins for maritime applications. These areas will be applied to four blue economy sectors aligned with Croatia's S3: maritime security, aquaculture and fisheries, coastal tourism, and maritime transportation.

The project received a total funding of EUR 30 million, of which about half was granted by HE funds and half through the Croatian Competitiveness and Cohesion Operational Programme, which implements ERDF and Cohesion Fund allocations. With this budget, major investments in infrastructure and equipment are planned, and it is expected that more than 50 experts will be employed.

Sources: European Commission. (2024). [MARBLE: Centre of Excellence in Maritime Robotics and Technologies for Sustainable Blue Economy](#). CORDIS. And: National Research Council (CNR). (2024). [The first European Centre of Excellence in Croatia: FER and partners establishing CoE MARBLE](#).

Furthermore, to expand teaming projects and better connect less and more innovative regions, the Commission established the Regional Innovation Valleys (**RIVs**) initiative in 2024 as one of the New European Innovation Agenda (**NEIA**) novel actions. The RIVs facilitate interregional collaboration activities and connect more and less innovative regions with complementary S3s, thereby ultimately bridging the regional innovation divide while addressing the grand societal challenges the EU is facing. In June 2024, the Commission identified 151 RIVs, which will be supported by HE and ERDF with a total budget of EUR 116 million (European Commission, 2024c). Part of the RIVs had been identified through coordinated HE calls, which required 50% complementary funding from an alternative source to support interregional innovation projects.

Despite these noteworthy developments, MSs face several challenges related to the implementation of synergies in this framework:

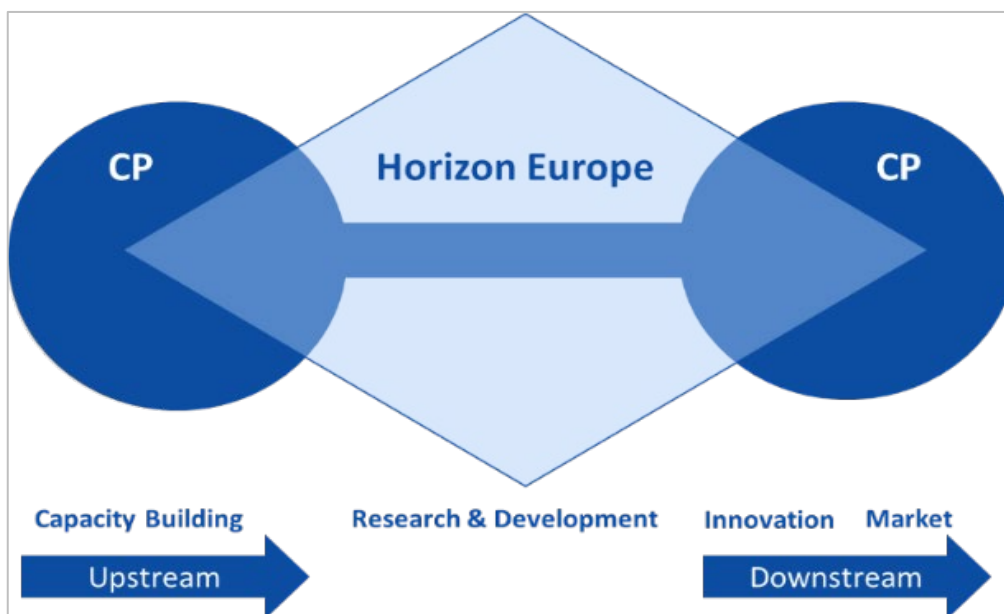
- **Timing and regulatory alignment.** For example, ERDF calls for the provision of complementary funding were not coordinated with the corresponding Teaming calls – an issue which had been already identified in 2018 by the JRC (Özbolat & Harrap, 2018). In addition, the deadline to incur and recover costs differed between H2020 and ERDF funds. These challenges remain open issues, as highlighted by the European Court of Auditors (2022a) as well as in the RIMA report (2025). These two challenges make it difficult for MAs to find complementary funding, which is a prerequisite to implementing the Teaming synergy and receiving HE budget (Rzhevkina, 2024). To increase the uptake of such synergies in the next programming period, enhancing the alignment of the timing of the calls and/or offering flexibility in cases of delayed approvals would be beneficial. Alternatively, a special budget could be planned during the programme drafting to take into account co-funding opportunities that emerge during the programming period (RIMA, 2025);

- **Complementary funding from ERDF often arrives with a delay**, due to cumbersome administrative procedures. This has slowed down, for example, some modernisation projects of centres of excellence, as these funds typically cover infrastructure and equipment costs (European Court of Auditors, 2022b). The REA has taken measures to standardise the monitoring process of complementary funding, to enable corrective actions when required. Next to delays, some beneficiaries have also experienced limitations in using ERDF funds to cover required expense items and had to mobilise national funds instead (RIMA, 2025);
- **Recruitment of high-level researchers is challenging**, yet crucial for improving a country's R&I performance. The process is time-consuming and difficult because researchers must be willing to relocate, despite the perceived low appeal of working in centres of excellence in widening countries. This is often due to factors like unattractive salaries. To address this matter, the HE Regulation now explicitly states in Article 7(5) that MSs should set attractive salaries with the support of available funds. Additionally, some MSs face challenges in establishing experienced management teams that are able to operate in line with international best practices (Rzhevkina, 2024); and
- **Ensuring sustainability** remains challenging as it is difficult for projects to seek further competitive grant funding and/or to generate income through the exploitation of research results. The goal is for centres of excellence involved in Teaming projects to become self-sustainable within six years. One initiative launched to support this is the "Excellence Hubs," which strengthen connections between science and business and focus on networking and policy development. However, since Excellence Hubs are topic-specific, they may be less beneficial for Teaming projects in unrelated fields. In addition, long-term sustainability requires private investments which is difficult to attract (Rzhevkina, 2024).

