

(English version)

**Question for written answer E-000020/26
to the Commission
Piotr Müller (ECR)
(6 January 2026)**

Subject: Commission actions to level the playing field in the Horizon Europe programme

Horizon Europe statistics show that there are still significant and persistent differences between Member States in accessing prestigious research grants, despite the functioning of the Widening instruments. Applicants from central and eastern Europe continue to have a lower success rate and a large share of the funds is concentrated in a limited number of institutions from a handful of countries. There are also public concerns about possible unconscious biases in assessment processes, inadequate representation of experts from Widening countries on assessment panels and the disproportionate weight given to institutional reputation at the expense of the actual quality and potential of projects. At the same time, there is a lack of clear indicators to assess whether the Commission's current actions effectively reduce these disparities.

In light of the above:

1. Is the Commission planning to carry out an independent audit of the procedures for evaluating proposals in Horizon Europe, including an analysis of possible unconscious biases and the composition of expert panels in relation to representation from Widening countries?
2. Is the Commission considering adapting the evaluation criteria for European Research Council grants in order to strengthen the weight given to projects' quality and novelty, while decreasing that given to institutional reputation?
3. Is the Commission analysing the introduction of systemic solutions, including mechanisms based on national envelopes or similar instruments, that would foster more sustainable access to research funding?

Submitted: 6.1.2026

**Answer given by Ms Zaharieva on behalf of the European Commission
(25 March 2026)**

The Commission implements a robust evaluation process for Horizon Europe designed to ensure equal treatment, fairness, transparency, and impartiality.

Proposals are assessed by external independent experts who collaborate to reach a consensus, which helps mitigate individual biases. In two-stage calls, first-stage proposals are evaluated blindly where possible, providing an additional safeguard against bias.

Evaluator panels reflect geographical diversity, including representatives from widening countries. An independent study ⁽¹⁾ concluded that the evaluation system in Horizon Europe is broadly fair.

The Commission is committed to continuous improvement, focusing on maintaining the same high quality in the process, with particular attention to the inclusion of widening countries.

The European Research Council (ERC) uses scientific excellence as the sole award criterion for assessing proposals. In 2024, the ERC ⁽²⁾ introduced further reforms to reduce bias and to ensure that the excellence of the research project carries more weight than the applicant's track record.

The new Horizon Europe proposal ⁽³⁾ strives to align European, national, and regional priorities, to strengthen research and innovation ecosystems by creating close links with the European Competitiveness Fund proposal ⁽⁴⁾ and coordinated investments through the proposed new National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) ⁽⁵⁾.

⁽¹⁾ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f54dbfed-7743-11ec-9136-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

⁽²⁾ See Article 28 (2) of the Horizon Europe Regulation, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0695>.

⁽³⁾ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025PC0543>.

⁽⁴⁾ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025PC0555>.

⁽⁵⁾ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025PC0558>.

Having a simplified framework for nationally pre-allocated envelopes within the NRPPs will allow in that respect to better exploit synergies with other instruments of the EU budget, including the European Competitiveness Fund and Horizon Europe ⁽⁶⁾.

⁽⁶⁾ Member States also have the possibility to transfer funds from shared management funds, e.g. European Social Fund Plus or European Regional Development Fund to Horizon Europe to support excellent proposals which would otherwise have received a seal of excellence. This can help strengthen participation in Horizon Europe by beneficiaries from regions/Member States that have traditionally had a low participation and success rate; boost projects in areas identified as priorities through smart specialisation; and help preserve administrative capacity at national/regional level in the selection and follow up of research and innovation projects. The Commission currently implements such transfers from Malta, Lithuania and Germany (Brandenburg).