

INTERVIEW WITH ANNA PANAGOPOULOU ON THE HOP ON FACILITY, A BRAND-NEW ELEMENT OF THE WIDENING PACKAGE

ROZHOVOR S ANNOU PANAGOPOULOU O NOVÉM NÁSTROJI HOP ON, ZBRUSU NOVÉM PRVKU WIDENING BALÍČKU

Horizon Europe earmarks a significant part of its budget to support the participation of countries with a low intensity of R&I. Almost 3 billion euro will be spent on measures exclusively designed to motivate institutions from 'widening countries' to get involved more in European research projects as well as to boost their excellence. Anna Panagopoulou introduces the Hop On Facility, a brand-new element of the widening package, and explains why it is vital for widening countries to HOP ON.

Za ECHO se ptala

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Program Horizont Evropa vyčleňuje významnou část svého rozpočtu na podporu účasti zemí s nízkou intenzitou výzkumu a inovací. Téměř 3 mld. € budou vynaloženy na opatření, jejichž výhradním cílem je motivovat instituce z „widening zemí“, aby se více zapojily do evropských výzkumných projektů a zvýšily svou excelenci. Anna Panagopoulou představuje nástroj Hop On, zbrusu nový prvek widening balíčku, a vysvětluje, proč je pro widening země životně důležité „NASKOČIT“.

Anna Panagopoulou is Director of 'European Research Area & Innovation' at the Research and Innovation Directorate General of the European Commission. She is responsible together with her teams to co-create with Member States and stakeholders policies to shape a globally competitive European research and innovation system that is open, performant, cohesive, and conducive to transformative innovation for a sustainable future. She has been working in the Commission in various policy and management roles for 24 years. She holds a master's degree in electrical engineering and has a long professional experience in the private and public sector.

Anna Panagopoulou je ředitelkou „Evropského výzkumného prostoru a inovací“ na Generálním ředitelství pro výzkum a inovace Evropské komise. Spolu se svými týmy je zodpovědná za společné vytváření politik s členskými státy a zúčastněnými stranami s cílem utvářet globálně konkurenceschopný evropský systém výzkumu a inovací, který je otevřený, výkonný, soudržný a přispívá k transformačním inovacím pro udržitelnou budoucnost. V Komisi pracuje již 24 let v různých politických a řídicích funkcích. Je držitelkou magisterského titulu v oboru elektrotechniky a má dlouholeté odborné zkušenosti v soukromém i veřejném sektoru.

ECHO: THE PARTICIPATION OF MOST WIDENING COUNTRIES, ESPECIALLY COUNTRIES FROM CENTRAL EUROPE, IN THE EU FRAMEWORK PROGRAMMES IS RELATIVELY LOW. WHAT ARE THE MAIN BOTTLENECKS THAT HINDER OUR INVOLVEMENT?

Panagopoulou: There is evidence that the participation of a country in the EU Framework Programme is strongly correlated with its overall level of investments in research and innovation. This concerns both the public expenditure in the national R&I system and business invest-

ments. It is therefore of paramount importance for countries that are underinvesting in this regard to modernise their national R&I systems, increase their national research budgets and develop the missing links between academia and business, including for research and innovation projects at higher technology readiness levels. This is one of the four strategic priorities of the new European Research Area as presented by the Commission in September 2020, and further emphasized in the ERA Policy Agenda for the period 2022-2024 that the Council adopted last December. In this context, the Commission will support in-

interested Member States in prioritising R&I investments and reforms, including through synergies between EU and national programmes; building-up regional and national R&I ecosystems to improve regional/national excellence and competitiveness; and launching a Science management Initiative, to enhance the strategic capacity of at least 100 participating research performing organisations across Europe. These actions will be implemented and monitored through the new ERA Forum and ERAC.

Another bottleneck, especially for the capacity to lead a consortium, is the lack of skills and experience in research management and administration for international projects. In addition, excellent researchers and institutions still lack visibility within the European R&I community and struggle to get access to established networks and consortia. The increased complexity of projects and financial stakes have also raised a certain risk aversion amongst established coordinators to involve new participants from widening countries that are not yet known before despite their indisputable scientific credentials.

