Excellence Hubs within the Widening programme

Nada SIROTIC, RTD.A2

Ioanna STAVRIDOU, REA.C3

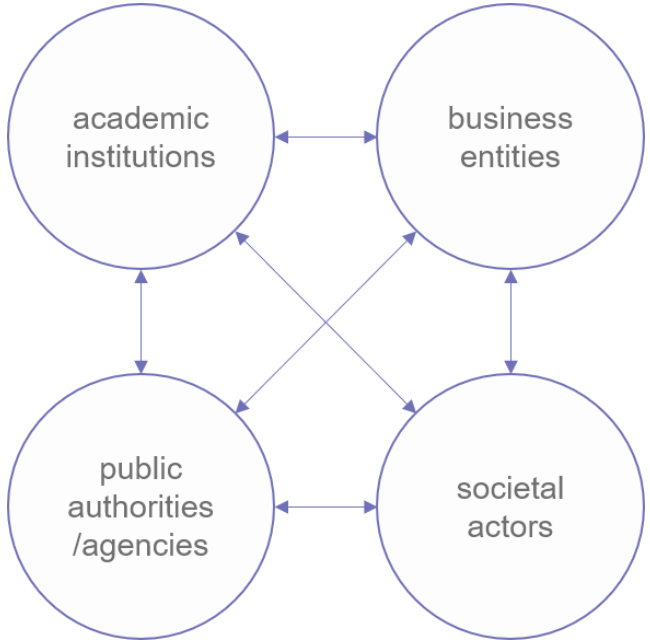
International Excellence Hubs Week, 23 October 2026

European Commission

Excellence Hubs – definition and scope

- EH are networks of innovation ecosystems involving larger communities based on the quadruple helix principle.

- Strengthening regional innovation excellence in **Widening countries** and beyond by **teaming up of innovation ecosystems** and creating better linkages between academia, business, government and society.



Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026-2027 - 11. Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area

Excellence Hubs 2027 call

Call	HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01
Opening / closing	02 September 2026 / **04 March 2027**
Type of action	CSA
Budget	EUR 100 million
EU contribution per project	EUR 1.5-4.5 million
Indicative number of projects	30
Legal and financial set-up of GA	Funding rate: 70% of eligible costs Financial support to third parties (FSTP) in the form of grants: SMEs/start-ups; max. 60.000 EUR/third party
Applicants informed	July 2027
GA signature	November 2027
Duration	Up to 5 years

Funding rate

- Total amount of eligible costs has to be reported in order to qualify for a 70% reimbursement;
- Applicable to all beneficiaries;
- The proposal has to include a clear explanation on how the remaining 30% will be secured and shared among the beneficiaries; no formal proof of financial commitment is required.

Comparison of Excellence Hubs Calls 2021-2027

HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ACCESS-04-01	HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07-01	HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01
50 million EUR	60 million EUR	100 million EUR
3-5 million EUR Union contribution/project	2-6 million EUR Union contribution/project	1,5-4,5 million EUR Union contribution/project
Project duration up to 4 years	Project duration up to 4 years	Project duration up to 5 years
	Optional component: mentoring	Funding rate 70% of eligible costs

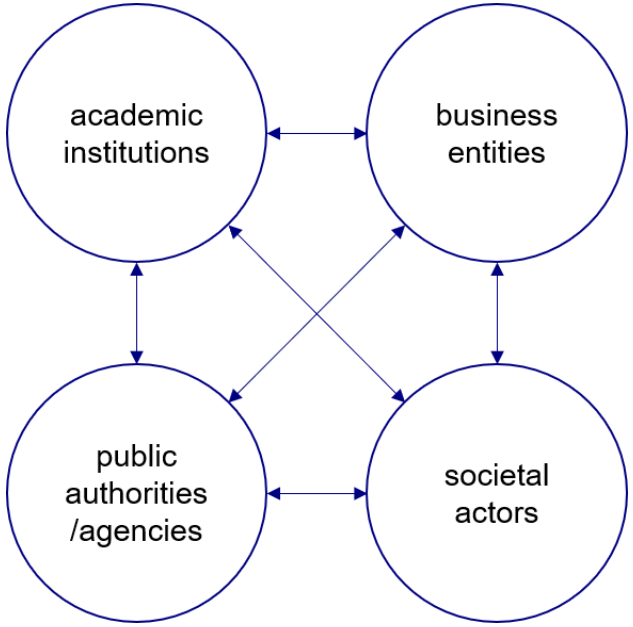
EH 2027: Eligibility

- **Coordinators**: legal entities established in Widening countries
- Participation of legal entities from non-Widening countries – if necessary to achieve expected impact.

- **At least two R&I ecosystems from two different Widening countries**

  - ➞ Each entirely based in a single Widening country

  - ➞ Each comprising four different categories of actors* (either as „umbrella” organisation(s) or individual legal entities)



EH 2027: Activities

Well-balanced package covering at least:

- Design and implementation of cross-border joint R&I strategy;
- R&I collaboration strengthening academia-business linkages (R&I component in a distinct work package; including long-term vision);
- Development of investment plans to implement the strategy, including business models;
- If applicable, conceptual design and pre-planning for pilots and demonstrators in line with the strategy (financed by other sources);
- Complementary activities.

EH 2027: Outcomes

- Excellent and sustainable regional R&I ecosystems in Widening countries and beyond;
- Long-term joint R&I strategies underpinned by concrete action plans of European relevance;
- Common investment plans for R&I, leveraging other funding in a synergetic manner;
- R&I pilot projects alongside a joint strategy, in line with regional and national strategies;
- New competences and skills for researchers, entrepreneurs and professionals in R&I intensive domains;
- Strengthened linkages in the quadruple helix;
- New business opportunities, especially in deep-tech areas.

Excellence Hubs Financed Projects



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EXCELLENCE HUBS INFO DAY · HORIZON EUROPE WIDERA

Research and Innovation ecosystems:

