



## Spring of discontent in the EU science community

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Science appears to be low in priorities of the new Juncker commission, preferring direct support to jobs' creation

The European science community feels increasingly uneasy about the science policies of the new head of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker. Under what is dubbed as the “Juncker plan”, formulated in November 2014, a fraction of the budget originally earmarked for Horizon2020 would be reallocated to the newly created European Fund for Strategic Investment, [EFSI](#), to support high-risk and high-return projects. The European Parliament’s report on this proposal is expected on 20 April 2015, and approval is not expected until June at the earliest.

The proposal has, in the past few months, triggered a swarm of statements—one of which was signed by [27 Nobel laureates](#)—expressing scientists’ concerns about a planned €2.7 billion cuts to Horizon2020. This upheaval follows a previous outrage at Juncker’s [decision](#) not to renew the post of Chief Scientific Advisor, previously held by [Anne Glover](#) during the Barroso era. As a result, Juncker’s decisions have been perceived as not being supportive to science so far. Some scientists have also expressed concerns that further negative consequences could be forthcoming, should the use of structural funds no longer be available for research, for example.

### Proposed EFSI

According to the Juncker proposal, the EFSI would inject a total of €21 billion of loans into the hobbling European economy. Its objective is to stimulate a total of €315 billion investment from the private sector. Horizon2020 is set

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to lose 3.5% of its funds, should the proposed transfer to EFSI be approved. The European finance ministers backed it unanimously on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2015.

Now, the ball is in the court of the European Parliament. Its report on the proposed plan is due on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 2015. The Commission is pushing for the EFSI to be approved by the summer 2015. Individual MEPs have suggested sparing cuts on Horizon2020. However, the first [draft report](#) issued by Parliamentary committees on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015 just calls for postponing the decision on a year-by-year basis, for each of the next five years' budgets.

By contrast, the proposed regulation put forward by Juncker is very detailed. It already contains specific statements on how and when the money will be subtracted to Horizon2020 in the next 5 years. 2016 and 2017 will be the most difficult, since the cuts—by €860 and €871 million, respectively— will reach about 8% of the expected funds. The European Research Council (ERC) is expected to lose €220 million—which represents 1.69% of its budget. This will translate into about 150 fewer grants than expected, which corresponds to about 900 qualified jobs, according to ERC's president Jean-Pierre Bourguignon.

Beyond ERC, almost all chapters of Horizon2020 are expected to be slashed. In the so-called Pillar 1 pertaining to basic research, the Marie Curie Actions would be reduced by 1,62%, Research Infrastructures by 4,22% and Future and Emerging Technologies by 4,37%. ITER would lose €490 million in 2015, but they are expected to be returned starting from 2017. The only budget line remaining untouched is the Access to Risk Finance, which is the one from which industry can take money out of Horizon2020. According to early reports, these should have been entirely transferred to EFSI, but in the end it is set to remain untouched.

However, the European Court of Auditors (ECA), in an [opinion](#) dated 12th March 2015, has strongly criticised the proposed EFSI. Among a host of criticism to the proposal's governance, legal framework and procedures. In addition, the ECA opinion questions "the basis for choosing the Connecting Europe Facility and Horizon 2020 as the main funding sources [...]; and the consequences that a reduction of funds for those programmes would have in filling investment gaps, removing bottlenecks and contributing to the Europe 2020 targets." This criticism has been echoed by a [statement](#) issued on 23rd March 2015 by Kurt Deketelaere, Secretary-General of the Brussels-based League of European Research Universities (LERU).

### Multiple dissenting voices

Further dissenting voices have emerged from organisations representing the interests of the science community in Europe. "If you want to do something for the future of Europe it's not a good idea to strangle research, which is the basis of future economy," says Christian Keyzers, member of the board of [Young Academy of Europe](#) (YAE), a pan-European bottom-up initiative of a dynamic group of recognised European young scientists.

Others raise additional issues. "Our concern is that the EFSI rather leads to a short-term employment increase but not to substantial growth and progress in the science sector," says Matthias Johannsen, executive secretary of the federation of European science academies, the [All European Academies](#) (ALLEA) based in Berlin, Germany. "The perception is that that science is not a priority to the commission," says Stephan Kuster, head of policy affairs at [Science Europe](#), an association of European funding and performing organisations, based in Brussels, Belgium.