### 3.2.6. Upstream and downstream synergies

Upstream synergies occur when CP funds are used to build the R&I capacities needed for successful participation in HE. For their part, downstream synergies leverage CP funds to capitalise on HE projects results and support their national and regional uptake. For clarification, the logic of upstream and downstream synergies is presented in Figure 6. When HE and CP funds are seamlessly coordinated across all innovation stages, especially in alignment with EU priorities, they can significantly enhance the impact of innovations and have the potential to generate broader social and economic benefits throughout the EU. The realisation of upstream and downstream synergies requires close cooperation between relevant actors, and in particular between the EU and national authorities involved in the HE and CP funds programming and implementation.

Figure 6: Upstream and downstream synergies between HE and CP funds



Source: Adapted from European Court of Auditors, 2022b.

### Upstream synergies

Capacity-building activities supporting the HE application process are key to improving HE participation rates, particularly in MSs with lower participation in FPs. In 2022, the European Court of Auditors found that half of the MAs are implementing upstream synergies (European Court of Auditors, 2022a). The high uptake of upstream synergies may be due to them being less challenging to implement. It has also been noted that these often arise incidentally, as their structured development, especially for specific topics, is time-intensive (RIMA, 2025).

To encourage a more structured and strategic approach towards upstream synergies in the RIMA report it is suggested that additional funding to MAs for technical assistance is provided, to allow them to map opportunities at programme level and identify relevant stakeholders and potential beneficiaries. This would enable the targeted initiation of upstream synergies. Moreover, better alignment of timing and requirements between HE and ERDF during the programming phase is crucial for planning and facilitating upstream synergies.

### Downstream synergies

Downstream synergies are a major opportunity in ensuring the uptake of new R&I technologies, thereby increasing the impact of the FP while at the same time providing access to state-of-the-art-technologies to widening countries (European Court of Auditors, 2022b). However, the ECA highlighted the scarcity of downstream synergies in the previous programming period. They found that only 2 out of the 15 MSs that contributed to the study had implemented downstream synergies. This situation has not improved in the current programming period, with **only 3 out of 16 MSs reporting the implementation of downstream synergies to date** (RIMA, 2025).

The main challenges identified by the ECA during the H2020 period remain during the current programming period. These include:

- **Limited understanding** of downstream synergies and their benefits among relevant stakeholders. Additionally, political support and the necessary capabilities to promote and implement downstream synergies are lacking; and

- **Limited collaboration between the Commission and MSs** to exchange data on downstream synergy opportunities. In addition, MAs are often unfamiliar with the CORDIS database and other sites where HE projects results can be found.

Aware of these shortcomings and to foster the structured implementation of upstream and downstream synergies, **the Commission launched the “Pathways to synergies” call** for proposals in March 2023, to provide support for synergies between HE and CP and overcome barriers between regional and European approaches. Specifically, the call aims to enable beneficiaries of CP funds to become more competitive in HE (upstream synergy), and to set up incentives for the valorisation and uptake of Horizon results by improved access to regional funds for beneficiaries of HE projects with validated results (downstream synergy).

The call closed in September 2023 and received 33 eligible proposals, of which **16 proposals were selected for funding with a total budget of EUR 20 million** (European Commission, 2024). 11 projects will be dedicated to upstream synergies, focusing on human resources development and internationalisation facilitating capacity building. The other 5 projects focus on downstream synergies and aim to increase the advancement and commercialisation of research results. Box 7 and Box 8 below provide examples of two of the selected projects.

The projects have officially started over the course of 2024, and most of them are expected to conclude by 2026 or 2027. Their impact on enhancing innovation capacity, competitiveness in widening countries, as well as the uptake of advanced technologies is to become evident over the coming years. The evaluation of these outcomes will provide insights into the effectiveness of the synergies and their contribution to bridging regional and EU-level innovation gaps.

#### Box 7: MILESTONE project: focusing on upstream synergies

The “Upstream synergies to overcome Locked-in effects in widening regions and broaden internationalization pathways for sustainable innovation and competitive grant applications” (MILESTONE) project establishes a collaboration between three widening countries’ academic institutes: Panepistimio Patron (Greece), Kemijski Institut (Slovenia), Masarykova Univerzita (Czechia) and a higher-performing country academic institute, Université d’Aix-Marseille (France). The MILESTONE project focuses on internationalising the widening partners to improve their access to EU R&I consortia in joint HE applications as well as to enhance and improve their R&I capacity thereby ultimately reducing the innovation gap among EU regions.

Source: European Commission. (2024). [Upstream synergies to overcome Locked-in effects in widening regions and broaden internationalization pathways for sustainable innovation and competitive grant applications](#). CORDIS.

#### Box 8: 6SAVA project: focusing on downstream synergies

The “6thSense Asset Valorisation Action” (6SAVA) is a project that aims to drive the commercialisation of the outcomes from the H2020 SIXTHSENSE project. During the SIXTHSENSE project (2021-2023) the respective consortium developed an industry 4.0 health monitoring device that ensures employee safety in physically demanding manufacturing jobs (e.g. in the cement industry) and a comprehensive IT solution for firefighter operational management.

Now, in the 6SAVA project the respective consortium aims to bring these successful outcomes of the SIXTHSENSE project to a larger market, including the Republic of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The main goal of 6SAVA is to align the technology specifications with the S3s and needs of the local industrial actors to leverage national and regional funding, thereby realising downstream synergies. The ultimate goal of the project is to enlarge the uptake of the SIXTHSENSE project outcomes, creating a wide-reaching positive impact throughout the region’s technological landscape.

Source: European Commission. (2024). [6thSense Asset Valorisation Action](#). CORDIS; [Sixth Sense. An EU H2020 Research and Innovation Action](#) (Last accessed: 13 January 2025).

## 4. SYNERGIES - DRIVERS AND BARRIERS

As reflected in the disparate degree of implementation by synergy type described in the previous section, both the planning and the effective implementation of synergies between HE and CP instruments are influenced by several interplaying factors. Understanding these drivers and barriers is essential for optimising resources and enhancing the use and impact of complementary funding mechanisms.