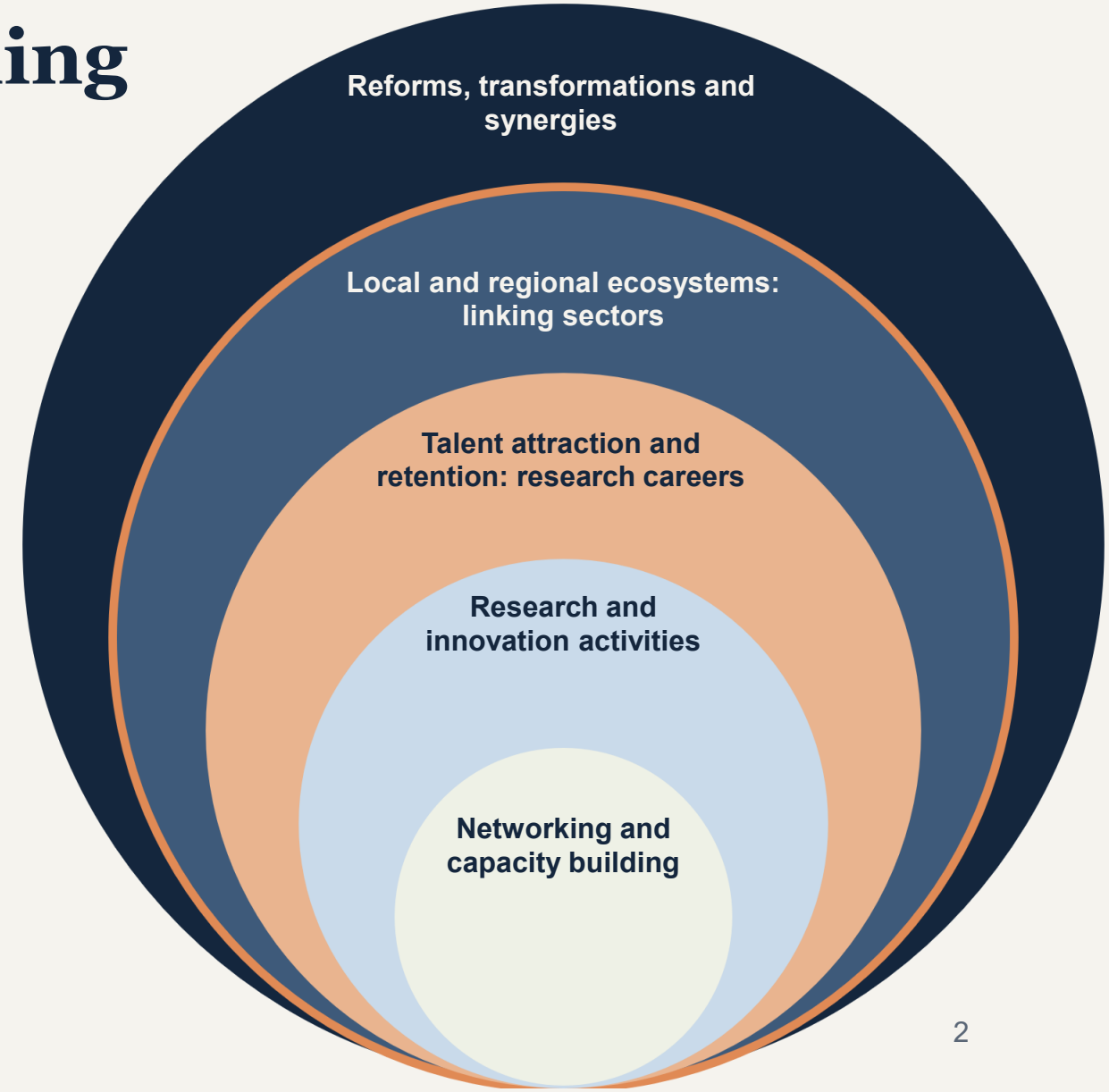
the quadruple helix in Excellence Hubs 2027

Rui Munhá · FCT· 23 October 2026

THE WIDENING PORTFOLIO

Excellence Hubs in Widening

- Teaming
- Pathways to Synergies
- **Excellence Hubs**
- European Excellence Initiative
- EIC Pre-accelerator – Widening
- ERA Research Managers
- ERA Chairs
- ERA Fellowships
- Hop-On Facility
- Twinning
- ERA Talents
- COST



WHAT CHANGED FROM THE PREVIOUS CALL

More hubs, smaller grants, shared financial commitments

	2023 call	2027 call
Indicative budget	€60 M	€100 M
Projects expected	~12	~30
EU contribution per project	€2–5 M (€6 M with mentoring)	€1.5–4.5 M
Duration	Up to 4 years	Up to 5 years
Funding rate	**100%**	**70% (30% secured by beneficiaries)**
Mentoring scheme	Optional	Not foreseen

Sources: Horizon Europe Work Programme 2026–2027, Part 11 (HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01); Work Programme 2023–2025 (HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07-01)

POLICY ANCHORING

Linking science to business, from 2021 to 2027

ERA COMMUNICATION 2020

Priority 3: translate R&I results into the economy

Cited explicitly in the 2027 call as the priority the action supports.

ERA POLICY AGENDA 2022–2024

Action 15: improve EU-wide access to excellence

Excellence Hubs named as a contributing instrument.

ERA POLICY AGENDA 2025–2027

Four structural policies

- Research careers and intersectoral talent flows
- Knowledge valorisation and intermediaries
- Stronger, connected regional R&I systems
- Access to excellence and cohesion–FP synergies

Sources: COM(2020) 628; ERA Policy Agenda 2022–2024; ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 (OJ C/2025/3593)

PLACE-BASED RESEARCH AND INNOVATION CULTURE

Place-based, revisited: three tests

Rooted

Each ecosystem anchored in one territory and its smart specialisation strategy, entirely within a single Widening country.

Connected

Each ecosystem contributes to what the others lack, along a European value chain. The network of ecosystems (the Hub) demonstrates its added-value.

Co-invested

The own actors carry part of the cost and own the investment that follows the project. Other funding sources may be mobilised.

These represent the easiest narratives. Other models and approaches may apply.

RESARCH AND INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

An ecosystem is defined by what circulates

Knowledge

Joint projects, shared resources and facilities

People

Secondments, staff exchanges, careers across sectors

Funding Sources

Private investment, regional and cohesion programmes

Rules and demand

Standards, user needs

IN THE PROPOSAL

- Mapping the actors
- Mapping the links per ecosystem
- Mapping the links within the Hub
- Explain the added-value of the Hub
- Demonstrate competitiveness in partnerships, institutional change and R&I intensity

QUADRUPLE HELIX

Four categories per ecosystem, one role each

Academia

Role · Knowledge, talent, research capacity

Evidence ·(Joint) track record; (valorisation structures)

Business

Role · Demand, route to market, co-investment

Evidence · Established firm: 2 consecutive years of proven turnover. (Joint) track record

One ecosystem
in one Widening country

Public authority

Role · RIS3 ownership, regional programmes, continuity

Evidence · Regional or local level; link to the investment plan

Society

Role · Users, adoption, co-design

Evidence · Neither commercial nor public administration; defined tasks

REIMBURSEMENT RATE

30%: commitment and sustainability test

70/30

“An explanation should be provided in the proposal on how the remaining 30% will be secured and shared among the beneficiaries.”

