

SYNERGIES IN THE EUROPEAN R&I FUNDING

SYNERGIE V EVROPSKÉM FINANCOVÁNÍ VaI

Activities of the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU (CZ PRES) in the area of Research & Innovation (R&I) have been kicked-off with a major conference dedicated to Synergies in the Research and Innovation funding in Europe that took place on July 7 and 8, 2022. Organized by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS) jointly with the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research at the premises of Prague Congress Centre, the conference welcomed more than 300 participants who discussed on how to exploit the full potential of synergies to increase the R&I funding in Europe. In addition, more than 1000 viewers followed the event on-line.

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The conference focused on synergies from a broad perspective. Representatives of the European Commission (EC) as well as the Member States (MS) presented their views on how to remove barriers and make synergies between different funding programmes possible. An effective use of the EU, national and regional funds is key to achieve ambitious goals set by the Horizon Europe including the EU Missions and European Partnerships. Outcomes of the conference are summed-up in the Prague Declaration, a document that was presented to the Member States representatives during the Informal EU Competitiveness Council meeting in Prague in July.



Conference Synergies in the R&I Funding in Europe 2022
(Source: <https://synergies2022.eu/>)

Opening speeches of the conference were delivered by two Czech Ministers: Mr Vladimír Balaš (Education, Youth and Sports) and Ms Helena Langšádlová (Science, Research and Innovation), both stressing the importance of cooperation of the Member States on the subject of synergies and endorsement of the Prague Declaration. In her address, the EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, Ms Mariya Gabriel appreciated activities of an informal working group formed by representatives of Czech organizations involved in implementing synergies between the EU and national funds (including EU Cohesion policy Funds). She highlighted the ELI Beamlines research infrastructure as a good example of a successful investment using different funding instruments that made possible establishment of a world-class research facility in Central Europe. Moreover, she announced recent publication of a new guidance document on opportunities to maximise the synergies between Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund programmes.

On the first conference day, a number of interesting outcomes emerged from the panel discussions. Several panellists called for a simplification of the structure as well as the rules of existing EU programmes or even creation of a single set of rules for all EU programmes. In addition, efficient communication and cooperation between the national and European authorities was highlighted as crucial. The EC representatives informed that a special activity is foreseen to foster synergies at regional level that should help closing the innovation divide across Europe which is one of the EC priorities for the upcoming programming period. The national representatives suggested that an indication of „synergy-friendly“ topics in Horizon Europe Work Programmes would be of a great help to applicants and the managing authorities. Finally, a need to define the role of private investors in synergies and related processes was highlighted.

On the second conference day, four parallel break-out sessions were dedicated to debate on synergies in the areas of Research Infrastructures, the EU Cohesion policy Funds, Innovation, and European Partnerships and EU Missions. The participants to session on research infrastructures agreed that specific needs of these facilities must be considered when designing different programmes. A complementarity of programmes is crucial to sustain such long-term undertakings which cannot depend on a single source of funding. In its outcomes, the session on the EU Cohesion Policy Funds stressed a need for more flexibility in funding and a more strategic approach that would allow to combine different programmes in a simpler way. The panellists also supported activities of the existing Seal of Excellence Community of Practice and suggested involvement of other relevant players into it. The topic of a harmonization of timing of different EU programme calls was also emphasized. In the Innovation session, practical examples of support provided to innovative SMEs, especially applicants to the European Innovation Council schemes and Seal of Excellence holders were discussed. The panellists agreed that synergies may only work in a cooperative innovation ecosystem built on trust. They also underlined that the national authorities should adopt a more flexible approach in supporting the applicants. Finally, the last panel highlighted the Horizon Europe's Partnerships as an excellent example of co-creation and co-decision principles that are essential for efficient use of funding from various sources. As for the EU Missions, a key role of the TRAMI project that helps to coordinate efforts of the national, regional, and local initiatives as well as to enhance complementarity of funding in order to reach the EU Missions' objectives was acknowledged.

The conference closing was delivered by Ms Radka Wildová, Deputy Minister for Higher Education, Science and Research (MEYS), who summed up the main conference takeaways, thanked all speakers as well as participants for their valuable contributions and reassured the audience of the paramount importance of the synergies for the Czech Presidency.