Stakeholders at the EU, national and local level interviewed in the context of this study identified several factors encompassing intertwined political, regulatory, strategic and operational dimensions that either hinder or facilitate synergy realisation. Focusing on the insights from such interviews and drawing on complementary perspectives stemming from the literature and data reviewed, the main detected practical drivers and barriers for the planning and implementation of synergies are reported hereunder. Table 3 below provides a summary of the main points.

One of the main and most frequently mentioned instrumental factors is the **alignment of programme objectives and governance models between HE and CP funds**. This is a persistent challenge to synergy creation that has been highlighted by many interviewees and emphasised in several earlier studies (ERA LEARN, 2021; European Court of Auditors, 2022b; Schwab, 2024). As outlined in Table 1, the policy objectives, management approaches and priority setting mechanisms, among others, vary significantly and sometimes even appear to be incompatible. Notwithstanding this, common ground has consistently been found in the key technologies and societal challenges that R&I is set to address through any funding sources (Doussineau & Bachtrögler-Unger, 2021), which is in fact the reasoning behind the existence of the synergy mechanisms themselves. As one interviewed researcher pointed out, **synergies should not be conceived as an end in themselves, but as means to achieve greater innovation outcomes that are common to HE and CP goals**.

In practical terms, the **differing policy objectives and timing cycles between programmes** create challenges in aligning strategic priorities with funding opportunities in advance, as required by the relevant regulations. These misalignments often complicate compliance efforts and hinder effective implementation. For instance, strategic planning for HE is outlined in the Work Programmes, whereas for CP funds, it is detailed in Operational Programmes and S3, each following distinct development processes. To meet mandatory alignment requirements, it is crucial to consider potential synergies during the very drafting of these documents. On top of that, some of the interviewees representing MAs noted that anticipating synergies sometimes years in advance is not only challenging but also potentially inefficient. They emphasised that if synergies are not carefully planned at this early stage, they often become exceedingly difficult to implement later. Furthermore, differences in evaluation processes at the EU, national, and regional levels frequently require project proposals to be adjusted, undermining the efficiency gains synergies are meant to deliver. This misalignment in timing and preparation complicates project cohesiveness, often resulting in fragmented or inefficient implementation (RIMA, 2025).

As regards **regulatory alignment and simplification**, although advancements have been achieved as compared to the 2014-2020 programming period, more legislative adjustments and coordination between implementing institutions at the different levels are essential to maximise the implementation and impact of synergies. The simplification of state aid rules by means of the GBER amendment, the inclusion of mirrored provisions in the HE Regulation and the CPR to facilitate synergies, and the publication of the *Commission Notice on Synergies* were all regarded as good examples of steps taken in the right direction. Yet there is still room for improvement, for instance by adjusting the timing for allocation negotiations and correcting documentation requirements mismatches.

Interviewees reported complications in planning funds complementarities also due to the heavy administrative burden they experience in dealing with many different applicable frameworks. Notably, from an interview with actors involved in the policy-making process, it emerged that some of the perceived barriers might stem more from a lack of information or access to available tools rather than from challenges related to regulatory processes. This underscores the crucial importance of strengthening dissemination efforts and cooperation among stakeholders.

In this vein, another key instrumental factor in seeking synergies was indicated to be the **collaboration between EU, national and regional authorities**, all of which retain key competences in the synergistic processes. In this sense the establishment of the RIMA network and of other CoP were recognised as increasing cooperation efforts, which provide opportunities for best-practice showcasing and know-how systematisation. These collaboration spaces are, however, deemed to be still in their early stages, highly Commission-dependent and limited to certain stakeholders. Moreover, while acknowledging the progress made, particularly in terms of **awareness** of the options for synergies, the progress made and some implemented processes, interviewees pointed to the benefits yet to be gained from greater transparency and broader representativeness.

The **frequent involvement of various authorities from different governance levels within the same MS** was highlighted as another common obstacle, often leading to increased complexity and inefficiencies due to overlapping roles and differing capacities. This challenge was referred to be particularly pronounced in less centralised countries, where regions have more heterogeneous R&I competences and capacities. The interaction between those bodies responsible for allocating cohesion funds, regional authorities defining S3 and institutions managing research in the field emerged as a significant issue. While efforts such as the development of tailored and updated guidelines to align regional practices with national requirements were noted in some jurisdictions, it was said that the introduction of simplified processes and centralised support materials, with backing from the EU, would enhance the coherence and efficiency of these interactions.

**Expertise and administrative capacity** to successfully identify available opportunities and implement synergies were noted as remaining limited for many stakeholders. The administratively complex and time-intensive nature of some of the synergy implementation process was reflected in the demonstrative cases referred to in this study, and underscored again by several interviewees. In operational terms, one of the most resonant concerns that emerged from the interviews was **the bureaucratic burden that both MAs and beneficiary institutions, but also researchers themselves have to bear**. This was especially said to affect those regions or institutions with less administrative capacity or resources –often located in lower-performing regions– where the workload arising from the differing documentation and information required is more likely to end up affecting the research results themselves.

Another important factor that was largely raised and explored in previous studies regards **data availability, interoperability and monitoring** (See: European Court of Auditors, 2022b). Since the start of the 2021–2027 period, some progress has been made, including the creation of open dashboards on Horizon Europe data, offering among others, detailed information on projects awarded a SoE,<sup>39</sup> as well as other improvements in the Kohesio and CORDIS databases. While this has helped the visibility of certain synergies, persistent data gaps and a lack of interoperability between these databases –which continue to operate as separate environments– keep on hindering the MAs' and

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<sup>39</sup> See for example Horizon Dashboards on [R&I Proposals](#), on [R&I Projects](#), or the [R&I Seal of Excellence Dashboard](#). Last accessed 2 December 2024.

other stakeholders' full understanding of synergies and impede measuring the degree and impact of their implementation, causing further fragmentation<sup>40</sup>. In this context, the absence of legal obligations for data collection and reporting is a critical challenge. As noted by several interviewees, the currently available data is often derived from unsystematic, voluntary submissions by stakeholders or ad hoc responses to specific requests from MAs, which in turn limits the Commission's ability to systematise and analyse it effectively.