- **Who pays?**
- **From which source?**
- **How certain?**

Source: Work Programme 2026–2027

SYNERGIES

Positioning the hub in different directions

UPSTREAM · BUILDS ON

- Teaming centres
- Twinning projects
- ERA Chairs
- COST Actions
- Earlier Excellence Hubs

ALONGSIDE · ALIGN, NO OVERLAP

- European Innovation Ecosystems
- EIC Pathfinder
- EIT KICs and EIT Community Hubs
- JRC Partnerships for Regional Innovation
- Widening Dissemination and Exploitation Facility

DOWNSTREAM · FEEDS

- Pilots and demonstrators, funded by other sources
- Regional and cohesion programmes
- National instruments
- Private capital

RESEARCH COMPONENT

Research as the evidence engine of the strategy

Conditions

- A distinct work package
- Joint research projects closing knowledge gaps, with market potential
- A long-term vision beyond the state of the art
- In balance with the other activities, never the dominant part
- Evidence for the strategy and the investment plans

Pitfalls

- (Hub) as a collaborative research project in disguise
- Research disconnected from strategy and investment
- Research confined to one ecosystem
- *Grey area* between CSA eligible costs and pilots and demoonstratators

COMMON WEAKNESSES

Patterns evaluators recognise

01

The isolated clubs

Ecosystems side by side, with no shared value chain

02

The checklist helix in ecosystems

All categories present, roles absent

03

The *for-show* strategy

Delivered in year one, never used again

04

wish list *vs.* sustainability

An investment plan with needs and no sources

05

The unallocated 30%

Co-funding asserted, never distributed

SUSTAINABILITY

Life beyond the project

Governance

Keeping a structure

Pipeline

Funding of the knowledge value chain, pilots under way

People

Careers that cross academia and business

Positioning

Competitive advantage towards FP10

Obrigado

Rui Munhá · FCT

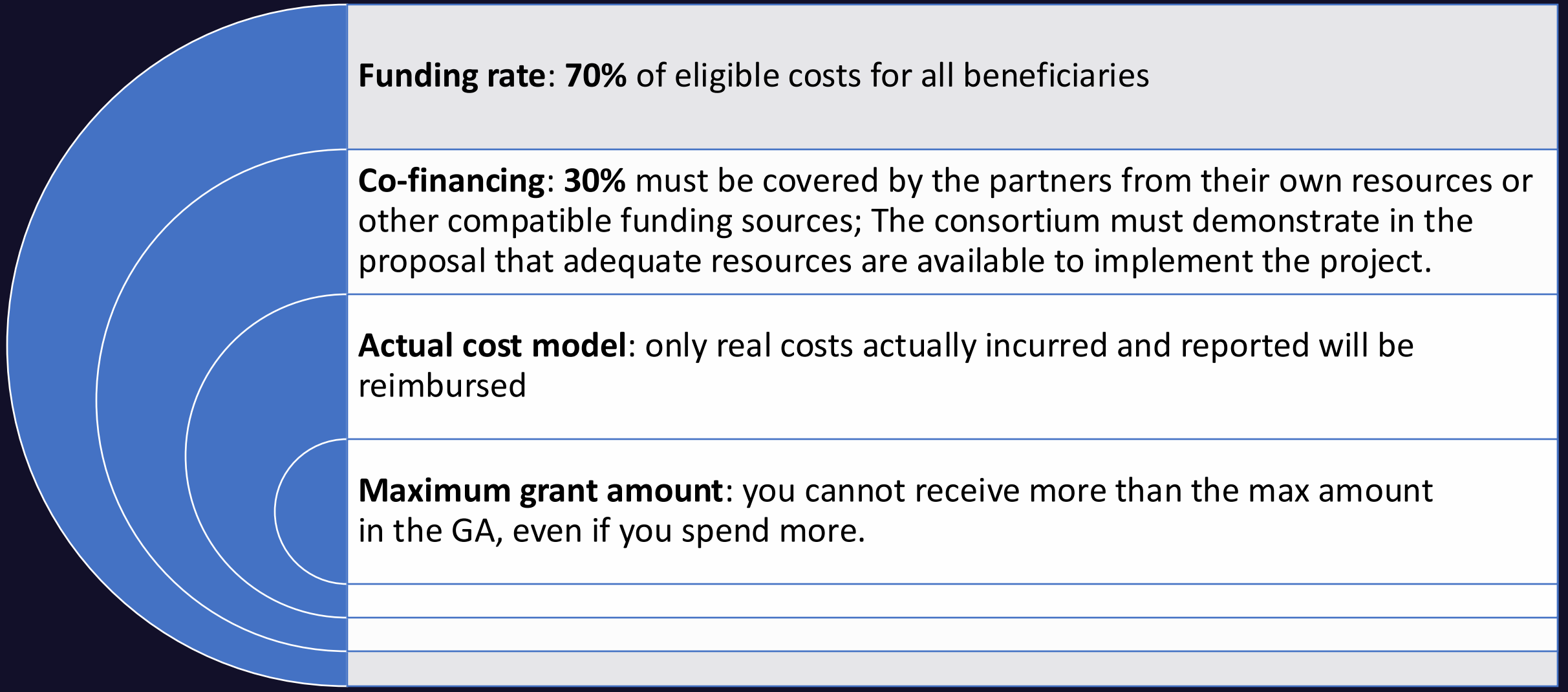
NCBR
Krajowy Punkt Kontaktowy
Programów Badawczych UE

Project Budget:
eligible costs
in the Excellence Hubs project

Widening: Excellence Hubs
(HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01)

Beata Jankowska
Beata.Jankowska@ncbr.gov.pl

Main Budget Rules



Funding rate: **70%** of eligible costs for all beneficiaries

Co-financing: **30%** must be covered by the partners from their own resources or other compatible funding sources; The consortium must demonstrate in the proposal that adequate resources are available to implement the project.

Actual cost model: only real costs actually incurred and reported will be reimbursed

Maximum grant amount: you cannot receive more than the max amount in the GA, even if you spend more.

General eligibility conditions Art.6.1 HE MGA

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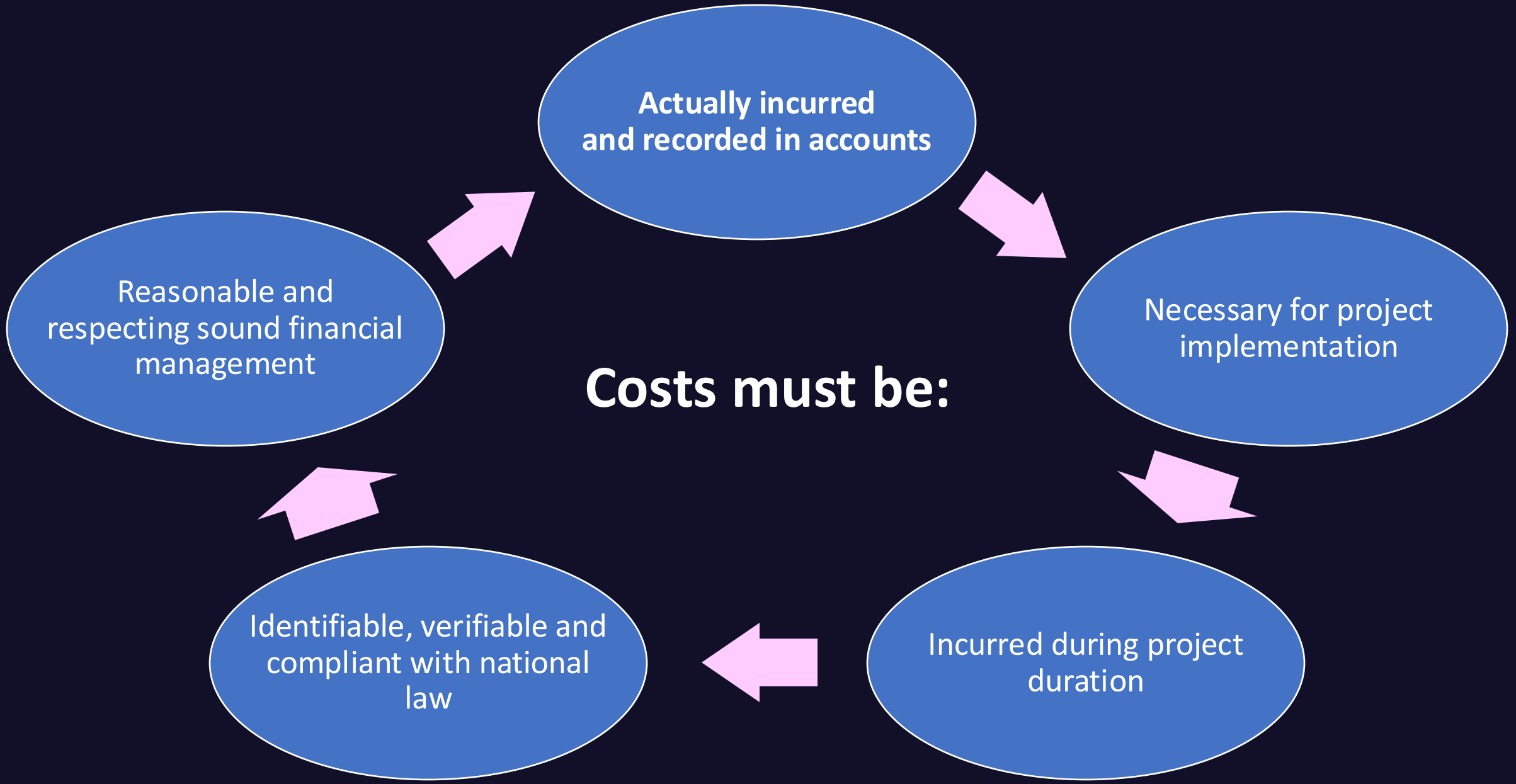