I would also like to emphasize the challenges arising from the brain drain. Many talented young researchers leave their home countries in Eastern and Southern Europe to pursue their careers abroad because they are attracted by better working conditions and career prospects elsewhere. Once expatriated, it is hard to attract these talents back and reintegrate them into the institutional structures still prevalent in many widening countries. In this regard, it is not only about salaries that matter but also the immaterial working conditions in terms of recognition, career prospects, and management.

Finally, there is another potential effect that might dampen the motivation of researchers and their institutions to apply for funding under competitive calls of the Framework Programme. This is the abundance of R&I funding under the regional funds typically allocated to mono beneficiaries and awarded by regional authorities. It relieves the applicants from the odds of being exposed to strong competition in an international arena with limited success chances and the requirement of working in a non-native language. Therefore, we may suggest a certain substitution effect, especially in countries that made very good use of these structural funds to boost their R&I system. In the regulations for Horizon Europe and the regional funds, we have now introduced new provisions that facilitate synergies between these two different funding systems towards stronger impact by combining elements of competition and cohesion.

ECHO: HIGHER INVOLVEMENT OF WIDENING COUNTRIES IN HORIZON EUROPE IS AN ISSUE WITH A HIGH POLITICAL PRIORITY, WHICH IS DEMONSTRATED BY A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE OF BUDGET EARMARKED FOR THE WIDENING PACKAGE. WHY IS IT ESSENTIAL THAT WIDENING COUNTRIES GET INVOLVED MORE IN EUROPEAN RESEARCH CONSORTIA?

Panagopoulou: Better involvement of widening countries in European research consortia is at the benefit of the European Union as a whole. In view of increased global competition for the best technology and talents and in view of challenges such as climate change and the pandemics, we can no longer afford to have a considerable part of the Union lagging behind. Higher involvement of widening countries means unlocking the full potential of R&I by pooling resources and getting access to knowledge of excellent researchers and their teams that are currently disconnected. Participation in Horizon Europe is also a quality seal for successful applicants and will hence raise the level of excellence of R&I in widening countries at a systemic level leading to spill-over effects on job qualities and economic development.

ECHO: ADVANCING EUROPE PACKAGE INTRODUCED A COUPLE OF ELEMENTS EXTENDING THE EXISTING TOOLBOX OF TEAMING, TWINNING, ERA CHAIRS, AND COST. HOP ON FACILITY IS ONE OF THESE BRAND-NEW ELEMENTS. WHAT WAS THE MAIN IDEA BEHIND ITS INTRODUCTION?

Panagopoulou: The Hop On Facility is based on Article 20 (3) of the HE Common Understanding providing that the work programme may foresee the possibility for legal entities from low R&I performing countries to join already selected collaborative R&I actions, subject to the agreement of the respective consortium and provided that legal en-

ties from such countries are not yet participating in it. The scheme further aims improving the inclusiveness of Horizon Europe by involving more research institutions from widening countries under Horizon Europe Pillar 2 actions and to set incentives for opening up potentially closed networks. We have recently decided to extend the scope of the action also to consortia selected under the EIC Pathfinder calls. The main selection criteria are excellence and added value of the new partner performing a relevant additional task in the project. All consortium partners need to agree on the accession of the new partner, whereas the R&I relevance and complementarity need to be demonstrated. The accepted application will trigger an amendment of the grant agreement of the host project, including an upgrade of the budget for the contribution of the new partner. A coordination fee of up to 10% of the budget increase may be allocated to the coordinator.

ECHO: WHAT ARE THE EXPECTED BENEFITS AND IMPACTS OF THE HOP ON FACILITY FOR WIDENING PARTNERS?