Finally, several interviewees noted the additional complication of what has been referred to in other work, as the **siloed approach, i.e. the relatively independent proliferation of multiple, potentially complementary and sometimes overlapping initiatives**, with respective rules and conditions (European Commission et al., 2024). The multiplicity of funding instruments, networks and alliances that have been developed to boost R&I ecosystems at the European level is indicative of the large investment that is being made, but at the same time, it gives rise to a lack of clarity to beneficiaries on the ground and may generate operational inefficiencies in terms of synergies. Clearly defining and communicating each instrument's goals, funding possibilities and added value, as well as its potential interactions with other funding schemes would help maximise the benefits each can provide.

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<sup>40</sup> As introduced in Section 1.2 above, this barrier is both a major challenge for stakeholders and a limitation for the present analysis.

Table 3: Drivers and barriers - Summary per category

Category	Drivers	Barriers
<b>Programme objectives and governance alignment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common innovation goals and challenges out of shared key technologies and societal challenges.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Differing policy objectives and timing cycles complicating strategic alignment.</li> <li>Variations in evaluation processes.</li> </ul>
<b>Regulatory alignment and simplification</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simplification of key provisions to facilitate synergies (such as achieved with the state aid rules, or the mirrored provisions in the HE Regulation and the CPR).</li> <li>Publication of practical guidance documents (such as the <i>Commission Notice on Synergies</i>).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mismatches in the timing for allocation negotiations and documentation requirements.</li> <li>Heavy administrative burden due to multiple applicable frameworks.</li> <li>Insufficient awareness on available regulatory tools.</li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration and cooperation among authorities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishment of networks such as the RIMA and other CoP.</li> <li>Strengthening best practices sharing and dissemination efforts among stakeholders to continue increasing awareness.</li> <li>Greater transparency and broader representativeness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collaboration spaces are still limited.</li> <li>Complexity due to involvement of multiple authorities with overlapping roles.</li> </ul>
<b>Administrative capacity and expertise</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Support material and activities to align EU, MS and regional requirements and implementation practices.</li> <li>Introduction of simplified processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited expertise and administrative capacity to identify opportunities and implement synergies (particularly in lower-performing MSs/regions).</li> <li>Bureaucratic burden of operationalising synergies leads to operational inefficiencies and discourages MAs and beneficiaries alike.</li> </ul>
<b>Data availability, interoperability, and monitoring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creation of open data dashboards.</li> <li>Availability of synergy-specific data.</li> <li>Increased awareness of synergy options and implemented processes by best-practice sharing.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Persistent data gaps and lack of interoperability between databases.</li> <li>Absence of legal obligations for data collection and reporting.</li> <li>Reliance on unsystematic, voluntary data submissions limiting analysis.</li> </ul>
<b>Visibility and accessibility of available R&amp;I funding instruments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Better definition and communication of each available instrument's goals, funding possibilities, and potential interactions and complementarities with other schemes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Siloed approach with multiple, often overlapping, initiatives and varying rules, causing confusion and operational inefficiencies.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

## 5. LESSONS LEARNT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This report has examined the evolution of synergies between HE and CP funds, observing certain progress in regulatory alignment, cooperation, and actual implementation as compared to the previous programming period. The factors considered instrumental by interviewed stakeholders were identified, along with their positive or negative effects on the generation of synergies. Comparing the current situation with the end of the 2014–2020 programming period reveals that several steps have been taken in some areas, leading to a relatively more intense pursuit of synergies. However, progress in the consistent uptake of synergies appears slow, and significant strategic gaps between programmes and specific initiatives persist. As found by Heitor et al., further efforts are required to substantially increase R&I overall investment in the EU, and it can be noted that synergies between HE and CP funds remain largely untapped (European Commission, 2024b, 2024i).

While some cases illustrate that certain synergy mechanisms are beginning to be adopted in widening countries –with promising interest and potential impact– significant barriers are still reported to persist, particularly for stakeholders with fewer resources. As a result, the cost-benefit analysis of engaging in synergies remains uncertain and can vary significantly from one case to another. Considering the fundamental role of cohesion funds in financing R&I in less-developed regions, addressing these challenges becomes crucial.

Simplifying processes, aligning requirements and procedures, and optimising timelines are thus essential steps towards making synergies more accessible and ultimately reducing inequalities. The Commission-led actions in the current period –a series of key regulatory adjustments, the *Notice on Synergies*, and cooperation enhancement networks, among others– were generally viewed as valuable attempts to make MAs and other stakeholders more aware and open-minded about synergies. Yet as claimed by some interviewees working in EU R&I policy implementation, for these measures to be fully successful, they must be complemented by strengthening awareness-raising efforts and capacity-building support. This is essential not only for funding managing bodies to promote synergies but also for researchers aiming to scale up their innovation outcomes.

