Meeting minutes

IGLO Open: Maximizing Synergies between Horizon Europe and Cohesion Funds

Date:	22 October 2026
Place of the event:	Permanent Representation of Bulgaria to the EU
Minutes taken by:	Anna Ledahudcová, Junior Consultant for Research

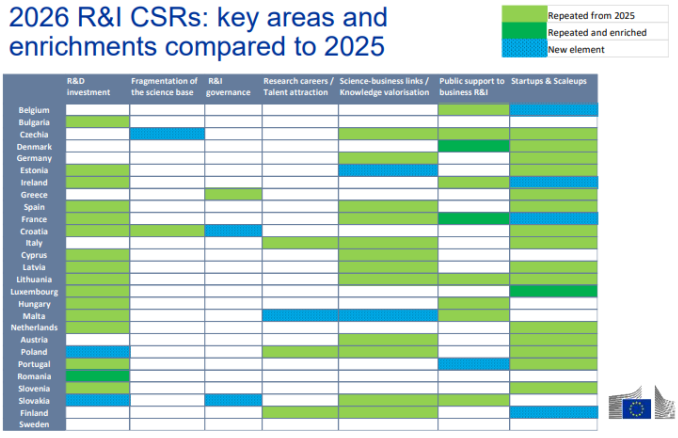
Welcome remarks – Deputy Permanent Representative of Bulgaria to the EU

Presentation: Maximizing Synergies between Horizon Europe and Cohesion Funds
Eva-Maria SZAVUJ, European Commission, DG Research and Innovation, Unit A1 – European Semester & Country Intelligence

- Why synergies?
  - Several programmes – RRRF, ERDF, HE – all contributing to the same objective in different ways
  - **Substantial amount allocated to R&I in cohesion funds**
  - Differences in programming management and implementation, and scope – but **complementary**, ERDF on territorial cohesion and industrial transition, HE strengthens EU scientific, tech. and innovative excellence for competitiveness at global level
  - Not working with synergies wastes taxpayers' money
- Most recognised **areas of synergies**
  - **Seal of Excellence (SoE)** – MS can use other sources to fund Seals – the added value is that MS don't have to go through the evaluation process; both sides benefit
    - Facing difficulties when it comes to knowing the fate of the Seals – **national level doesn't always communicate** how many or how Seals were supported
    - The same goes for multi-beneficiary projects – cooperation between MS has been difficult, **no multi-beneficiary international projects with Seal of Excellence have been implemented**
    - **Competitiveness Seals** modelled after the SoEs – they will not be exactly the same, but the SoE serves as an inspiration for the Competitiveness Seal
  - **Transfers to Horizon Europe** – MS can transfer up to 5% of their national allocation to HE
    - 4 individual cases in Europe: Malta, Poland, Lithuania, Brandenburg region
    - Lengthy process, might be considered risky by national authorities, administrative hurdles – but those who decided to have been positive
  - **Teaming** – ERDF as combined funding in 37 projects, favourable national rules
  - **Regional Innovation Valleys**
  - **European Partnerships and EU Missions** – mobilised both cohesion and RRF money to support these, e.g., climate adaptation – more than 40 bn eur used
  - **Upstream and downstream synergies**
    - Upstream – targeted strategy and national or local level building capacity to be able to participate in HE
    - Downstream – those with innovative HE project ideas can be scaled with cohesion funding

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- Ongoing actions to facilitate synergies/complementarities
    - Notice on synergies (2022) explains possibilities, gives examples
    - SoE Community of Practice – designers of calls, meeting 2x a year in cooperation with DG REGIO, hands on approach to sharing ideas, challenges, finding solutions
    - RTD and REGIO jointly manage the European Network of Research & Innovation Authorities of Cohesion Policy and Member states' Research & Innovation Authorities (RIMA)
        - Next meeting in November – one of the topics will be how to improve in future
    - RTD Dissemination and Exploitation Strategy – i.e., HE Results Platform…
    - S3 Thematic Platforms
- **Future opportunities under the MFF 2028+** (discussions ongoing, reflecting here the proposal)
    - Existing operational synergy tools remain available
    - Trying to ease administrative burden both on design and beneficiary side – single set of rules, single legal commitment (cumulative funding), transfers (until now 5% limit, in future no limit stipulated, but until now only 4 MS benefitting)
    - **Partnership principle** reaffirmed in NRPP, multi-level governance is in design, asking for involvement of stakeholders on all levels
    - **Synergies by design** – want to plan (both EU and national level) in ways that reinforce each other (easier transfers, different sources of application without having to apply each time separately)
- **NRPPs** – in the future, aiming for more focus on MS real needs
    - Will be possible to finance reforms
    - Lower administrative burden
    - More focus on impact
- **Bridge to next MFF – European Semester**
    - In preparation of NRPPs, HE, ECF, other funding – common document guiding – the Competitiveness Compass
    - How to translate the Competitiveness Compass onto national level – done through European Semester exercise and Country Specific Recommendations
        - Guiding priorities in recommendations, key reform areas to tackle
        - New European Semester cycle starting now, in October
        - Last 2 Spring Packages have R&I at their heart to ensure European competitiveness
        - Hope this will be reflected in future financing
        - One key takeaway is the need to strengthen R&D investment – many MS still below the 3% target, some not even over 1%. Consider South Korea, which has 5%
        - Sweden has a very competitive national strategy in place, moving forward



Source: EC presentation

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Q&A

Q: *Can you give examples of downstream synergies?*

- Downstream – agencies have lists of projects financed from HE that go to national and local level and implemented
- Trying to facilitate the cooperation and flow of information
- Decision whether to finance projects at lower level still decided by national level
- Afterlife of projects is difficult to follow, need to see how to improve that without adding administrative burden to beneficiaries
- **Single Gateway** – future portal with information on all funding instruments in the EU with direct, indirect, or shared management
    - Not easy to put in place
    - In beginning of technical setup of this

Comment from audience: *Brandenburg case – says dealing with EC was easy, the problem was with own authority*

- Took a long time to convince regional level (was a MSCA project)
- 2nd year was not approved
- Difficult to let go of control of money, but the benefit is going to the same place. Need to recognise this. But of course, requires a bit of understanding and awareness.

Q: *How will regional leverage be assured in the next MFF?*

- Indeed, the perspective is shifting as with the NRPP it will be big pots of money handled by the **national** level
- But **possibility to have regional chapters** with own priorities and allocations
- Possibility of negotiations – don't have to go through national level every time
- i.e., CEE – often no institutionally defined role in planning, but capacities for implementation and experience with handling cohesion policy money
- we don't know for sure how final set-up will look like, but the intention of involving regions is there, building on regions knowledge and experience

Q: *Shift to **lump sum funding** in NRPPs?*

- Want to stick to paying out on milestones and targets
- But not analysing individual invoices
- But audits can be imposed on other levels – national and regional
- **Obligatory audits are still being discussed, cannot be ruled out**
- There is the intention that to be able to simplify, we need trust at all levels, not imposing obligatory audits

Comment from audience: *For regions, it would be important to know what the ECF brings so that they know what to negotiate with national level.*

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