Eligible Cost Categories Art.6.2 HE MGA

A. Personnel costs

B. Subcontracting

C. Purchase costs (travel, equipment depreciation, goods and services)

D. Other cost categories (if applicable)

E. Indirect costs (**25%** flat rate)

Personnel Costs (Art. 6.2.A HE MGA)



Eligible personnel costs:

- A.1 Employees working under an employment contract,
- A.2 Persons with direct contracts equivalent to employment contracts,
- A.3 Seconded personnel working under the beneficiary's instructions,
- A.4 SME owners and natural persons without a salary (special unit cost rules).



Key requirements:

- The person must work on project tasks,
- The time charged must be supported by reliable records (time records where required),
- Costs must be calculated according to Horizon Europe rules and the beneficiary's usual accounting practices (**215 days** per person per year),
- Only the time actually worked on the project can be charged.

Subcontracting (Art. 6.2.B HE MGA):

- For action task that you cannot do yourself - eg. developing a complex digital platform, external evaluation, video production
- Must be limited , justified in the proposal and awarded on the best value for money
- Subcontrating between consortium partners is not allowed
- No 25% indirect costs are calculated on subcontracting

Purchase costs (Art. 6.2.C HE MGA)

C1. Travel and subsistence:	• Travel costs • Acomodation costs • Subsistence cost
C2. Equipment:	• Depreciation costs
C3. Goods, works and services:	• Consumables and supplies • Dissemination, communication and event organisation services • Audit and CFS (Certificate on Financial Statements) costs • Translation, printing, software licences.

Other Cost Categories (Art. 6.2.D HE MGA)

Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP)

Internal invoices:
Cost charged internally from one department to another of the same beneficiary, but only if you have a defined cost accounting method.

Financial Support to Third Parties (FSTP)

- Used to support SMEs and start-ups through cascade funding,
- Must be explicitly foreseen in the Grant Agreement,
- Maximum grant per recipient: **€60,000,**
- Selection process must be transparent, non-discriminatory and well documented,
- FSTP activities must contribute to the objectives of the Excellence Hub,
- FSTP activities should not become the dominant part of the action.

Indirect costs:

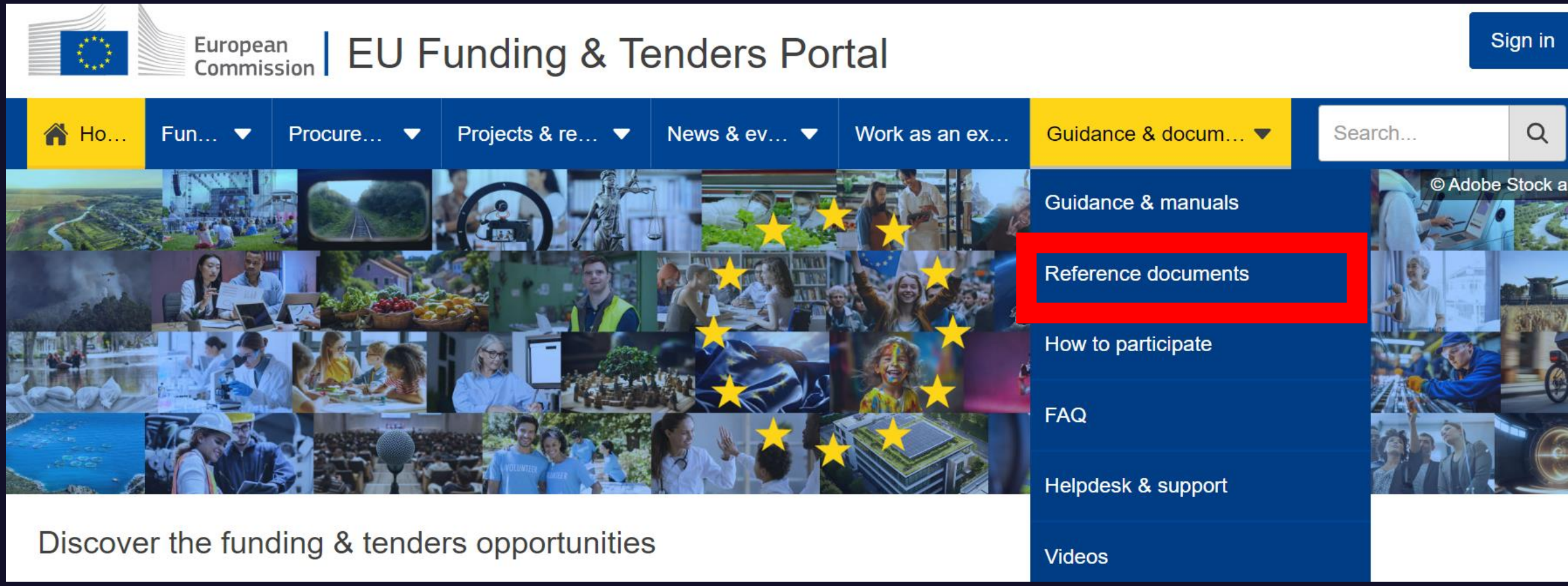
Flat rate of 25% of total direct costs,
excluding:
subcontracting, FSTP,
internal invoices



During audits accounting documentation is necessary only for direct costs.
Indirect costs will not be checked because they are declared using a flat-rate.