By systematically addressing persistent barriers and leveraging the lessons learnt from successful initiatives –from overarching strategic mismatches to specific operational solutions– policymakers, authorities, and researchers can collaboratively develop tailored arrangements to maximise synergies and enhance innovation outcomes. In this sense, the following actionable steps reflect potential pathways forward as learnt in the research process:

- **Pursue further regulatory simplification and harmonisation** across funding programmes to minimise administrative burdens on MAs and researchers:
  - Enhance alignment in policy design to avoid overlapping initiatives and foster complementary opportunities;
  - Consider a one-stop-shop approach with supporting materials to simplify the understanding of all R&I funding options and requirements, improving visibility and accessibility; and
  - Account for differing policy cycles, call timings, and documentation processes, allowing for flexibility to broaden the “administrative” window of opportunity;
- **Develop a unified strategic framework** involving stakeholders from all relevant fields of competence at the EU, national and regional levels to better align policy and programme’s objectives and procedures, thus reinforcing collaboration throughout the entire programming cycle, from design to implementation:
  - Establish mechanisms to better align EU priorities with regional needs and with S3, considering a place-based demand-supply logic;

- Promote the funding of all SoE awarded projects, especially from widening countries; and
- Focus the assessment of synergies on the impact of funding on innovation outcomes and sustainable R&I capacity building;
- **Continue enhancing formal mechanisms for coordination and cooperation among authorities at all governance levels** to reduce overlaps and foster a deeper and more efficient uptake of synergies:
  - Encourage wider engagement in platforms like the RIMA network, increase transparency and visibility, and produce implementation guidelines tailored to practitioners and local contexts, thus helping to overcome reluctance to change; and
  - Enhance synergies-related networking and cooperation among stakeholders at the local level, matching stakeholders by thematic specialisation or relevant S3 objectives;
- **Implement targeted capacity-building initiatives and provide comprehensive guidance** to increase awareness and technical ability to take advantage of synergy opportunities:
  - Foster improved and simplified interactions between authorities managing different programmes at the national and regional levels; and
  - Provide technical support and training to MAs, research institutions, SMEs, and individuals to strengthen their capabilities; and
- **Continue enhancing data collection and dissemination practices** to generate performance and impact indicators for synergies outcomes:
  - Establish periodic data reporting obligations on synergy implementation to ensure timely and accurate information;
  - Set incentives for data sharing among stakeholders to facilitate transparency and collaborative analysis; and
  - Create data-based monitoring mechanisms to track progress and inform policy adjustments effectively.

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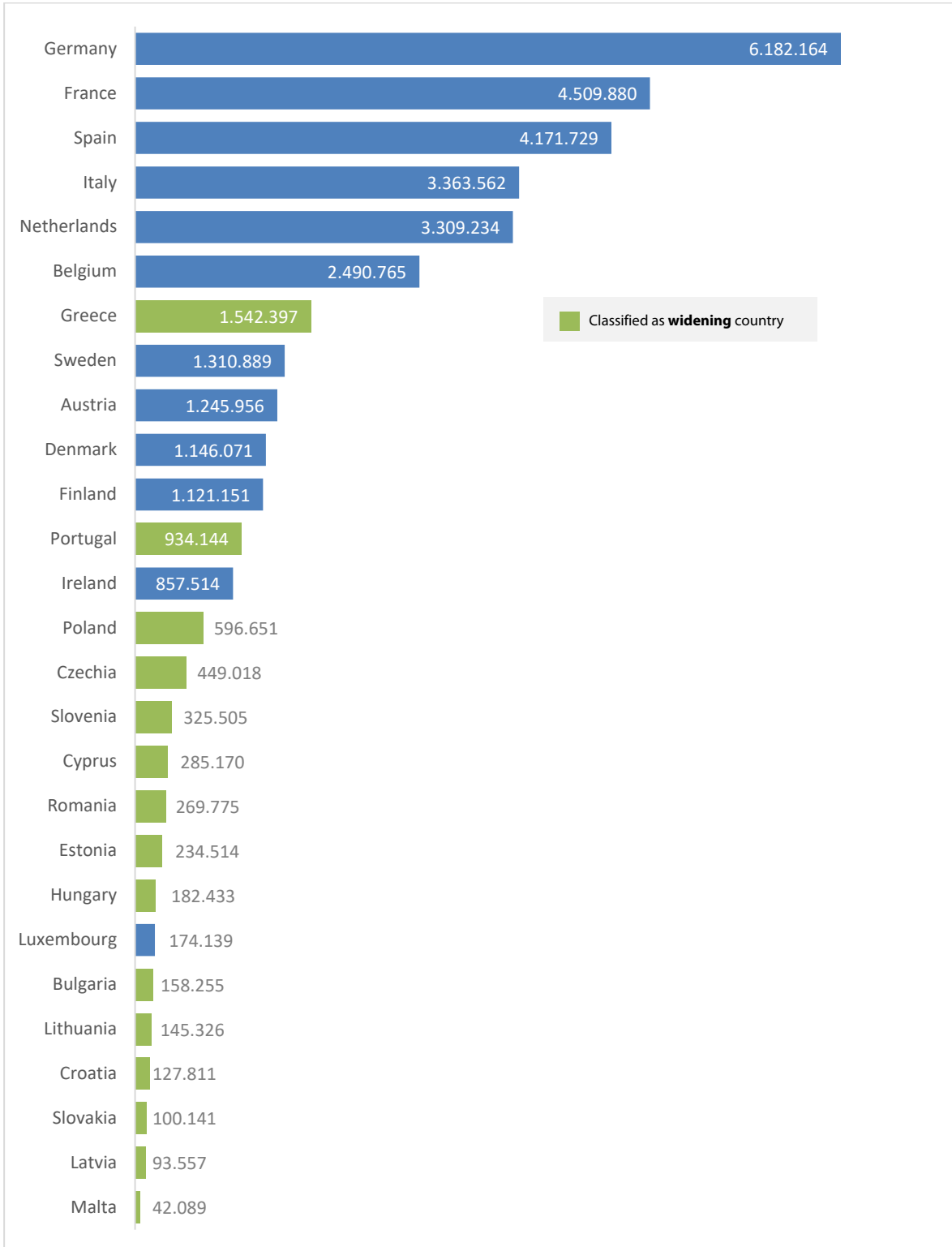
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## ANNEX 1 HE AND CP FUNDING CONTEXTUAL DATA

