

Gender and geographical balance in the governance structures of Horizon 2020

Horizon 2020 is the EU's framework programme for research for the 2014-20 period. The programme's main aim is to enable world-class research and to facilitate innovation and collaboration between the public and private sectors. It rests on the three pillars of excellent science, industrial leadership and tackling societal challenges, and two specific objectives, namely (1) Spreading excellence and widening participation and (2) Science for and with society.¹

The programme plays a key role in delivering the Europe 2020 strategy for a smarter, sustainable, and inclusive growth, according to Article 4 of the Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013. It is also mentioned in the same Article that Horizon 2020 provides a common strategic framework for the Union's funding of excellent research and innovation. It aims to maximise the Union's value and impact, focusing on objectives and activities that cannot be efficiently executed by the Member States acting alone. Particularly, Article 5 (1) of the Regulation (EU) sets out the general objective of Horizon 2020 that is to contribute to building a society and an economy based on knowledge and innovation across the Union by leveraging additional research, development and innovation funding and by contributing to attaining research and development targets, including the target of 3 % of GDP for research and development across the Union by 2020.

For this purpose, considering Articles 5(2), (3) and (4) of the Regulation, the programme is to be implemented through three priorities: generating excellent science (Part I "Excellent science"), creating industrial leadership (Part II "Industrial leadership"), and tackling societal challenges (Part III "Societal challenges"). Also, specific objectives such as Part IV "Spreading excellence and widening participation", Part V "Science with and for society" and Part VI "Non-nuclear direct actions of the Joint Research Centre" will help to meet the programme's general objective.

The programme is partly under direct management by Commission DGs and their executive agencies and partly under indirect management by other bodies as per Article 187 TFEU. In contrast to the EU's main spending programmes under the regional and agricultural policies, there are neither national financial envelopes nor is there shared management with the Member States. Instead, there are competitive calls that aim to identify excellent research projects to be funded from the programme, independent of geographical considerations.

While research excellence is the main criterion for funding, the programme does take into account gender and geographical balance in its governance structures and addresses inequalities between the sexes and between the Member States in terms of application and success rates and other aspects through various mechanisms.

¹ For details on the structure of Horizon 2020, please see this in-depth analysis: Reillon, Vincent (2015): [Horizon 2020 budget and implementation: A guide to the structure of the programme](#). European Parliament: EPRS



This briefing first briefly examines the Treaty base for gender and geographical balance in the EU's actions. Then, it gives an overview of how gender and geographical balance are considered in the legal framework of Horizon 2020, and specifically in its governance structures such as the European Research Council (ERC).

Gender and geographical balance in the Legal Framework of the EU

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) states: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities." In the second sentence of this article, equality between women and men is explicitly enshrined as a core value common to the Member States. Article 3(3) TEU tasks the EU with promoting equality between the sexes. Article 8 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) stipulates that "[I]n all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and promote equality, between men and women." Consequently, gender equality should be a consideration for all of the EU's actions. In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, Article 21 prohibits any discrimination on any ground, including sex; Article 23 of the Charter maintains that "Equality between women and men must be ensured in all areas, including employment, work and pay."

The EU has given itself a clear legal framework as regards the equality between women and men. As a consequence, equality of women and men should play a role both in all its policies and in the internal organisation of its institutions. Recruitment of managerial positions and general staffing procedures constitute prime examples. For gender equality to be achieved, women and men are expected to participate proportionally to their share of the population in all areas of work, projects or programmes (as defined by the European Institute for Gender Equality).²

Regarding geographical balance, the Treaties are less explicit than with regard to gender balance. However, 'equality' as mentioned in Article 2 TEU also pertains to that domain. Article 4 TEU stipulates that the Union needs to respect the equality of Member States before the Treaties, and Article 9 TEU binds the Union to 'observe the principle [...] of the equality of its citizens' in all its activities and states that the citizens 'shall receive equal attention from its institutions, bodies, offices and agencies'. Discrimination on the basis of nationality is thus prohibited, and the latter article also serves as the basis for relevant provisions in the Staff Regulation of the EU, for example.

Gender and geographical balance in the legal basis of Horizon 2020 with a focus on the European Research Council

Horizon 2020 as the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) is established under Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013. Council Decision of 3 December 2013 establishes the specific programme implementing Horizon 2020. It is complemented by Regulation (EU) No 1290/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down the rules for participation and dissemination in the programme.

Recital 25 of Regulation 1291/2013 cites Articles 2 and 3 TEU and Article 8 TFEU and sets out the overarching approach of the programme as regards gender balance: The programme's activities "should promote equality between women and men in research and innovation, by addressing in

² <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1148>. Accessed 09/10/2020.

particular the underlying causes of gender imbalance, by exploiting the full potential of both female and male researchers, and by integrating the gender dimension into the research and innovation content as well as by paying particular attention to ensuring gender balance, subject to the situation in the field of research and innovation concerned, in evaluation panels and in other relevant advisory and expert bodies in order to improve the quality of research and to stimulate innovation.”

