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# Policymakers call for greater speed in getting grants to researchers as Horizon Europe is formally launched

*Chair of the Parliament research and industry committee calls on Commission to ignore legal niceties and get money from new research programme flowing as soon as possible. MEPs also want more effort to create synergies with other funding streams*

By [Florin Zubaşcu](#) and [Éanna Kelly](#)



With great fanfare, the European Commission heralded the start of its next big R&D programme, Horizon Europe – but it caught some criticism for the fact that it will be months before the money starts flowing or the remaining practical details get settled.

EU research and innovation chief Mariya Gabriel formally launched the programme, urging the European Council and Parliament to conclude their negotiations on the final details of the programme as soon as possible and calling on the Portuguese presidency of the council to speed things along.

“I count on you to continue playing a key role as we finalise the strategic plan of Horizon Europe,” Gabriel told Portuguese science minister Manuel Heitor, during the online launch event of Horizon Europe. “I hope that we can advance during the Portuguese presidency in order to close what remains in the legislative process to have the new [research] partnerships landscape fully ready to start,” she said.

Under the leadership of the German Council presidency, policymakers reached agreement last December on the legal framework of Horizon Europe, but the second half of the legislation, detailing the specific research agenda, will not be finalised until April.

The Commission is planning to launch the official work programmes and first calls for proposal around the same date, but [many administrative and legal steps \(https://sciencebusiness.net/framework-programmes/news/let-party-begin-eu-commission-plans-symbolic-launch-horizon-europe\)](https://sciencebusiness.net/framework-programmes/news/let-party-begin-eu-commission-plans-symbolic-launch-horizon-europe) remain to be completed before any of the €95.5 billion budget can start flowing to researchers and innovators around the EU.

According to Gabriel, the EU-27 research budget has increased by 30% compared to the previous programme, Horizon 2020. “This is EU’s largest research and innovation programme,” she said.

However, the €95.5 billion budget is calculated at current, inflation-adjusted prices and it includes a €5 billion top-up from the pandemic recovery fund which only covers specific areas for a limited time period. In real terms, the final Horizon Europe budget is very close to funding levels of its predecessor if the UK’s contribution to the Horizon 2020 budget is also taken into account.

But MEPs say funding calls should start as soon as possible and the Commission should not wait for the publication of all final legal texts in the EU’s official journal. “Despite the difficult circumstances, we are calling for the automation of the programme, to be kicked off as soon as possible in the most inclusive manner, in order not to delay the start of any project and not to leave any European region behind,” said Cristian Buşoi MEP, chair of the ITRE research and industry committee in the European Parliament.

Buşoi echoed a view by Portuguese MEP Maria da Graça Carvalho, who is also urging the Commission and Council to speed up the first calls. “I urge you to also

work together with us, so that we can make rapid progress on all [remaining files] during the Portuguese presidency," Carvalho told Heitor during a meeting of the Parliament's research committee last week.

"I hope that we can bundle our strengths to try and ensure that Horizon Europe is implemented as rapidly as possible with a retroactive effect of going back to the first of January," she said.

Gabriel has also voiced her hope that the Portuguese presidency will also conclude negotiations on partnerships.

### **Making synergies work**

Horizon Europe has new legal provisions allowing the EU to pair different funding streams in order to boost research investment in member states and to reduce the innovation gap between richer and poorer countries.

However, bringing these synergies into play could become a source of friction for member states in the months and years ahead, given success hangs on member states appreciating – and acting on – the importance of investing in research and innovation.

Bușoi urged member states to make use of these new legal provisions and prioritise investments in research and innovation. "I'd like to encourage you today to spread the news and make use of this possibility," he said.

Gabriel has also urged EU research ministers to use the pandemic recovery fund to invest in research, and to align EU and national priorities. "We all have this chance in our hands," said Gabriel. "We can achieve together what would be impossible to achieve individually."

The Commission has delivered official recommendations on how the pandemic fund can support research systems. Maria Teresa Fabregas Fernandez, director at the Commission's task force for recovery and resilience, said all member states have received country specific recommendations. "We are encouraging member states to consider possible cross border projects and to find the right synergies with other instruments," she said.

“All member states should consider these synergies and new opportunities as they devise their national action plans [for recovery],” said Thomas Rachel, state secretary to the Federal Minister for education and research in Germany.

While the plan to pair up different funding schemes to boost investment in research and innovation is picking up steam, not all member states are fully on board.

Croatia intends to use recovery fund money to boost the capacity of research institutions, to improve the effectiveness of public investment in research and reach the 3% R&D spending target set by the EU by 2030. However, the government also wants to prioritise EU structural funds for other policies and investments. “I agree that synergies are key but it should not mean putting one policy in the service of another, but about fostering complementarity,” said science minister Radovan Fuchs.

The disagreements will not be settled politically over the next few months. “What is needed is political and practical attention to make these synergies work,” said Jean-Eric Paquet, the Commission’s director general for research and innovation.

### **Star scientist endorses Horizon**

While politicians were busy debating policy and legal details of the programme, the endorsement of the day for Horizon Europe came from one of the scientists behind the first COVID-19 vaccine to be approved by western regulators.

EU funding laid some of the ground for BioNTech, according to CEO Ugur Sahin, co-founder of the company in 2008 with his wife Ozlem Tureci. The German biotech firm co-developed its vaccine with US pharma giant Pfizer.

Now one of the most famous scientists on the planet, Sahin said EU backing helped him to pull together a team in Mainz over 20 years ago. Back then, the focus was on cancer vaccines.

Between 1998 and 2014, “We were helped by the 5th, 6th, and 7th EU framework programmes,” Sahin said.

In January 2020, Sahin first learned about COVID-19 from an article in the medical journal The Lancet. After a discussion with Tureci, he sent an email to the other

members of the BioNTech board, and the COVID-19 vaccine project was born.

Some 20 years after his research team came together, the result was the “shortest time to develop a vaccine in history,” Sahin said. Not that he is hogging the limelight. “It was the accomplishment of an ecosystem,” he said.

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