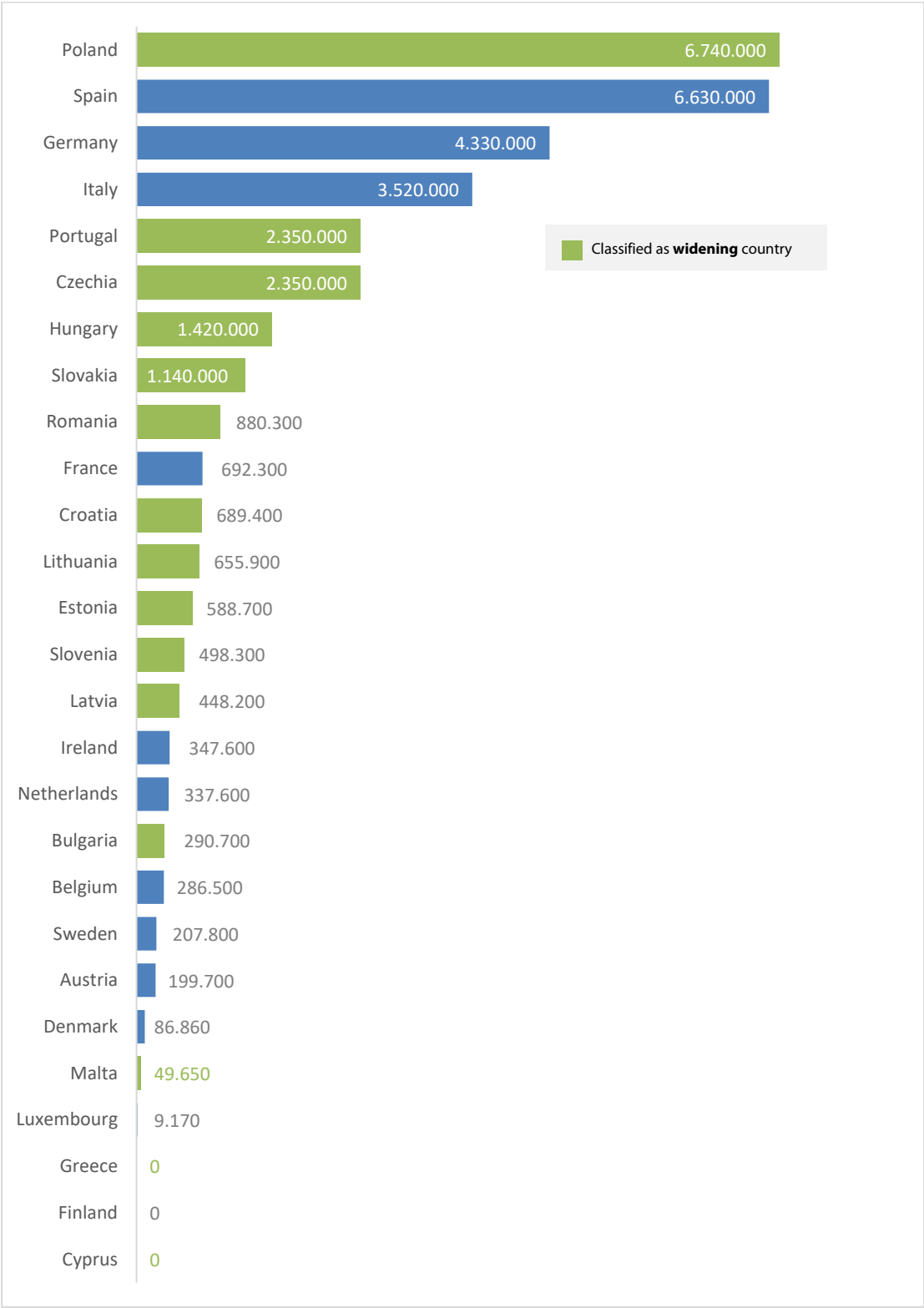
Figure 7: Horizon Europe Net EU Contribution\* per MS (x 1.000 EUR)



Source: Data retrieved from the [Horizon Dashboard \(Self-service BI\)](#) on January 9, 2025.

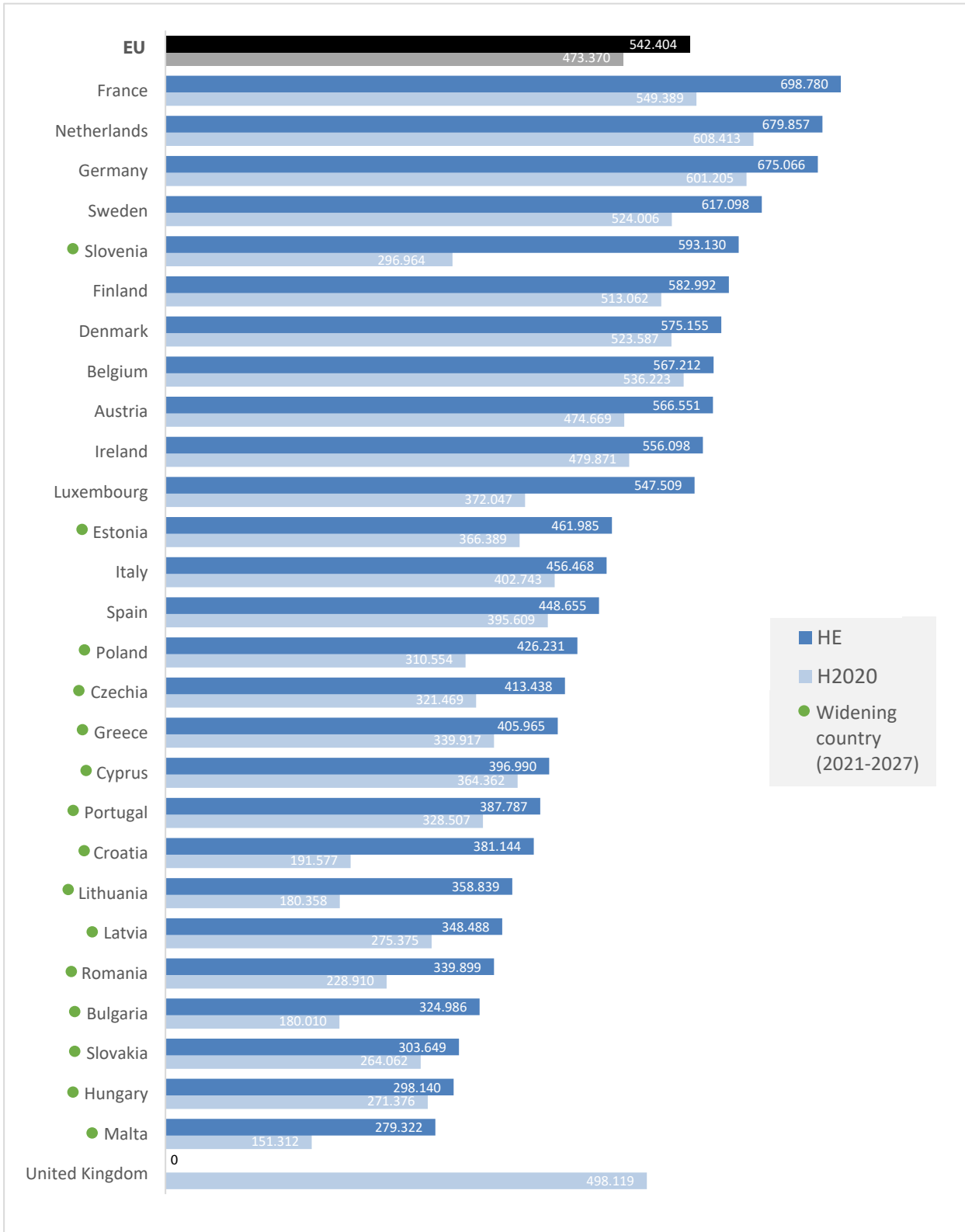
\* Net EU contribution = Funding received by the project’s participants after the deduction of their linked third parties’ funding.