Article 16 is entitled ‘Gender Equality’ and is concerned with promoting gender equality and the gender dimension in the content of research and innovation. It also repeats the language from Recital 25, ensuring that ‘particular attention’ is paid to ensuring gender balance in evaluation panels and in other relevant advisory and expert bodies, subject to the situation in the specific field. Its second paragraph makes a commitment to mainstream the gender dimension by adequately integrating it “in research and innovation content in strategies, programmes and projects and followed through at all stages of the research cycle”.

Article 19 of Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 demands all research and innovation activities carried out under Horizon 2020 to comply with ethical principles and relevant national, Union and international legislation, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights and its Supplementary Protocol, in which particular attention shall be paid to the right to non-discrimination.

Article 31 obliges the Commission to take up the dimension of gender equality in its annual monitoring of the programme. Article 32 says that the scope for promoting gender balance needs to be reported upon in the interim evaluation of the programme.

In Annex I on “Broad lines of the specific objectives and activities”, gender is identified as a cross-cutting issue to be addressed “in order to rectify imbalances between women and men, and to integrate a gender dimension in research and innovation programming and content.”

The same annex also provides detailed information on the role of the European Research Council (ERC), stating its specific objective to reinforce the excellence, dynamism and creativity of European research and setting out how its funding should be awarded. Here, “scientific excellence shall be the sole criterion” (see also Article 6(5) of Council Decision 2013/743), with the ERC operating in a bottom-up logic without predetermined priorities. Its grants shall be open to individual researchers of any age, gender, and from any country in the world, working in Europe. The competitive procedures used need to be “robust, transparent and impartial” and “address, in particular, potential gender bias”.

A researcher’s gender should thus not play a role, just as their nationality, institution or age. Any measures to ensure geographical balance are notably absent, as such measures would run counter to the idea of supporting research solely on the grounds of its merit.

European Research Council and the Scientific Council: Structure and Aim

The ERC was first set up under the EU’s Seventh Framework Programme for Research (FP7, 2007-2013). Under Horizon 2020, it is part of the first pillar – “Excellent Science”. This body represents 17% of the overall Horizon 2020 budget (€13.1 billion 2014-2020) with a total annual budget of €2 billion in 2019.

As the ERC is an instrument for implementing the programme, more details on its role and composition are set out in the Council Decision implementing Horizon 2020. According to this decision, the ERC’s objective is to strengthen frontier research and to reinforce the excellence,

dynamism, and creativity of European research³, according to point (a) of Article 3(1). In Article 6 (1), the Commission is asked to establish the ERC as the channel to implement the actions under Part I “Excellent science”, which concerns the ERC’s specific aim. Article 6 (2) states that the ERC shall be composed of the independent Scientific Council and the dedicated implementation structure (i.e., the European Research Council Executive Agency, ERCEA).

Article 7 (2) describes the role of the Scientific Council: most importantly, it establishes the strategy for the ERC and the work programmes for the implementation of the ERC activities as well as the methods and procedures for peer review and proposal evaluation on the basis of which the proposals to be funded are determined: it has full authority over decisions on the type of research to be funded.

The legal provisions for the identification of the Scientific Council members are set out in Article 7 (1) of the Decision, which notes that “the Scientific Council shall be composed of scientists, engineers and scholars of the highest repute and appropriate expertise, both women and men in different age groups, ensuring a diversity of research areas and acting in their personal capacity, independent of extraneous interests.” This article ensures that the questions of gender and geographical balance have to be addressed in the composition of the Scientific Council.

The Commission appoints its members, following an independent and transparent procedure agreed with the Scientific Council, including a consultation of the scientific community, and a report to the European Parliament and the Council. The members of the Scientific Council have a term of office limited to four years, renewable once, based on a rotating system that ensures work continuity.

Overall, the Scientific Council acts exclusively in the interest of achieving the ERC’s specific objectives: strengthening frontier research, set out in point (a) of Article 3(1), according to principles of scientific excellence, autonomy, efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and, accountability, fixed in Article 6(4) of the Decision.

The Scientific Council may set up, from amongst its members, Standing Committees, Working Groups, and other structures addressing specific tasks of the Scientific Council, according to the point F(26) of the Rules of Procedure and Code of Conduct of the Scientific Council. Notably, in point 28 is noted how working groups are dedicated to topics such as Gender Balance, Open Access, Innovation and Relations with Industry, Key Performance Indicators, and Widening Participation. Nevertheless, decisions taken by the Committees and Working Groups must be confirmed by the Scientific Council to be formally adopted.

The President of the ERC “shall be chosen from among senior and internationally respected scientists” (Article 6(3)). It is the Commission that appoints the President “following a transparent recruitment process involving an independent dedicated search committee”. Also the President’s term of office is 4 years, renewable once. Both the recruitment process itself and the candidate selected need the approval of the Scientific Council. The President’s tasks are to chair the Scientific Council and to ensure its leadership and liaison with the ERCEA. Also, he or she needs to represent the Scientific Council in the world of science.