PRAGUE DECLARATION ON SYNERGIES IN THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FUNDING IN EUROPE

The document represents a common effort by the European Commission, the Member States and Associated Countries on promoting the synergies across relevant R&I funding instruments. Based on the main conclusions of the conference, it invites relevant stakeholders to strengthen the dialogue in order to identify and remove barriers that prevent the full potential of synergies from being harvested.

EC should analyse rules of the EU programmes in order to harmonize them and allow increased flexibility in their implementation. Further support to communities and platforms that allow for sharing of knowledge and experiences in using synergies would also be welcomed. The Member States are strongly in favour of a better coordination within the EC services, and between the EC and the national authorities during the programme planning periods. Practical guidance provided by EC including good practice examples is key to a successful application of synergies between different funds.

The Member States and Associated Countries should further explore possibilities of synergic use of the regional, national and European R&I funding. Moreover, they should also increase their efforts to provide the Seal of Excellence holders with funding and support at national or regional levels in order to increase participation in Horizon Europe, in particular when it comes to applicants from the cohesion countries.

Besides, the Prague Declaration calls on all relevant actors to take action in policy-making areas addressed by the conference parallel break-out sessions, i.e. research infrastructures, the European Partnerships and EU Missions, Innovation and the EU Cohesion Policy.

The document shall be endorsed by the Member State representatives per rollam and the outcomes of the endorsement initiative communicated on the occasion of the formal EU Competitiveness Council meeting in December 2022.

ECHO asked representatives of the team responsible for the Conference organization, Ms Táňa Hálová Perglová and Mr Lukáš Levák a couple of questions related to the conference agenda, programme highlights and follow-up activities on the national and international levels.

therefore, comprise particularly policy-making and public funding of research infrastructures (including Czech memberships in international R&D organisations and the ERIC consortia), and formulation and implementation of the strategy for international collaboration of Czechia in R&D in the framework of the European Research Area (including agenda of the EU Competitiveness Council of Research Ministers).

ECHO: WHY DO SYNERGIES OF DIFFERENT EU FUNDING INSTRUMENTS REPRESENT A KEY PRIORITY TO THE CZECH PRESIDENCY IN THE AREA OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION?

Levák: First of all, with the new EU programming period starting, synergies are a very topical issue. The timing of the conference could not have been better in this regard as EC released the long-awaited guidelines on synergies between Horizon Europe and the European Regional Development Fund programmes only a couple of days before holding the event, at the very beginning of the Czech Presidency. Secondly, an efficient implementation of synergies is critical for achieving goals and objectives of all EU policies. There are dozens of the EU directly managed programmes and even more initiatives implemented at the national, regional, and local levels. As a result, the R&I funding landscape has become very complex, which clearly calls for further advancement of synergies. Despite years of efforts, we still have to align better the framework conditions to raise funds across a broad range of funding instruments in a more synergic and complementary way. The Czech Presidency set out the ambition to reach a consensus on the Prague Declaration, which is meant as a call for action in the area of synergies. On the top of that, there will also be the Council Conclusions on synergies following the special report by the European Court of Auditors evaluating synergies in the past EU programming period. Against this background, synergies simply had to become one of the top priorities of the Czech Presidency.

ECHO: IN THE CONFERENCE KEYNOTES, HIGH-LEVEL REPRESENTATIVES OF THE CZECH GOVERNMENT HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF SYNERGIES TO SUPPORT RESEARCH AND INNOVATION. WHAT ACTION WILL BE TAKEN AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL TO FACILITATE SYNERGIES OF DIFFERENT EU FUNDS AND TO IMPROVE THE ACCESS TO FUNDING TO THE CZECH R&I COMMUNITY?

Levák: In a number of R&I funding areas, implementation of synergies is still a pending challenge that has to be faced and resolved. On one hand, we can already build on a large variety of good practice examples from the past. We have been applying synergies when covering the operational and investment costs of research infrastructures. We have been using the Seal of Excellence funding approach to finance the projects of the European Research Council, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions and SME Instrument. We have also been participating in various European R&I co-fund programmes and used synergies when co-financing projects of Teaming. Nevertheless, there is so much space for improvement. The ambition is to align better the national programme-based funding with the pan-European initiatives, particularly when it comes to the thematic areas addressed by the European Partnerships and EU Missions. The involvement of the Czech Republic in these schemes is still rather moderate or modest, and the level of engagement has to be increased.