Funding&Tenders Portal
https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home

Annotated Model Grant Agreement
https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/common/guidance/aga_en.pdf



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Thank you for your attention!

T.C. SANAYİ VE TEKNOLOJİ BAKANLIĞI

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TÜBİTAK

UFUK AVRUPA

TÜBİTAK

Excellence Hubs International Info-Day

23.10.2026

Merve Aydemir Aydın

TURKIYE NATIONAL CONTACT POINT FOR WIDERA
TÜBİTAK

HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01 · EXCELLENCE HUBS

How to Create a Consortium to Develop a Regional Quadruple Helix Research and Innovation Ecosystem?

Consortium design under the Excellence Hubs call, a comparison across editions, and real funded-project examples

TÜBİTAK · TURKIYE National Contact Point for WIDERA
Merve Aydemir Aydın

TODAY'S AGENDA

What We'll Cover in 15 Minutes

1. What is the Excellence Hubs call, and what does the quadruple helix model mean?
2. The 2027 call's consortium and eligibility requirements, including official clarifications from REA
3. What's changed, and what hasn't, across the 2022, 2023 and 2027 calls
4. Four real funded projects from past editions: consortium structures and lessons
5. A practical roadmap for building your own consortium

INTRODUCTION

What Is Excellence Hubs?

Excellence Hubs is a Horizon Europe instrument supporting **regional innovation ecosystems** in Widening countries to build strong links between academia, business, public authorities and society, fostering a **place-based culture of innovation** through cross-border cooperation.

HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01	€100.00 M	04 March 2027	Max. 5 Years
Call Code	Indicative Budget	Deadline	Project Duration

Projects are built around a shared R&I and investment strategy aligned with regional smart specialisation strategies (RIS3), complementing science-focused schemes such as Teaming, Twinning and ERA Chairs with an innovation component; synergies are sought with EIC Pathfinder, EIT Community Hubs and the JRC's Regional Innovation Partnerships.

How it differs from Teaming: Teaming is built around a single institution, whereas Excellence Hubs is a network of place-based innovation ecosystems built on the quadruple helix principle, covering a much broader set of regional actors.

The Quadruple Helix Model: Four Actors

Every Excellence Hub ecosystem must include all four of the actor categories below: a requirement that has stayed unchanged since 2022 during the whole Horizon Europe Programme.

1 Academia

Universities and/or non-university research centres/laboratories

2 Business

Established firms with ≥2 years' proven turnover (start-ups/consultants allowed if justified)

3 Public Authority

Public bodies / competent agencies operating at regional or local level

4 Societal Actors

Civil society organisations, associations, citizens, end-users, media, cultural actors

CONSORTIUM REQUIREMENT

At Least 2 Ecosystems, 2 Different Widening Countries

The core rule of the 2027 call: Proposals must include at least two "place-based R&I ecosystems" from at least two different Widening countries. Each ecosystem must be located entirely within a single Widening country and must cover all four actor categories.

- Only organisations established in a Widening country, as defined under the Horizon Europe Regulation, may apply as coordinator.
- Organisations from non-Widening countries may join if duly justified (e.g. specific expertise or a value-chain link) — REA has confirmed this can only ever be a minor component, not a parallel structure.

A POINT WORTH NOTING

- Going beyond the minimum is entirely the applicant's call: most funded projects meet the requirement with exactly two ecosystems, but a third or fourth is neither better nor worse — it simply has to be justified by what the project genuinely needs; see the project examples from 2022 and 2023 calls:

2022 Excellence Hubs Çağrısı: HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ACCESS-04-01: EU Funding & Tenders Portal

2023 Excellence Hubs Çağrısı: HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07-01: EU Funding & Tenders Portal

Two Ways to Demonstrate an Ecosystem

There are two ways to show that a Widening country ecosystem covers all four actor categories:

A Via an Umbrella Organisation

- One or more umbrella organisations (e.g. a cluster) whose membership already spans all four actor categories take part as a single structure.
- REA recommends this route for smooth management: an existing umbrella organisation with its own legal personality limits the number of individual consortium members you otherwise have to manage directly.

B Via Individual Entities

- Separate legal entities, each representing one of the four actor categories, join the consortium directly as beneficiaries.
- On this path, at least one business representative in each ecosystem must be an established firm with at least 2 years of proven turnover at the time of application (shown via balance sheet/activity report).

Straight from REA: Consortium & Actors

Answers received directly from REA to questions submitted on the Excellence Hubs call

1. Can umbrella and individual entities be combined?

No - the Work Programme allows either an umbrella organisation whose membership spans all four actor categories, or individual legal entities each representing one category. It does not provide for combining the two, e.g. an umbrella covering two categories plus individual entities for the other two.

2. Representing a complex ecosystem

For complex ecosystems with a large number of members, where there's no umbrella organisation, it's recommended the ecosystem be represented by a limited number of core partners - at least one research and one established business partner - who sign the Grant Agreement. Other members are listed with a short role description but don't sign the GA and may not claim project costs; affiliated partners are also an option.

3. Formalising the quadruple helix

There is no obligation to have a dedicated legal entity assembling all four components. For smooth management, it's recommended to rely on an existing umbrella organisation with its own legal personality (e.g. a cluster) to limit the number of individual consortium members. A consortium agreement is mandatory - nothing more.

4. Defining a "business entity"

At least one business entity per ecosystem must prove it has existed for at least two years before the call's publication and generates significant operational income from commercial activity - not public funding. Balance sheets or extracts from annual business reports, annexed to the proposal, are accepted as evidence.

5. Choosing societal actors

The call text's examples are only a guide. The sole condition is that societal actors be neither commercial nor part of the public administration their added value, outreach and impact for the project's R&I context is what will actually be assessed.

Source:
Excellence Hubs
HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01 /
Topic Q&As:
EU Funding & Tenders Portal

Straight from REA: Roles, Balance & Participation

The remaining official clarifications - on defining public authorities, company balance, European added value, and outside-country participation.

6. Defining "public authorities"

Representative public entities with a clear role in shaping policies and/or ensuring public support for the implementation of national or regional strategies.

7. SMEs versus large companies

The ecosystem concept implies an adequate mix of large and small companies, which may vary by domain and sector - no preference for either type is indicated in the call. SMEs are especially encouraged and the call is SME-friendly; start-ups are welcome too, but not exclusively.

8. What does "European relevance" mean?

Added value from joint European funding versus presumably isolated regional or national activities. The consortium must demonstrate it is more than the sum of its parts - the individual ecosystems - through the strategic benefits of the envisaged European collaboration as a whole.

9. How far can non-Widening participation go?

The Excellence Hubs action does not foresee "advanced partners" as in other Widening actions. Legal entities from non-Widening Member States and associated countries may still participate, beyond the two core ecosystems, if necessary to achieve the action's objectives - but only as a minor component.

