

Rescue Horizon Europe - Our proposal to preserve Europe as a location for excellent basic research

Background

European leaders are in the process of finalizing a €750B “pandemic recovery fund” - €750B - almost 70x the money the EU spends on research in 1 year. €750B that we might never have needed to spend, had we invested in research earlier. Imagine where the world would be today, had we had more effective anti-viral treatments, a better understanding of disease transmission mechanisms and effective prevention barriers, a better understanding of coronaviruses and vaccine developments ?

And yet, despite the consequences of the lack of research investments being so obvious, so striking and so tragic, European leaders have decided to drastically reduce the European research budget (the ‘Horizon’ programme) – from an original proposal of €120B to €84.9B. An astonishing reduction of 30%. Effectively slashing any ambition to address the immense challenges that are ahead of us – including climate change, pandemics, quantum technology, artificial intelligence or precision medicine.

Last week, the plan was still to fund the EU Horizon programme with €80.9B. Then, in a last-minute attempt to save appearances, EU leaders agreed on a €4B budget increase – or +5%. €4B when €40B were needed. €4B that are not even fed from a secure source of income but are to be paid for from competition fines that have not yet been paid.

We do not know when the next crisis will happen nor what where it will come from. It might anti-biotic resistant bacteria, climate change, or asteroids coming too close to earth. But we do know that we will face stark challenges in the future and we need to be ready. And it is not this 5% increase that will get us there.

We are urging EU leaders not to make the same mistake again. We are urging EU leaders to support science with sufficient funding.

Our initiative

Our initiative – ‘Rescue Horizon Europe’ – was set up to remind EU leaders that behind their political discussions and budget decisions, there are real people, exceptionally talented scientists, who will leave Europe; real scientific questions that will not be answered; real progress that will not happen. All of that to the detriment of the people whom they have sworn to serve.

We have collected letters from over 50 scientists in 17 different countries. They are from European scientists who consider relocating their labs to places where outstanding research is encouraged and matched with ambitious funding schemes. Scientists in low-income countries write how cuts to European research will affect intercontinental scientific collaborations and their ability to train and grow. Clinicians explain how less basic science research will directly impact the care they can provide to their patients. Experienced scientists, many of whom have achieved breakthroughs that have revolutionised the world as we know it today, express their concern that future generations will not be given the chance to follow in their footsteps. Nobel Prize Laureates who have witnessed the establishment of EU 'framework programs' speak about how these have transformed the world map of scientific research. Young scientists who feel that Europe is stealing their generation the chance of discovering great things and making the world a better place.

Today, our initiative is supported by by 1'200 researchers from across Europe including 7 Nobel Prize winners, and over 800 universities and scientific organizations, many of which represent the very hallmark of Europe. 89 Member of the European Parliament have publicly expressed their support for this initiative and have equally called on the EU Commission and EU Council to strive for a more ambitious research budget.

As such, we represent the scientists on this continent and ask Ursula von der Leyen to receive us. To listen. To stand up for science. And tell us that the destruction of our ambitions for progress and prosperity – for the future of Europe - will not happen under her watch.

We have not come to protest or strike. We come to find the solutions.

More information about our initiative can be found here: <http://www.rescue-horizon-europe.org>

Our proposal to preserve Europe as a location for excellent basic research

Following the disappointing deal agreed between the EU parliament and EU Council on November 10th 2020, here are our concrete suggestions to preserve Europe as a location for excellent basic research and use available resources most effectively.

1. The entire €4B, additionally agreed this week, must go into Pillar 1 of Horizon (basic research)

The Horizon pillar 1 represents the core of the EU's scientific excellence, with the ERC and MSCA flagship programmes that help build a European research community focused on tackling known issues and generating the knowledge needed for the next, yet unknown, challenges. The highest European added value can be found in these programmes, which cannot be replicated at national level.

Allocating the additional €4B to basic, investigator-driven research is crucial for the EU to give itself the opportunity to support the next scientific breakthrough. It is also particularly important to rebalance different pillars in the Horizon program as the €5B allocated from NGEU will not benefit pillar 1. We hereby ask the President of the Commission to exercise her guideline competence to allocate the top up of 4bn to the pillar 1.

2. Next Generation EU must contribute its fair share to research & development

This could be achieved in two ways:

- By introducing a mandatory contribution of 3-5% on each NGEU grant to the Horizon budget.
- And/or – by mandating Member States to include at least 5% of research projects within their recovery and resilience plans that they will submit to the Commission early next year. The best way to achieve this is via a legal amendment to the recovery and resilience facility (trilogues on-going, amendments can be proposed by the EU commission or EU parliament). If this does not succeed, the Commission should ensure in reviewing the plans of the Member States that research is sufficiently covered as part of the Member States priorities. We count on the EU Commission to incentive Member States to do so and to provide an overview of all research projects within the Member States plans.

3. The EU R&D spending target of 3% of gross domestic product must be restored and respected

In our view, this includes at least the following key actions:

- A public expression of support from Ursula von der Leyen and the confirmation that this will be a strategic goal for the VDL Commission
- The creation of a task force, consisting of experts from the EU Commission, EU Parliament, Member States, as well as scientists and representatives from science organisations, which examines the landscape of R&D in Europe and its specific needs, in particular to make sure that EU based research remains competitive and attractive in comparison to other international players such as the US or China.
- The task force would be charged with drawing up a plan for sustainable research funding in Europe and ensuring that the 3% R&D goal is achieved
- The 3% R&D spending target must become mandatory for all Member States by 2027 and not be renegotiable (e.g. target agreed by the European Council). Spending must be distributed adequately between basic and industrial research.
- The task force should further examine other sources of income to which the EU has access and make a proposal to bring the Horizon budget back to an appropriate level. Examples of such additional income sources include:
 - The CO2 tax / carbon border adjustment mechanism
 - Any unspent funds from the NGEU recovery fund.

Note - a budget of 120 billion for the next 7 years would still only represent 2.2% of GDP (assuming a stable % of Member State R&D spending)