

Exploring synergies between Horizon Europe and the EU Cohesion Policy

Purpose of the Study

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The [original full study](#)¹ analyses the evolution and current implementation status of 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**).

Synergies between the HE and CP funding instruments, as defined in the study, result from **specific operational mechanisms that allow for identifying, pooling and exploiting funding complementarities**. These mechanisms aim to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of research and innovation (**R&I**) funding, ultimately driving **greater impact on innovation outcomes**.

Building on the achievements and obstacles of the operationalisation of synergies in the 2014-2020 programming period, the study assesses both the legal framework updates and the implementation status of those synergies pursued for the 2021-2027 period. It explores **the evolution of synergy mechanisms and the extent of their implementation to date**, and examines the **persistent barriers and key drivers to synergy realisation, considering regional disparities in R&I performance and funding concentration across the EU**.

Background

R&I framework programmes (such as HE) and the CP programmes both aim to drive the EU's sustainable growth, competitiveness, and innovation, yet they differ significantly in governance arrangements, funds allocation criteria, and primary target beneficiaries. In general, central-northern and western European regions show higher R&I investment intensities and innovation performance, leading to greater chances of success within the excellence-based competitive HE framework. Conversely, the "widening" countries, mainly from southern and eastern Europe, rely to a greater extent on CP structural funds contributions to sustain the development of their R&I systems.



As a result, the distribution of funds under both programmes unveils **noticeable disparities between EU regions in terms of R&I capabilities and funding sources**, indicating at the same time **the added value of exploiting complementarities between programmes**.



Indeed, the synergies between both types of EU funding have long been regarded as valuable tools for reducing the R&I divide and fostering the EU's innovation and competitiveness. First mentioned in 2007, they have been progressively incorporated into the legal instruments and increasingly put into practice. However, despite remarkable steps forward, the European Court of Auditors' assessment of synergies implementation in the 2014-2020 period found that they were "[not yet used to full potential](#)"².

Synergies Evolution and Implementation – Key Findings

To simplify the uptake of synergies, several **adjustments to the relevant regulations were introduced for the 2021-2027 period**, along with other efforts and instruments aimed at enhancing **the alignment of processes and coordination among stakeholders**. Amid these new developments, the *Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes* stands out as **key practical guidance**, enabling the identification of the **six types** of synergy mechanisms and their operationalisation procedures. In addition, the generation of **new initiatives** that boost R&I projects based on the combination of funds (such as STEP or the Regional Innovation Valleys), and of **networks for the coordination of R&I and cohesion funds managing authorities** have been significant advancements.

The six types of synergy mechanisms



Source: [Commission Notice on Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes 2022/C 421/03 of 4 November 2022](#).

However, despite the good progress made in the use and the visibility of synergy mechanisms, **the uptake of synergies between the HE and CP funds remains slow, with significant strategic and operational gaps between programmes persisting**. The study reports on the instrumental factors driving and hindering the implementation of each type of synergy, as well as their current state of adoption, showing promising progress in some mechanisms, but also some enduring barriers, which especially limit those with fewer resources.

Overall, a key challenge remains the alignment of objectives, requirements and processes between funding programmes, as **differing policy goals and timing cycles** complicate achieving synergies. Besides, **collaboration** among EU, national, and regional authorities **is still limited**, often hindered by overlapping roles and varying expertise or technical capacity. Moreover, while awareness of synergy opportunities has improved, identifying and assessing them remains challenging. This is due to **limited data availability**, poor interoperability between databases, and a "siloeed" approach to new initiatives.

Further **simplification, coordination and technical support** efforts are therefore required to maximise synergies, especially in view of the regulatory advances and the proliferation of innovative initiatives. To unlock the full potential of synergies, the **suggested pathways forward** include pursuing further regulatory simplification and harmonisation, developing a unified strategic framework bridging both HE and CP programmes, continuing enhancing coordination among authorities, implementing targeted capacity-building initiatives, and improving data collection to assess synergies' actual performance and impact.

¹ 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. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/754234/ECTI_STU\(2025\)754234_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/754234/ECTI_STU(2025)754234_EN.pdf).

² European Court of Auditors, 2022, *Special Report 23/2022: Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds - Not yet used to full potential*. Available at: https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications/SR22_23.

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