ECHO: THE REPRESENTATIVES OF DIFFERENT EU BODIES EXPRESSED THEIR CLEAR COMMITMENT TO THE IDEA OF A MORE FLEXIBLE AND EFFICIENT UTILIZATION OF THE EU FUNDS. WHAT FURTHER STEPS ARE ENVISAGED TO BE TAKEN BY THE CZECH AND THE SUBSEQUENT EU PRESIDENCIES IN ORDER TO KEEP THE MOMENTUM AND IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS SUGGESTED IN THE PRAGUE DECLARATION?

Levák: Although being a legally non-binding document, the Prague Declaration should bring a new impetus to enhance synergies. Stakeholders from all around Europe, who participated in drafting the paper, have been mobilised to take action. Now, it is their responsibility to take the initiative and introduce reforms facilitating better synergies. It goes without saying it is going to be a long-time run with

Lukáš Levák (Director of Department for R&D, MEYS)

Since 2014, Lukáš Levák has been the Director of Department for R&D at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, which consists of the Unit for Research Infrastructures and the Unit for European Research Area. His duties and responsibilities,

many obstacles across the way. Anyway, it is our strong belief that the Prague Declaration has been a sort of wake-up call for those, who have not paid particular attention to synergies yet or have not even noticed they are so important. Synergies have to become embedded in each and every policy-maker's mindset as an integral part of the default setting, when designing, creating and implementing a R&I programme incentivising science and technology advancement, or addressing a societal, environment or economic challenge.



Táňa Hálová Perglová

(Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU)

Táňa Hálová Perglová is involved in the team of the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU at the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic in Brussels. She has gained professional experience in research and innovation policy in different positions in CzechInvest, CZELO (Czech Liaison Office for Research and Development in Brussels), and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. Before joining the Czech EU Council Presidency team, she worked as Director of Horizontal and International Section in the Technology Agency of the Czech Republic.

ECHO: HOW DID YOU DETERMINE THE STRUCTURE AND THE PRIORITIES OF THE CONFERENCE PROGRAMME? WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE PROCESS?

Hálová Perglová: When EC started to put emphasis on synergies in 2014, it raised lot of interest in the Czech Republic, especially from the research funding organisations. We were keen to exploit them. We have also been active in the Seal of Excellence Community and thus aware of topics which were broadly discussed on the top of the Seal of Excellence tool. The team, which was responsible for designing the conference programme within the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, agreed immediately on the four main topics – research infrastructures, EU Cohesion Policy Funds, innovation, and European Partnerships. Then, we consulted the European Commission who wanted

to give more visibility to the EU Missions as the achievement of their goals is only possible if European, national and regional levels work closely together.

ECHO: WHAT WAS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE YOU AND YOUR TEAM HAD TO DEAL WITH DURING THE CONFERENCE PREPARATION? ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH THE OVERALL RESULT AND THE OUTCOMES?

Hálová Perglová: The greatest challenge were limited human resources. All persons, who were in the preparation team, had their own work agenda and the preparation of the conference was on the top of it. But all the team was just fantastic, passionate about the conference and its preparation. It was definitely a wonderful experience for all of us to prepare such an international event. I am personally satisfied with the outcomes and the results. The discussions were very fruitful, and we could see how important the topic of synergies is. Especially now, when the economic crisis is foreseen and we must use financial resources as efficiently as we can, avoid overlapping and work together. I strongly believe that the Prague Declaration contributes to a better dialogue and focus on the right mix of steps to be undertaken in the future.

ECHO: FROM YOUR POINT OF VIEW AS A RAPPOREUR OF THE PARALLEL BREAK-OUT SESSION ON SYNERGIES IN THE AREA OF INNOVATION, WHAT WAS THE MOST INTERESTING OR IMPORTANT MESSAGE COMING FROM THE SESSION?

Hálová Perglová: I very much appreciated the composition of the panel, which showed how complex the issue is and how important it is to work together, to network and to learn from each other. I learnt so many new things! We need exactly this sort of approach. We need dedicated groups on specific issues where people could meet and learn from each other and discuss very specific and detailed issues of synergies. The devil is in detail, and we must not allow a small detail to spoil setting of synergies, which could benefit hundreds and thousands of beneficiaries. We also need passionate people, good will and proactive attitude on all sides and at all levels. I could see in our panel that there is sufficient willingness on the side of EC, and also among stakeholders and research funding organisations which is crucial for a successful setting of synergies.

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