Source: Excellence Hubs HORIZON-WIDERA-2027-04-WIDENING-01 / **Topic Q&As:** EU Funding & Tenders Portal

Are These Rules New? 2022 – 2023 – 2027

	2022 (ACCESS-04-01)	2023 (ACCESS-07-01)	2027 (WIDENING-01)
Indicative Budget	€50.00 M	€60.00 M	€100.00 M
Contribution per Project	€3.00 – 5.00 M	€2.00 – 6.00 M*	€1.50 – 4.50 M
Funded Projects	13 (10 + 3 reserve)	12	~30 (indicative)
Min. Ecosystem Requirement	2 ecosystems / 2 Widening countries	2 ecosystems / 2 Widening countries	2 ecosystems / 2 Widening countries
Quadruple Helix (4 Actors)	Yes	Yes (same 4 categories)	Yes (same 4 categories)
Demonstration Path	Umbrella org / at least 2 reps (1 research + 1 business)	Umbrella org / individual entities representing the 4 categories	Identical to 2023
Business Entity Requirement	≥2 yrs proven turnover (start-ups/consultants allowed if justified)	≥2 yrs proven turnover	≥2 yrs proven turnover
Third-Party Financial Support	Not specified	Yes – up to €60,000/party	Yes – up to €60,000/party (SMEs/start-ups)
Funding Rate	Standard CSA (100%)	Standard CSA (100%)	**70% (new! – remaining 30% must be explained)**
Page Limit	Not specified	Not specified	**40 pages (new)**

** In the 2023 call, the contribution ceiling can rise to €6.00 M with the optional mentoring module.*

The consortium architecture has stayed largely the same across 3 editions

The quadruple helix principle, the 2-ecosystem/2-country requirement, the umbrella-organisation-or-individual-entities demonstration mechanism, and the proven-turnover requirement for the business partner; none of this has changed from 2022 to 2027. What has changed is only budget size, the funding rate, and other technical details.

What this means in practice: Projects funded under the 2022 and 2023 calls are reliable, directly applicable models for your 2027 application. Studying their consortium structures can be a source of inspiration.

EXAMPLE 1 · 2022 CALL (ACCESS-04-01)

MetaCities

MetaCities Excellence Hub in South-Eastern Europe — Greece, Cyprus and Bulgaria, with non-Widening partners built in -

Greece + Cyprus + Bulgaria (3 ecosystems) Ecosystems	**University of Patras (Greece)** Coordinator	**~€5.00 M** Budget	**2023–2026 (4 years)** Duration	**21 organisations, 5 countries (GR 9 · CY 5 · BG 5 · DK 1 · NL 1)** Number of Partners

Academia

University of Patras (coordinator), University of Peloponnese, CYENS Centre of Excellence (Cyprus), Technical University of Sofia, Aarhus University (Denmark, non-Widening)

Business

Yodiwo, P-NET (Greece); EBOS Technologies, Primetel (Cyprus); Inovatsionni Sistemi (Bulgaria); Smartavatar B.V. (Netherlands, non-Widening)

Public Authority

Municipality of Patras, Region of Western Greece; Union of Cyprus Municipalities; Municipality of Burgas (Bulgaria)

Societal Actors

Cyprus Consumers' Association; Hellenic Institute for Road Safety; South-East Digital Innovation Hub (Bulgaria)

Worth noting: The one example in our set with non-Widening partners inside the core consortium: Aarhus University (Denmark; participation later ended) and Smartavatar B.V. (Netherlands) — a concrete illustration of REA's "minor component" rule, layered on top of three full Widening-country ecosystems.

MetaCities Excellence Hub in South-Eastern Europe | METACITIES | Project | Fact Sheet | HORIZON | CORDIS | European Commission

EXAMPLE 2 · 2022 CALL (ACCESS-04-01)

SolarHub

A Greek-Turkish Solar Energy Excellence Hub to Advance the European Green Deal

Türkiye + Greece (2 ecosystems)	**METU / GÜNAM (Türkiye)**	**~€4.85 M**	**2023–2026 (4 years)**	**20 organisations, 5 countries (TR 10 · GR 7 · DE 1 · BE 1 · IE 1)**
Ecosystems	Coordinator	Budget	Duration	Number of Partners

Academia

METU/GÜNAM (coordinator), Ege University, Istanbul Technical University (Türkiye); CERTH, CRES (Greece); DLR (Germany, non-Widening)

Business

Kalyon Solar, Solimpeks Enerji, TAT Gıda (Türkiye); Brite Hellas, Venus Growers (Greece); International Development Ireland (Ireland, non-Widening)

Public Authority

TÜBİTAK, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Türkiye); Regional Development Fund of Central Macedonia (Greece)

Societal Actors

ISES Türkiye section (Türkiye); Solar Heat Europe (Belgium, non-Widening)

Worth noting: A compact two-ecosystem design that still brings in three non-Widening partners — Germany, Belgium and Ireland — spread across three different helix categories:

- DLR (Germany) → Academia
- International Development Ireland (Ireland) → Business
- Solar Heat Europe (Belgium) → Societal actors

each a minor component alongside the two core ecosystems.

A Greek-Turkish Solar Energy Excellence Hub to Advance the European Green Deal | SolarHub | Project | Fact Sheet | HORIZON | CORDIS | European Commission

EXAMPLE 3 · 2023 CALL (ACCESS-07-01)

GeneH

Excellence Hub for Advancing Innovation in Gene Therapy — a Portugal–Slovenia Excellence Hub

Portugal + Slovenia (2 ecosystems)	Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal)	~€4.89 M	2025–2028 (4 years)	13 organisations across 2 countries (PT 7 · SI 6)
Ecosystems	Coordinator	Budget	Duration	Number of Partners

Academia

Universidade de Coimbra (coordinator), Instituto Pedro Nunes, Biocant (Portugal); Kemijski inštitut — National Institute of Chemistry (Slovenia)

Business

Bluepharma (Portugal); Biosistemika, Jafral (Slovenia)

Public Authority

CCDRC — Regional Coordination and Development Commission of the Centre, Unidade Local de Saúde de Coimbra (Portugal); Regional Development Agency of the Ljubljana Urban Region (Slovenia)

Societal Actors

Associação Portuguesa de Ataxias Hereditárias (Portugal); national patients'-association network, Slovenian Innovation Hub (Slovenia)

Worth noting: A clean two-ecosystem design where each country's side independently covers all four helix actors on its own — not one ecosystem leaning on the other to fill a gap.

EXAMPLE 4 · 2023 CALL (ACCESS-07-01)

MarTe

Marine Technology Excellence Hub for Sustainable Blue Economy in the Baltics — Estonia–Latvia Excellence Hub

Estonia + Latvia (2 ecosystems) Ecosystems	**KIK — Estonian Environmental Investment Centre (Estonia)** Coordinator	**~€5.00 M** Budget	**2025–2028 (4 years)** Duration	**13 organisations across 2 countries (EE + LV)** Number of Partners

Academia

Tallinn University of Technology, University of Tartu (EE); Latvian Institute of Aquatic Ecology, Ventspils University of Applied Sciences (LV)

Business

Association of Estonian Marine Industries (EE); Freeport of Ventspils (LV)

Public Authority

KIK, Saare Development Centre (EE); Kurzeme Planning Region, Investment and Development Agency of Latvia (LV)

Societal Actors

Saarte Koostöökogu NGO (EE); WWF Latvia, 'Baltic Coasts' NGO (LV)

Worth noting: Another clean two-ecosystem design, with a textbook quadruple helix split laid out in parallel across both Baltic ecosystems.