Figure 8: ERDF Contribution to R&I (x 1.000 EUR) per MS, 2021-2024



Source: Data retrieved from the [Horizon Dashboard \(R&I Country profiles\)](#) on January 14, 2025.

Figure 9: Total costs\* per participant\*\* per MS for HE and for H2020 (in EUR)

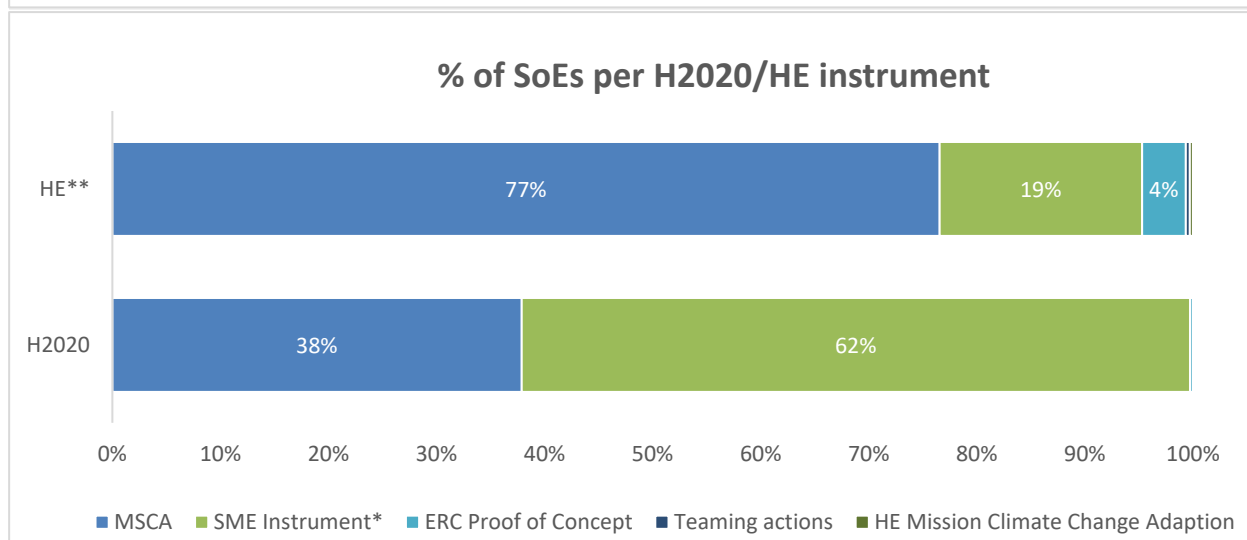
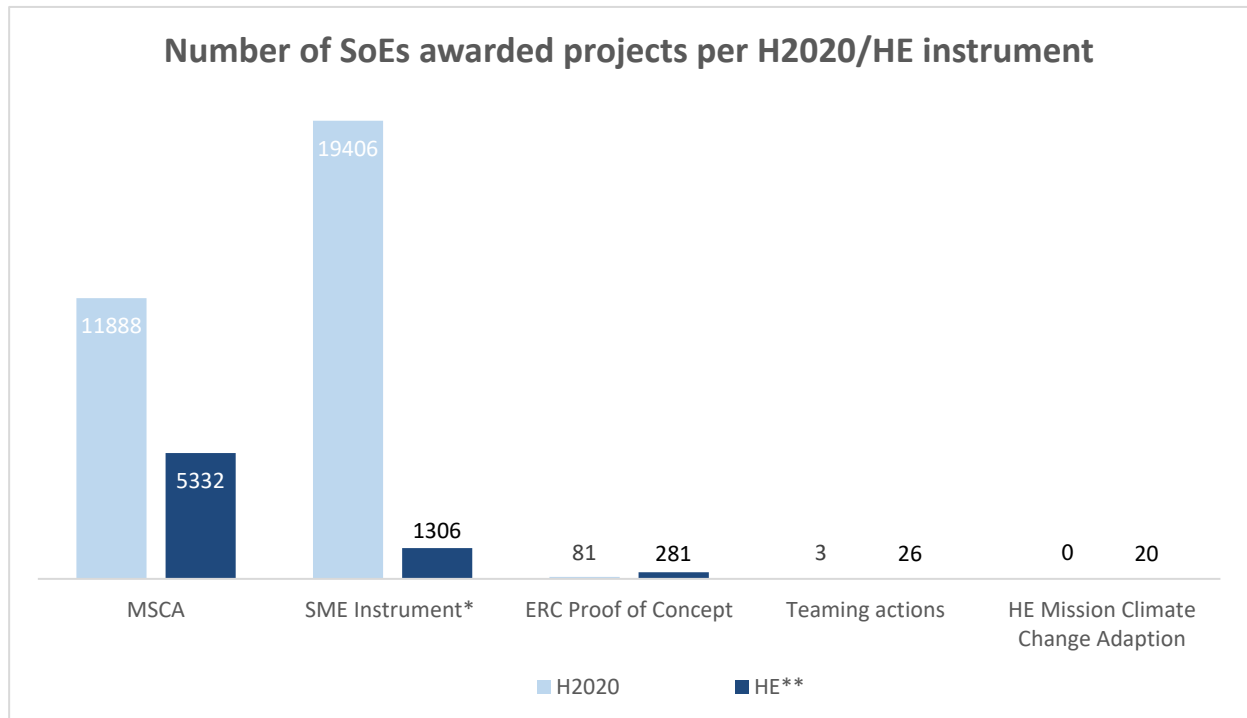