A solution, according to the Brussels-based European University Association (EUA), consists in shifting some of the cuts from Horizon 2020 to impose cuts greater than the €3.3 billion already proposed by the Juncker plan to the Connecting Europe Facility, which is the EU fund to boost transport, energy and [digital networks](#) across Europe. Another suggestion by ALLEA would require including the ERC among those that should select EFSI's projects.

The trouble is that EFSI may end up funding mainly streets and bridges, according to Dominic Guellec, head of the Science and Technology Policy Division of the OECD, based in Paris, France. "Money for infrastructures is fine, but it should not be taken from knowledge. Europe is lagging behind in R&D and should increase its investment: reducing it will have impact on long term competitiveness of EU," Guellec says.

The Commission has repeatedly pointed out that EFSI includes research among its strategic objectives. "With EFSI we're adding power to Horizon 2020 to take the lead in the race and create jobs, growth and competitiveness in the

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EU. This will benefit researchers and steer the motor of our society for the long run,” writes Carlos Moedas, Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, in a declaration sent by email to *EuroScientist*. Moedas has reportedly said that the EFSI is [expected](#) to be open to scientists, among others, and to support research infrastructures.

But scientists are not convinced with the new Juncker strategy. The EUA released a [policy brief](#) on 6 March 2015 stating that “in most EU Member States, borrowing money is restricted or even prohibited for universities,” so there is no way for them to access to EFSI funds. Moreover, “the currently available list of proposed projects [are] primarily related to [...] infrastructure such as transport and energy.”

Regarding the budget increase in Horizon2020, YAE’s Keyzers and Science Europe’s Kuster point out that it includes chapters that were not present in the former framework programme, like innovation. They also point out that ERC was only founded half way through the previous framework programme.

### The trouble with variable salaries

Beyond the proposed EFSI-related cuts, there is another source of discontent in relation to the way funding emanating from Horizon2020 is awarded. The issue is related to Article 27 of its regulation. A group of scientists based in several European countries, and self-identified as ‘Fair EU Costs Eligibility,’ drafted earlier this year a [document](#) complaining about the limitations on using Horizon2020 money to pay the variable part of salaries, for example bonuses associated with special merits. “There are requirements, like that complements to the salary are justified with objective criteria, which are difficult to be met in science,” says Arturo Azcorra, a professor at the Carlos III University in Madrid and coordinator of the group.

Azcorra says that an institution will not be able to give an incentive to a scientist for participating in a European project. “This regulation penalises the salary policy applied in less rich countries of the South and East [of Europe], where the variable part of the salary is higher,” he says. Lucía Caudet, spokesperson for the Commission, replies in a written answer to *EuroScientist* that “arbitrary bonuses” are ineligible to avoid unjustified charges to Horizon 2020 projects. “Extra salaries paid on subjective basis cannot be charged to the EU action [...] to avoid that the H2020 project is overcharged compared with other projects,” she says.

### Concerns over the structural funds

The perceived orientation of the Commission toward business to the detriment to science has also rung the alarms over the new regulation of structural funds. These represent an important source of science funding beyond Horizon2020. According to the new rules—which were approved before Juncker took office—Member States are required to set up smart specialisation strategies, focusing on research that makes a difference to their development.

Some scientists in countries, such as Portugal and Poland, suspect this may reduce their chances of benefiting from structural funds for science, as was previously the case. “Most countries, including Poland, are not still ready [with their strategy], which creates uncertainty”, points out Maciej Żylicz, president of the Foundation for Polish Science, based in Warsaw. He fears that companies may swallow most of these funds in Poland.

However, officials in the Commission say that there is nothing to worry about. “Countries and regions had a higher flexibility before, but now they need to have a very clear strategy, [still] research and innovation is number one among eleven priorities of the new structural funds,” says Dimitris Korpakis, head of unit, spreading excellence and widening participation, at DG Research. In the past five years, 25% of the €340 billion of the structural funds were used by Member States for research. The objective for the current period is to reach 30% of the total €325 billion—that is, about €100 billion—according to Korpakis, who expects the goal to be met, on the basis of the available strategies drafts.

The regulatory troubles experienced by scientists, the [uncertainty](#) related to how scientific advice will be provided to the Commission in the future, following the removal of the CSA position, and, above all, the proposal to slash Horizon2020 in favour of EFSI are creating mistrust among the scientific community over Juncker’s commitment to science. Most critics agree that the Commission’s policy may undermine its very intentions. “The foundation of

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science relies heavily on public investment,” points out Science Europe’s Kuster, concluding: “By cutting it, you are taking away the foundation of innovation. The political consequences are long-lasting, because Europe becomes less attractive for top researchers.”

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