MarTe: Marine technology excellence hub for sustainable blue economy in Baltics | MarTe | Project | Fact Sheet | HORIZON | CORDIS | European Commission

Practical Roadmap: How to Build a Consortium

1 Define your regional priority

Align your topic with your region's smart specialisation strategy (RIS3) and show its relevance with EU policy priorities (Green/Digital Transition and etc).

2 Build your core ecosystem

Identify key institutions in your own region representing all 4 actors (academia, business, public, society) and secure their commitment.

3 Find a second Widening country

Set up a peer ecosystem in a Widening country with a similar thematic priority and complementary strengths.

4 Choose your demonstration path

Umbrella organisation, or individual representative entities? Make sure the business partner meets the 2-year proven turnover requirement.

5 Justify any third-country participation

Add non-Widening participation only with a concrete expertise or value-chain justification - the main weight should stay with Widening countries.

6 Design your budget and work packages

Keeping the 70% funding rate and the 40-page limit in mind, design the R&D component as a separate, proportionate work package.

T.C. SANAYİ VE TEKNOLOJİ BAKANLIĞI

#MİLLİ TEKNOLOJİ HAMLESİ

TÜBİTAK

THANK YOU

TÜBİTAK | The Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye

ufukavrupa@tubitak.gov.tr

TÜBİTAK · TURKIYE National Contact Point for WIDERA
Merve Aydemir Aydın

TECHNOLOGY CENTRE PRAGUE

INTERNATIONAL EXCELLENCE HUBS INFO DAY

Petra Fedorová, WIDERA (Widening) & ERC NCP
23 October 2026 (online)

EXCELLENCE HUBS 2022 & 2023

What evaluators look for: lessons from evaluation summary reports

HOW CSA PROPOSALS ARE EVALUATED

1 EXCELLENCE

- **Clarity and pertinence** of the project's objectives
- **Quality of the coordination and support measures**, including the soundness of the methodology

2 IMPACT

- **Credibility of the pathways** to the expected outcomes and impacts set out in the work programme
- **Suitability and quality of the measures** to maximise outcomes and impacts: dissemination, exploitation and communication

3 IMPLEMENTATION

- **Quality and effectiveness of the work plan**, risk assessment, effort, and resources
- **Capacity and role of each participant** and the expertise of the consortium as a whole

0–5

score per criterion
(half points allowed)

3 / 5

threshold for each
individual criterion

10 / 15

overall threshold
(maximum 15 points)



Source: EC standard briefing for evaluators

1
EXCELLENCE

Clear objectives and a sound methodology

WHAT EVALUATORS ASK

1 EXCELLENCE

1 Clarity and pertinence of the objectives

- Are they clear and pertinent to the topic?
- Are they measurable and verifiable?
- Are they realistically achievable?
- Is the proposed work ambitious, and does it go beyond the state of the art?

2 Quality of the coordination & support measures, soundness of methodology

- Is the methodology (concepts, models, assumptions) clear and sound?
- Is the gender dimension in R&I content properly taken into account?
- Are open science practices an integral part of the methodology?
- Is research data management properly addressed?

Mandatory in Horizon Europe

Open science: open access to publications; data management in line with FAIR principles, incl. a data management plan; open research data – “as open as possible, as closed as necessary”. **Gender dimension:** integrated into R&I content (WP Research Component). Ex-aequo proposals: gender balance among the researchers with a leading role (task/work package leader) named in the researchers table in the proposal template Part A.

WHAT EVALUATORS PRAISED

1 EXCELLENCE



1. **SMART objectives with well-defined KPIs**
   each with a baseline, a target and a means of verification
2. **Thorough analysis of the context, needs & state of the art**
   that justifies the thematic focus
3. **Methodology tailored to the local context of each country**
   based on a SWOT analysis; balancing innovation, training, networking and policy
4. **Alignment with RIS3**
   and other national/regional strategies, backed by local R&I authorities
5. **Genuine quadruple helix involvement**
   every actor has concrete tasks, budget & responsibility, and co-creates key outputs

WHAT EVALUATORS CRITICISED

1 EXCELLENCE



1. **KPIs without baselines, targets or means of verification**
   or overly optimistic numbers
2. **Methodology too generic**
   describes concepts, not how they apply in each country
3. **Weak links to RIS3**
   joint R&I strategy postponed until the project is under way
4. **Vague investment plans**
   co-funding and private capital not specified
5. **Open science, DMP and gender merely declared**
   no concrete activities behind the statements, no balance between publishing and protecting IP

+ EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS

1 EXCELLENCE

> *Objectives are **extremely clear, measurable, verifiable and achievable**, and are very well integrated with other aspects of the proposal. Actions are fully detailed with **precise and well-substantiated KPIs**. The methodology is **sound and based on a SWOT analysis** and offers a solid approach to achieving the project objectives.*

> *__Staff exchanges between research groups and industry organisations__ are a positive element, allowing staff to acquire new competencies and strengthen collaboration between partners. Measures connected with __education for students and young researchers__, as well as __talent retention__ are well addressed.*

> *Gender representation in R&I and decision-making processes is identified as a key challenge and addressed through __a clear gender equality approach__ covering __sector-specific issues, participation in training, education, events,__ and __team composition.__*

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

– EXAMPLES OF WEAKNESSES

> *The proposal* ***does not offer a comprehensive analysis of existing collaborative vs. competitive relations*** *within the proposed innovation ecosystems, which may affect their quality and stability.*

> ***The joint R&I strategy is insufficiently described*** *and is declared to be prepared during project execution. R&I investment plans and pilots lack the details required by the programme.*

> ***Co-creation multi-stakeholder engagement activities are not sufficiently outlined*** *in the work plan to guarantee adequate quadruple helix involvement.*

KEY MESSAGE Make every objective SMART – with a KPI, a baseline, a target and a means of verification. Translate the methodology into your own context.

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

2
IMPACT

Credible pathways and measures to maximise impact

WHAT EVALUATORS ASK

1 Pathways towards impact

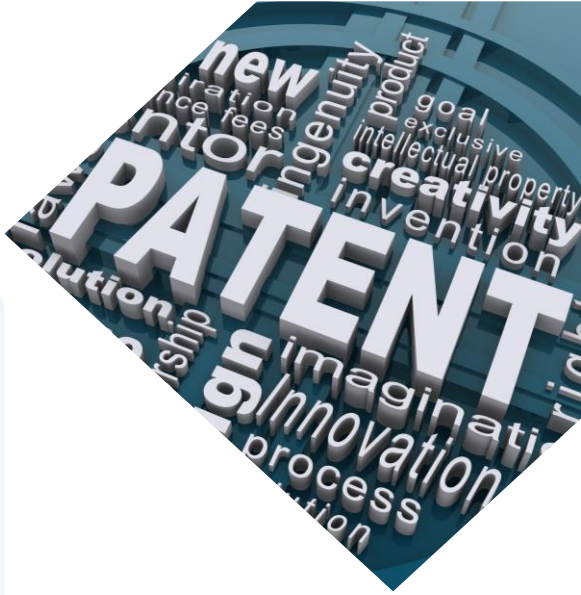
- Is the contribution to the expected outcomes of the topic and to the wider, longer-term impacts in the work programme credible?
- Are potential barriers identified and mitigation measures proposed? Is the management of potential negative impacts described?
- Are the scale and significance of the contribution estimated and quantified, including baselines, benchmarks and assumptions?

