

## Draft Science Europe Response to the European Commission Consultation on European Partnerships to be implemented as joint undertakings and Partnership Thematic Priorities

**16 October 2026**

### **Context**

European Partnerships are key instruments for pooling national resources, enabling international collaborations, and creating leverage for both EU Member States and the European Union as a whole. However, [the June 2026 Science Europe Position indicated](#) some concerns, as “certain policy directions currently under consideration could significantly reduce the ability of national research funding and performing organisations to participate in partnerships”.

Under the next EU R&I Framework Programme, Horizon Europe 2028-2034, the European Commission is undertaking significant revisions related to European partnerships, intending to streamline the instrument. As a part of this process, it has consulted stakeholders on “the functioning of current Treaty-based partnerships and potential areas for improvement under the next MFF.” The consultation also addresses “specific objectives” and “possible policy measures to achieve them”. To do so, it contained questions on the drivers and objectives of partnerships and on proposed policy measures to achieve them. Furthermore, it also touched upon “possible thematic areas to be addressed by partnerships” under the upcoming Framework Programme.

Science Europe possesses a unique perspective as an aggregator of the voices of European national research funding and performing organisations - key stakeholders in these partnerships. Its responses to the consultation, summarised below, build on the aforementioned position, developed by consensus amongst its Members. They address partnerships from a broad perspective, taking into consideration not only treaty-based partnerships, but also the entirety of the interlinked partnership landscape, including Work-Programme-based partnerships as well.

### **Considerations towards, and design of partnerships (Treaty and Work-Programme based)**

The added value of partnerships lies not only in the funding mobilised, but in maintaining the long-term co-ordination and alignment of national and European R&I efforts, including the ability to connect research with policy and implementation, that cannot be achieved effectively through individual Horizon Europe calls alone.

Experience from some current partnerships suggests that larger partnerships - concerning both treaty- and WP-based ones, as indicated by the current policy direction - can create challenges in transparency, stakeholder ownership and visibility of activities. This could lead smaller or different collaborations being neglected. Furthermore, accessibility remains a key issue. Overly complex rules necessary to govern partnerships at such scale could increase administrative burdens, potentially undermining the intended benefits of simplification. In such cases, new grantees could find access to large consortia – managed by the European Commission, rather than their national/regional institutions – excessively difficult, and thus, may end up being discouraged from participating. These challenges can also pose as barriers for new partnership participants, and

complexity also limits potential cross-fertilisation. Transparency can contribute to addressing the challenges of complexity: it is important to provide access to statistics and publications from partnerships to Pillar 2 Programme Committees.

Partnership formats and governance also affect accessibility. Solely proposing a tripartite funding model runs the risk of limiting access to organisations only from countries which can provide additional national funding. In addition, in certain cases, participants receive lower funding rates from Joint Undertaking (JU) calls than standard Horizon calls, due to, amongst others, the pressures from the matched funding requirement, which creates financial barriers to participation. Difficulty of access could be exacerbated if a significant minimum budget is required for calls.

There are some practices under current partnerships, that can inspire solutions to overarching challenges, such as fast-track options for smaller actors, for whom financial support is more important, or improving access to infrastructures, especially for researchers via calls. Shared research infrastructures can support work across sectoral Joint Undertakings, and implementing joint access routes in Joint Undertakings would be beneficial. Furthermore, in-kind contributions should be maintained, as this method allows for flexibility in financing, and enables broader participation. It should be facilitated from the preparatory phase.

### **Partnership objectives and drivers**

With regards to European partnerships, including JUs, falling under the aegis of Horizon Europe, the development of the scientific and technological base and capabilities of Europe should remain the key policy objective – in line with the underlying goals of the Framework Programme. Such scientific and technological development should encompass all scientific disciplines, including Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts. This way, the added European value generated by partnerships should contribute to technological, societal, cultural and economic development - all key components of competitiveness, as understood in a broad sense.

Stakeholder mobilisation depends less on the number of partnerships and more on how they are governed, how clearly their objectives are defined, and how effectively Member States and stakeholders are involved. Research funding and performing organisations should maintain their involvement in the development, implementation and governance of this instrument, under the upcoming Framework Programme, as well as in the separate legal structures. As a part of this, they should be consulted during the definition of objectives and priority setting. They can provide crucial insights, given their broad involvement with a wide range of collaborative initiatives within the Framework Programme and European Research Area (ERA-Nets, Joint Programming Initiatives), as well as their key role in national R&I systems.

To facilitate this, coherence should be sought between national co-funding processes and JU timelines. The lack of alignment is a challenge, as national funding and performing organisations run their own award processes after the Joint Undertaking has selected projects. Earlier sight of call topics, budgets and timelines, and a predictable call calendar, would allow them to better prepare in advance.

### **Policy measures**

Science Europe acknowledges the links to non-R&I related European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) priorities. However, partnerships play a crucial role in international scientific collaboration. While noting the importance of the links with the ECF, it is also important that such connections do not

weaken the relation between European partnerships and researchers. Partnerships should remain attractive for research communities. Considering this, funding from this programme should only cover investments up to Technological Readiness Level (TRL) 7. TRL 8 and 9 should only be funded by the ECF budget. By maintaining a balanced TRL distribution, the focus on market uptake and economic competitiveness should not have negative implications on low TRL R&I / fundamental research, and the limited R&I funding should not be redirected to non-R&I priorities. Meanwhile, greater clarity is needed on the openness and access to partnerships that draw funding from other European Union programmes. The implications on participation where there is funding from the ECF may be unclear for Associated Countries.

### **Approach to thematic choices, and Partnership portfolio-building**

Alignment with the EU's long-term priorities should be assessed not only in terms of competitiveness and innovation, but also the capacity to harness the fundamental research and knowledge base on which future innovation depends. The portfolio should support the full R&I continuum and retain dedicated Partnerships where long-term co-ordination, critical mass and alignment of national and EU investments are necessary. Further clarification of the scope and implications of several proposed Partnership areas is therefore needed before determining which configuration is best aligned with the EU's long-term priorities. When developing themes, and reducing the number of partnerships, broad thematic alignments should not necessarily be considered overlaps, as in certain cases, they fund considerably different projects. Caution should be exercised when merging themes.

Establishing direct links with the ECF by aligning the thematics of partnerships with those proposed in the ECF should not mean undue thematic restrictions. Such alignment, if not done flexibly, can have negative implications on the freedom of scientific inquiry, and ignores relevant emergent topics. Furthermore, the merger of potentially disjointed areas, when replacing multiple smaller calls by one substantial call, may dilute focus and result in less clear impact and have negative implications for learning across projects.

The need for the early involvement of Member States/Associated Countries in the development of call topics is also important to note – as on occasions State Representative Groups (SRG) members discover call topics at the same time they are made public. This leaves little opportunity to influence the topics.

### **Final remarks**

The significant added value of this instrument is a result of the meaningful involvement of Member States, research organisations, industry, SMEs, national governments, and societal actors throughout governance and implementation. The consultation response by Science Europe aims to preserve effective, inclusive partnerships, which support EU strategic priorities in conjunction with the objectives of the European Research Area. Maintaining the unique qualities of this instrument is a shared interest within the R&I sector and beyond.

*Science Europe is the organisation representing major public organisations that fund and perform excellent, ground-breaking research in Europe. It brings together the expertise of some of the largest and most respected European research organisations to jointly push the frontiers of how scientific research is produced and delivers benefits to society.*