Panagopoulou: Widening partners will acquire new competencies and skills for working in transnational projects, including research management and dissemination and exploitation are acquired. Participation in the hop-on-the-action will increase their visibility, improve knowledge circulation and reduce the lack of participation of the widening countries in specific thematic domains. Successful hop-on participants will remain trusted candidate partners for future follow-up projects. The level of excellence of hop-on partners and their institutions will be raised with a role model effect on the national R&I system.

ECHO: HOW WILL THE MATCHMAKING BETWEEN THE COORDINATORS OF ELIGIBLE PROJECTS AND WIDENING PARTNERS WORK IN PRACTICE? WILL THERE BE SOME ONLINE TOOL OR PLATFORM FOR FACILITATING THEIR CONNECTION?

Panagopoulou: Consortia eligible to host hop-on partners will be advertised on our participant portal. There will be no dedicated platform for matchmaking apart from existing tools. We count on the help of our NCP network that will be trained for hop-on by our services and receive dedicated financial support to conduct the matchmaking services. We also count on the initiatives of individual consortia and candidate hop-on partners themselves. In addition, the project officers in the executive agencies and policy officers in the Commission will informally support the matchmaking process.

ECHO: HOW WILL THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION EVALUATE THE HOP ON FACILITY? CAN WE EXPECT POSSIBLE CHANGES IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN THE COURSE OF HORIZON EUROPE'S DURATION?

The Hop On Facility, as it stands in our current work programme, has a pilot character and also includes an innovation dimension by its extension to the EIC Pathfinder actions. The effectiveness of the Hop On Facility will be assessed by the Commission services and the Executive Agencies after the first two annual cycles. This will include surveying beneficiaries and host coordinators as well as the internal services involved. Pending the results of this assessment, modifications of the implementation modalities will be considered subject to approval by our Programme Committee and compliance with the legislative package.

ECHO: SCEPTICS MIGHT HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT THE REAL IMPACT OF THE HOP ON FACILITY FOR WIDENING COUNTRIES. WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ARGUMENTS TO COUNTER SUCH SCEPTICISM?

Panagopoulou: The Hop On Facility is only one element in a diversified portfolio of mutually reinforcing widening actions and therefore cannot be seen in isolation. The ambition is not a systemic effect like Teaming but rather breaking up silos and opening doors for newcomers to our Framework Programme. I am confident about the favourable long-term effect of trust building and internationalisation of research groups from widening countries. Further, it will incentivise followers and increase the motivation for researchers to get involved in our Framework Programme.

EXPLANATION NOTES / VYSVĚTLIVKY

In Horizon Europe, 'widening countries' are defined as countries with a low intensity of R&I. These are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, so far unidentified number of countries associated to Horizon Europe and EU outmost regions.

V programu Horizont Evropa jsou „widening countries“ definovány jako země s nízkou intenzitou výzkumu a inovací. Jedná se o tyto země: Bulharsko, Chorvatsko, Kypr, Česko, Estonsko, Řecko, Maďarsko, Lotyšsko, Litva, Malta, Polsko, Portugalsko, Rumunsko, Slovensko, Slovinsko a dosud neurčený počet zemí přidružených k Horizontu Evropa. Mezi widening countries jsou zahrnuty také nejvzdálenější regiony EU.

Technology Centre of the Czech Academy of Sciences is a partner organisation in the **FIT-4-NMP** project, which aims to increase the participation of talented newcomers (especially SMEs) from underrepresented regions in the Horizon Europe programme in nanotechnologies, advanced materials, and new manufacturing processes. FIT-4-NMP offers free services in the Hop On Facility call for RIA projects financed under the 2nd pillar of the Horizon Europe and EIC Pathfinder.

Technologické centrum Akademie věd ČR je partnerskou organizací v projektu **FIT-4-NMP**, jehož cílem je zvýšit účast perspektivních nových subjektů (především MSP) z nedostatečně zastoupených regionů v programu Horizont Evropa v oblasti nanotechnologií, pokročilých materiálů a nových výrobních procesů. FIT-4-NMP nabízí bezplatné služby ve výzvě Hop On Facility pro RIA projekty financované v rámci 2. pilíře programu Horizont Evropa a EIC Pathfinder.

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