Source: Data retrieved from the [Horizon Dashboard \(Self-service BI\)](#) on January 9, 2025.

\* Total costs = Total costs of the selected projects, covered partially by the EU contribution but also by other funding sources.

\*\* Participant = Number of organisations involved in the selected projects. One organisation participating in N projects is counted N times.

## ANNEX 2 AWARDED SEALS OF EXCELLENCE PER PROGRAMMING PERIOD



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on 2024 data provided by DG RTD.

Notes:

\* The Commission launched the SoE in 2015 for projects submitted by SMEs under the H2020 "SME Instrument", later known as the "European Innovation Council (EIC) Accelerator". In the graph, the H2020 numbers show the SoEs awarded under the SME Instrument, and the HE numbers show the SoEs awarded under the EIC Accelerator as well as the EIC Transition projects.

\*\* HE data available until November 18, 2024.

## ANNEX 3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE EXAMPLE

### PART I – INTRODUCTIONS & RECORDING

#### Study context

Over the years the investments of the European Union (EU) in Research and Innovation (R&I) have increased significantly. Currently, the two main EU funding instruments supporting R&I activities are Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy. With the increasing competitive pressure from global markets and the grand societal challenges the EU faces, the significance of creating synergies between these two instruments to achieve greater innovation outcomes is becoming increasingly important. However, due to different objectives and governance creating such synergies can be challenging.

In this regard, the current study aims to examine the status of synergies and complementarities between HE and CP and ultimately aims to provide insights on how to improve these synergies in the remaining years of the current 2021-2027 programming period.

1. Do you have any **questions** regarding the project or things you would like to clarify before we start with the questions?
2. Would you be comfortable with us **recording** (for internal purposes only) and taking notes throughout our conversation?

### PART II – EVOLUTION OF SYNERGIES

3. What specific changes have been introduced in the current programming period to improve or facilitate synergies between Horizon Europe (HE) and Cohesion Policy (CP)?
  - a. What is the observed or anticipated impact of these changes?
  - b. Based on current evidence, would you say synergies have improved compared to the previous period? Are there measurable indicators to support this assessment?

### PART III – SYNERGIES DRIVERS AND BARRIERS

4. In your view, what are the key drivers and barriers to fostering synergies between HE and CP?
  - a. Are there specific challenges related to the capacities of managing authorities in different Member States or regions?
  - b. How do differences in timing, administrative processes, or implementation policies across the two programmes or across national systems influence synergies?
5. Do you think some Member States or regions are more successful than others in implementing synergies between HE and CP?
  - a. What is limiting R&I funding programmes from reaching and benefiting all EU regions equally?
  - b. What instrumental factors or policy actions could address these disparities at the European level?
6. To what extent are strategic documents related to both programmes (e.g., Smart Specialisation Strategies, Operational Programmes, Work Programmes) actively used to plan or implement synergies?
  - a. Which actions could be taken to enhance the alignment of these documents to further promote synergies implementation?
7. From your perspective, how could the regulatory framework governing HE and CP be improved to better support synergies?
  - a. Are there specific changes you would recommend in terms of eligibility criteria, co-financing rules, applications timelines and requirements, or others?
8. What role does the Commission play or should play in monitoring and supporting synergies across Member States and regions?
  - a. Could further tools, platforms, or initiatives be introduced or improved to better track and facilitate synergies?
  - b. How can the Commission further assist managing authorities in overcoming technical or administrative barriers?

### PART IV – FINAL QUESTIONS

9. Do you have any further recommendations to improve synergies between CP and HE in the future?
10. Do you have any recommendations for the study in terms of data sources to consult?
11. Is there anything else that we might have missed, or that you would like to add?

**MANY THANKS FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTION**



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This study examines the evolution and the current status of implementation of synergies between Horizon Europe and the Cohesion Policy funds for research and innovation activities. It provides insights into the main barriers and drivers of these synergies uptake, along with possible pathways forward to achieve greater innovation outcomes.

This document was provided by the Policy Department for Transformation, Innovation and Health (DG ECTI) at the request of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE).

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PE 754.234

IP/A/ITRE/2024-04

Print

ISBN 978-92-848-2525-7 | doi: 10.2861/5557214 | QA-01-25-017-EN-N

PDF

ISBN 978-92-848-2526-4 | doi: 10.2861/1202164 | QA-01-25-017-EN-C