The composition of the independent identification committee and other expert groups

The Commission relies on a list of experts to set up the independent identification committee. This list was established following a 2013 open [“Call addressed to individuals for the establishment of a](#)

³ [Regulation \(EU\) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation \(2014-2020\) and repealing Decision No 1982/2006/EC Text with EEA relevance \(europa.eu\)](#) see 22 Part I, 1, 1.1

[database of prospective independent experts to assist Commission services with tasks in connection with Horizon 2020 – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation](#)”⁴.

The list not only is the basis for staffing the independent identification committee, but also to find experts for other functions that are vital to the functioning of Horizon 2020, such as the evaluation of proposals, the monitoring of the implementation of actions carried out under Horizon 2020, the implementation of the EU’s research and innovation policy and programmes, the achievement and functioning of the European Research Area, programme evaluation and the design of the EU’s research and innovation policy, including that of future programmes.

In cases where necessary skills are not represented among the experts listed, the Commission may also appoint experts who are not in the database. Such appointments need to be duly justified and made transparently.

Regarding the composition of the expert groups and evaluation panels, the independent identification committee included, the Commission (or the relevant funding body) needs to take measures to “seek a balanced composition...in terms of various skills, experience, and knowledge, geographical diversity and gender, depending on the situation in the field of action”.

With a view to gender balance, the Commission aims at a target of 40% of the under-represented sex in evaluation panels and experts groups; applications from suitably qualified women are encouraged.

The experts perform their work in their capacity as independent experts. They have to respect a code of conduct and need to sign a declaration that attests to the absence of any conflicts of interest; should such a conflict arise while they exercise their duties, they need to inform the Commission (or the relevant funding body) immediately.

In May 2020, Commissioner Mariya Gabriel appointed a new Identification Committee that will, according to the Commission, “focus on the continuation and renewal of the ERC Scientific Council in view of the start of Horizon Europe, the next EU research and innovation programme.”⁵ Its members are Carl-Henrik Heldin (chair - Uppsala University, Chairman of the Board of the Nobel Foundation, Sweden), Barbara Flückinger (Zürich University, Switzerland), Kirsten Gram-Hansen (Aalborg University, Denmark), Michal Karonski (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland), Carlos Martinez Alonso (Spanish National Research Council) and Mira Mezini (Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany/Albania).

Specific objective “Spreading excellence and widening participation”

The maintenance of geographical balance is clearly a consideration for the setup of the governance structures of Horizon 2020. However, it does not play a role when research proposals are considered, in particular for ERC grants, for which excellence is the sole criterion. A large part of the funding under Horizon 2020 goes to the ‘old’ Member States of the EU (although the picture becomes much more nuanced when one considers the size of the national research and innovation systems: if one expresses funding from Horizon 2020 as a percentage of gross national expenditure on research and development, Member States such as Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia or Slovenia and Bulgaria are placed ahead of those that receive a larger absolute share of the funding, such as Germany, the UK, France or Spain).⁶

⁴ [OJ C342/03 of 22 November 2013](#).

⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/top-scientists-identify-future-members-european-research-councils-scientific-council-2020-may-19_en

⁶ Quaglio, G. et al (2020): [Exploring the performance gap in EU Framework Programmes between EU13 and EU15 Member States](#). European Parliament: STOA.

The specific objective 'Spreading excellence and widening participation' is intended to address this disparity and 'to fully exploit the potential of Europe's talent pool and to ensure that the benefits of an innovation-led economy are both maximised and widely distributed across the Union in accordance with the principle of excellence', according to the Annex to Regulation 1291/2013. In short, the actions under this objective aim to address geographical imbalances in the distribution of research excellence and thus funding.

In order to do this, synergies with the European Structural and Investment Funds are to be exploited. More specific measures should also be taken. According to the broad lines of activities as set out in the annex to Regulation 1291/2013, specific actions include the teaming of excellent research institutions and low performing regions to create new centres of excellence in Member States that perform lower in research, development and innovation, twinning of emerging institutions with at least two leading institutions in a certain field, the establishment of ERA chairs to attract outstanding academic, a policy support facility to improve national research and innovation policies and capacity building for transnational networks of National Contact Points to strengthen their ability to support potential participants.⁷

Outlook

The 2014-2020 programming period is drawing to a close. The successor programme to Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe, is under preparation. An agreement between the Parliament and the Council has been reached on 11 December 2020. At the time of writing, the text of the agreement was not yet public. For the programme to enter into force, Parliament and Council need to endorse the text after the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021 to 2027 has been formally agreed upon by the institutions.

Taking into account the original Commission proposal for Horizon Europe and a partial agreement between Parliament and Council already reached in 2019, activities to address gender and geographical balance in the programme will be continued and form part of the legal basis of the programme. The "Widening" actions will continue and be budgeted up.

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