POSITION STATEMENT

Science Europe supports a novel category for Association to Horizon Europe for closer international R&I collaboration with aligned countries

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Facilitating international co-operation in research and innovation (R&I) is of utmost importance. The Horizon Europe Framework Programme fosters such collaboration through its Association model, which enables it to achieve shared international goals while strengthening Europe's competitiveness and resilience. Horizon Europe 2028–2034 should maintain this approach and reinforce responsible strategic international scientific collaboration.

Against the backdrop of increasing geopolitical challenges, association to Horizon Europe should be driven by the principles of responsible openness, while acknowledging the EU's strategic and security priorities. While the European Parliament's position on the 2028–2034 Horizon Europe Programme (Art 9/4a) are a welcome step in the right direction, they do not address all concerns.

The following recommendations are made by Science Europe and its Member Organisations (national research funding and research performing organisations across Europe) to seamlessly involve aligned international partners in all types of R&I collaborations, including more strategic and long-term ones.

Seamless continuation of R&I collaborations, including long-term, strategic ones, from the outset of Horizon Europe 2028–34

This Framework Programme should create the Associated Countries provide scientific expertise and contribute substantially to the budget of Horizon Europe 2028–2034. As they participate in long-standing, strategic co-operations that may reach beyond the scope of R&I and the timeline of a Framework Programme, continuity is crucial.

This continuity should not be disrupted during the transition from the 9th to the 10th Framework Programme. Association agreements should be in place from the outset of the new programme. Should this not be possible, early assurances should be provided to maintain participation.

Reflection on the European Parliament's recommendation

Article 9/4a of the recent position by the European Parliament establishes that non-EU countries – once associated to the Framework Programme – can be designated as 'Trusted Partners'. Such countries would be able to engage in strategic collaborations with EU Member States within Horizon Europe, without any restrictions that may apply to other third countries. Enabling such closer collaboration is in line with the recommendations of Science Europe.

However, countries can only be granted the designation 'Trusted Partner' after their association to the programme is completed. This leaves the issue of potentially lengthy association processes unaddressed and does not remove the barriers they may pose for the continuity of collaboration between 9th and 10th EU R&I Framework Programmes. Swift and seamless association from the outset of Horizon Europe 2028–2034 should be prioritised for countries that already satisfy the criteria to be designated as 'Trusted Partners'.

Furthermore, Science Europe advises against explicitly naming any country in the legislative text. This practice is not in line with the country-agnostic approach of the EU towards R&I collaboration with third countries. In addition, it does not convey any advantage to the countries named, as they should already meet the criteria to be considered a 'Trusted Partner'.

Proposal for a new Association Category for closely Associated Countries

Acknowledging the wide range and variety of countries associated to Horizon Europe, Science Europe supports the introduction of a **new category for closely associated, aligned countries.**

A novel association category should expedite the association process and minimise restrictions based on objective, country-agnostic criteria, with an emphasis on democratic and academic values, outlined below:

- Track record of sustained and substantive participation in previous Framework Programmes, and contribution to the European Research Area
- Commitment to EU values
- Robust frameworks for the protection of intellectual property and personal data
- Respect for research integrity and academic freedom
- Compatibility with EU strategic interests (including research security)

This novel association category should include default eligibility to all calls, including strategic, long-term initiatives, while keeping exceptions minimal. This would enable strategic planning and strengthen the overall reliability of the next Framework Programme – not only for the countries in the new category, but for all stakeholders from all EEA Member States with whom they collaborate.

Periodic monitoring of criteria

A robust and proportionate system should be developed to provide effective pre-assessment and periodic monitoring of whether closely Associated Countries continue to satisfy the criteria outlined above. The system currently in place for GDPR/data protection adequacy could serve as an inspiration for developing a framework for monitoring eligibility for long-term, strategic R&I collaborations.

At the same time, an Associated Country's potential loss of eligibility for this novel category due to national or international developments independent from Horizon Europe cannot be excluded. To anticipate such cases, a 'stop clause' should be implemented in the regulation, clarifying that close association is only maintained for as long as the criteria are met.

Concluding Remarks

Open, responsible research collaborations are fundamental to the goals of Horizon Europe and for building a strong knowledge base in the EU. In addition, they can generate significant strategic advantages, support the Union's long-term competitiveness, and collectively help address the critical challenges we face.

Carefully implemented (in a manner that provides necessary safeguards and ensures that it does not create arbitrary divisions) a novel Association category can further strengthen the effectiveness of Horizon Europe in and for the European Union.

Science Europe is the association of national research funding and research performing organisations in Europe. We define long-term perspectives for European research and champion best-practice approaches that enable high-quality research for knowledge advancement and the needs of society.

Our vision for the next Horizon Europe is a Framework Programme that supports a robust research & innovation ecosystem providing the best conditions for excellent science and researchers.

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