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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
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Subject:	Council conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 23/2022 'Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds - Not yet used to full potential' - Council conclusions (approved on 07/03/2023)

Delegations will find in Annex the Council conclusions on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 23/2022 entitled 'Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds – Not yet used to full potential', approved by the Council at its 3935th meeting held on 7 March 2023.

COUNCIL CONCLUSIONS**on the European Court of Auditors' Special Report No 23/2022 entitled 'Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds – Not yet used to full potential'**

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING

- Horizon 2020's contribution to measures aimed at closing the research and innovation (R&I) divide within the Union by promoting synergies with the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIFs);
- the Common Provisions Regulation¹, which stresses the need to strengthen coordination, synergies and complementarities between the ESIFs and Horizon 2020;
- its Conclusions of 1 December 2017 'From the Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020 towards the ninth Framework Programme'², which highlight the importance of improved synergies and complementarities between the Framework Programme and other EU funding instruments;
- its Conclusions on European Court of Auditors' (ECA) Special Report No 15/2022, adopted on 13 October 2022³, which stressed the importance of synergies between Union programmes and the European, national and regional levels,

¹ 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, OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159–706.

² 15320/17.

³ 13426/22.

1. WELCOMES ECA Special Report No 23/2022 entitled ‘Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds – Not yet used to full potential’⁴ complementing ECA Special Report No 15/2022 on the measures to widen participation in Horizon 2020; TAKES NOTE of the Commission’s replies to Special Report No 23/2022⁵; RECOGNISES the efforts the Commission has made in response to shortcomings in rules and regulations, by proposing several adjustments to align them in the relevant regulations for the 2021-2027 period; ENCOURAGES the Commission, in cooperation with Member States, to continue its work on further simplification and alignment in implementation between the R&I framework programmes and the cohesion policy funds (the successor to the ESIFs) in order to maximise the potential for synergies; and CALLS on the Commission to continue working on ensuring greater legal clarity for implementing bodies in the context of synergies in the future;
2. WELCOMES the recommendation to improve cooperation between bodies involved in the management of the ESIFs and the R&I framework programmes, in particular between the relevant managing authorities, the intermediate bodies implementing the programmes under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and the national and regional funding public agencies; and WELCOMES the Commission’s efforts to set up a regular structured dialogue, including through the European Research Area (ERA) Forum sub-group on improving EU-wide access to excellence (ERA Action 16), bringing together the relevant bodies from the Commission, Member States and stakeholders at policy design and implementation level (cohesion policy funds, in particular ERDF, and Horizon Europe), while working with Member States to foster such cooperation at a national/regional level;

⁴ OJ C 442, 22.11.2022, p. 2. The report can be consulted at the European Court of Auditors’ website <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/Pages/DocItem.aspx?did=62446>.

⁵ https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECARepplies/COM-Replies-SR-22-23/COM-Replies-SR-22-23_EN.pdf.

3. STRESSES the need for the availability of data about projects and beneficiaries to foster synergies; SUPPORTS the recommendation to the Commission to improve such availability; ENCOURAGES the Commission and relevant authorities in the Member States to collect and share relevant information about beneficiaries of Horizon Europe and cohesion policy funding, as well as examples of synergies between the two; INVITES the Commission to facilitate the creation, promotion and monitoring of synergies, by further exploiting interoperable databases for the framework programme and the cohesion policy funds so as to allow easier matchmaking between projects and beneficiaries; and ENCOURAGES the Commission to identify and promote examples of good practice and to use existing tools, such as its text mining tool CORTEX or the ‘Seal of Excellence Community of Practice’, while extending the scope of the latter to all the potential areas and tools for synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF, including their use in European partnerships;
4. WELCOMES the recommendation to increase the use of downstream synergies while recalling also the importance of upstream synergies; UNDERLINES that the use of downstream sequential funding may contribute to the transfer of research results to the economy; and INVITES the Commission to support managing authorities in designing and implementing actions to create downstream synergies with Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe projects and to promote public procurement for innovation based on the results of research projects;
5. ENCOURAGES the Commission and Member States to include synergies in strategic planning, programming and implementation, where relevant, for instance in smart specialisation strategies, in order to capitalise on the full potential of investments in Europe’s R&I sector while respecting the specific goals and characteristics of the different EU instruments and funds; EMPHASISES the need for better synchronisation of planning and implementation timelines of relevant EU programmes; and STRESSES the importance of creating and implementing synergies with the user perspective in mind, for example with regard to converging rules, application periods, accountability systems, procedures and reducing the implementation burden of EU funds and instruments;

6. WELCOMES the recommendation to improve the information flow about projects that have received the Seal of Excellence; CALLS UPON the Commission to support the implementation and make wider use of the Seal of Excellence, to regularly and in a timely manner provide all relevant managing authorities and National Contact Points with data on project proposals that have received the Seal of Excellence in their Member State or region and to encourage the sharing of best practices; TAKES NOTE of the ECA finding on the lack of common categorisation (taxonomy) of Horizon 2020 and smart specialisation strategies' priorities, and on the fact that ESIF data recorded by managing authorities were not fully standardised, and INVITES the Commission to address these challenges, when appropriate;
7. CONSIDERS that the pursuit of synergies between funds, such as the use of the Seal of Excellence, should not interfere with the evaluation of proposals under Horizon Europe, and therefore INVITES the Commission to pay due attention to potential undesired impacts of synergies and take precautionary measures if necessary;
8. REITERATES, inter alia, the principles and guidelines set out in the Prague Declaration on Synergies in the Research and Innovation Funding in Europe of 8 July 2022⁶; RECALLS the Commission Notice on synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes⁷; and CALLS UPON the Commission to use the Notice as a potential example to be followed for other funds and to complement it with upcoming examples on how the synergies are concretely put in practice;

⁶ <https://synergies2022.eu/>

⁷ COMMISSION NOTICE Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes, OJ C 421, 4.11.2022, p.3.

9. ACKNOWLEDGES that synergies are relevant for all Member States to increase their R&I capacities and to implement EU policy targets at national, regional and local levels; INVITES the Commission to take the ECA special report No 23/2022 and the ECA's recommendations into account when implementing current and designing future measures, in particular in the context of the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe and of the preparation of the next R&I framework programme; ENCOURAGES the Commission to work on the further alignment of rules between the R&I framework programmes and the cohesion policy funds in view of the next financial perspective; SUGGESTS that existing information on, *inter alia*, synergy opportunities, good examples, guidelines and legal framework conditions be bundled and published in an appropriate manner on the Commission's website.
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