ISE Statement: The EU Commission's Horizon Europe budget proposal: a glass half full

Initiative for Science in Europe welcomes the Commission’s new budget proposal for Horizon Europe as a step in the right direction. We thank commissioner Gabriel for her efforts and success in putting research at the top of the EU’s agenda. The proposal is 13 billion more than the one that was on the table last winter. However, this is still far from the European Parliament’s 2018 proposal of 120 billion €, and even further from the 160 billion € most science organisations, including ISE, asked for. We hope that an agreement will be reached with a higher budget for research, moreover in time to allow the program to start on January 1st, 2021, as it has to.

Our major concern is over the share of the budget which will go to each of the three pillars, and how funds will be allocated within the three pillars. It is regrettable that the 13.5 billion increase, which comes from the EU’s Recovery Fund will not fund Pillar I. The COVID-19 epidemic shows beyond any doubt how important basic research is, and particularly when crises arise. It is unfortunate that pillar 1, including the European Research Council (ERC), EU’s highly successful programme, will not receive any additional funding. As a consequence, a lower share of the total budget will go to basic research than previously proposed in Horizon Europe, e.g., for the ERC the recent proposal lags 550 million € behind the 2018 initial Commission proposal, although it had a smaller budget.

We also insist that basic research should have a significant place in pillar 2 to balance and strengthen the R&I cycle. Without basic research in the picture, the EU will not properly address Global Challenges and Industrial Competitiveness. We call on the Commission to allow all forces to come together, including scientists working in basic sciences in particular in social sciences and humanities.

In our open letter to EU leaders on April 24 we indicated that the EU must be careful not to yield to the temptation of a disproportionate effort in fields of immediate relevance in the context of the present health crisis. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be the case. It is of critical importance that the budgetary allocation finds the right balance between all fields of basic research: nobody knows where and how the next crisis will strike.

ISE is an association established on June 15, 2017 in the departments of Haut Rhin, Bas-Rhin and Moselle (France), regulated by the article 21 to 79 of the local civil code. It has been registered in Strasbourg as “association de droit local” (not-for-profit organization) on October 17, 2017 with registration number (SIREN) 837 814 730. ISE public ID number in the European Transparency Register is: 263249337259-15
As COVID-19 is not under complete control, and may again become more widespread and threatening, its economic and societal impact becomes more evident. Of particular concern for us is the likelihood that it will deepen the East-West and North-South divides within the EU in research, thereby increasing brain drain within Europe, and that it will badly affect the job situation for young scientists all over Europe. In the context of an increased competition with the US and China, public opinion and political leaders must better understand the role played by research in the society’s resilience and development that makes it a key element of Europe’s standing. We cannot afford to lag behind, and a lot on this front will depend on decisions to be taken in the weeks to come.

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About ISE
ISE represents major European Learned Societies and Research Organizations in Europe operating within different disciplines and across sectors. Active in the policy debate at the European level, ISE has been instrumental in promoting disruptive excellence-based funding programmes for scientific research such as the ERC.

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