2 Measures to maximise impact Dissemination, exploitation, communication (DEC)

- Are the measures suitable, of good quality and proportionate to the project, with concrete actions both during and after the end of the project?
- Are the target groups identified – e.g. the scientific community, end users, financial actors, the public?
- Is an IP management strategy outlined that supports the exploitation of results?

WHAT EVALUATORS PRAISED

2 IMPACT



1. **Impacts quantified**
   measurable KPIs, baselines and benchmarks

2. **Credible pathways backed by concrete actions**
   e.g. a roadmap for cross-regional collaboration after the project

3. **Long-term joint R&I strategy**
   well-defined & strategic investment plans (public & private funding); sustainability beyond the project

4. **Emphasis on science–business links, knowledge transfer & entrepreneurial skills**
   significant potential for creating new business opportunities (especially for SMEs, start-ups, spin-offs)

5. **Robust IP management and a tailored DEC plan**
   e.g. a DESCA-based agreement and a dedicated exploitation committee

WHAT EVALUATORS CRITICISED

2 IMPACT



1. **Impacts too vague**
   no “how much, by when, how measured”

2. **Pathways do not match the expected outcomes of the call & wider impacts**
   sustainability of ecosystems/investments/activities,
   potential barriers & mitigation measures not/insufficiently addressed

3. **Underdeveloped investment plans & mobilisation of national/private funds**
   joint strategy missing, post-project sustainability unclear

4. **IPR & exploitation not managed properly**
   exploitation limited to publications; no partner-specific plans; not all potential end-users engaged

5. **DEC not tailored to target groups**
   no KPIs or means of verification

+ EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS

2 IMPACT

> *Joint R&I strategies are innovative and well devised, with clear European relevance. Plans for common investment are highly convincing – the partners have already committed resources for project infrastructure.*

> *The draft DEC plan includes proper details about envisaged actions, channels, tools, indicators & the target groups (business & industry, policy makers, research institutions, general public). Plans for exploitation, based on the DESCA model, include a Joint Ownership Agreement signed by all partners and third parties, and a dedicated Exploitation Committee to oversee the protection of new IP.*

> *There is a very convincing strategy to provide new competencies and skills for researchers, entrepreneurs and professionals. The project will significantly strengthen science–business linkages.*

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

– EXAMPLES OF WEAKNESSES

2 IMPACT

> ***Longer-term impacts are described in general terms.*** *How end users will be engaged in the adoption and transfer of technology is not convincingly addressed.*

> ***Lack of an appropriate exploitation plan and IPR strategy*** *is a major shortcoming, as Excellence Hubs are expected to foster not just innovation, but also its uptake and use.*

> ***Stakeholders affected by the project are not sufficiently described****, and their roles in the dissemination activities are not clear.*

KEY MESSAGE Quantify the expected impacts and describe the pathways to achieve them. Turn investments into a joint strategy and take exploitation beyond publications.

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

3 IMPLEMENTATION

A realistic work plan and a capable consortium

WHAT EVALUATORS ASK

3 IMPLEMENTATION

1 Work plan, effort and resources

- Is the work plan effective and of good quality?
- Does it include quantified information so that progress can be monitored?
- Is it logically structured, e.g. in the timing of work packages?
- Are resources in line with the objectives and deliverables of each work package?
- Are critical implementation risks identified, with proper mitigation measures?

2 Participants and the consortium

- Does the consortium match the objectives and bring together the necessary knowledge, incl. open science practices and gender aspects of R&I?
- Do partners have access to the critical infrastructure needed?
- Do partners complement one another, each with a valid role and adequate resources?
- Is there industrial/commercial involvement to ensure exploitation of results (if applicable)?

+ WHAT EVALUATORS PRAISED

3 IMPLEMENTATION



1. **Complementary consortium**
   quadruple helix in each country, incl. SSH, open science and gender expertise
2. **Clear, balanced partner roles**
   each partner has a valid role and adequate resources
3. **Coherent work packages**
   covering all core components of the call, incl. a distinct R&I WP
4. **Logical work plan**
   interdependencies explained; milestones and deliverables allow progress control
5. **Justified resources, credible risk mitigation**
   person-months and budget in line with objectives

WHAT EVALUATORS CRITICISED

3 IMPLEMENTATION



1. **Weak representation of some quadruple helix actors**
   partners role & expertise not sufficiently justified; non-academic partners lead no WPs
2. **Vague tasks, confusing Gantt chart**
   no quantities, timing or interdependencies
3. **Few or unverifiable milestones**
   deliverables not aligned with tasks
4. **Unbalanced, poorly justified resources allocation**
   (person-months, budget, staff effort) across partners, WPs or research activities
5. **Too narrow or too generic risks**
   limited to lack of commitment of stakeholders/IPR conflicts between public and private sector; governance, team and technical risks ignored

EXAMPLES OF STRENGTHS

> *__Clear, logical and well-presented work plan__. The description and timing of WPs are comprehensively supported by the __Gantt and PERT charts__. Deliverables and milestones are very well formulated.*

> *The __research component__ is presented through a __distinct WP__ with clear scientific objectives and tasks in line with the budget requirements of the call, suitable to cover development needs and gaps in the chosen domain.*

> *__Critical risks__ (likelihood and severity) and the proposed __mitigation measures are well identified, realistic, and credible__. These include lack of synergies between the joint research activities and management of the FSTP actions, and __are mitigated through adequate monitoring and mentoring measures.__*

> *__Each partner has a valid role and adequate resources__ to fulfil it. The roles are assigned in a __meaningful and balanced way__. The partners __have access to relevant critical infrastructure.__*

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

EXAMPLES OF WEAKNESSES

> *A large number of tasks are described in general terms only, with no quantitative and/or time details. In some cases, their description is essentially a list of objectives rather than planned activities.*

> *The integration of non-academic partners and their contribution to the execution is weakened by their limited involvement in leading work packages.*

> *The number of person-months in the proposed work packages is insufficiently justified.*

KEY MESSAGE: Justify every person-month, align the Gantt chart with milestones and deliverables, and give evidence of each partner's capacity.

Source: Evaluation Summary Reports, Excellence Hubs calls 2022 and 2023 (anonymised, shortened and edited)

TIPS FOR WRITING THE PROPOSAL



1 Content

- **Start from an honest SWOT analysis** and address weaknesses & threats in the work plan
- **Mirror the call text** & **Work Programme** in your objectives
- **Show links to RIS3** and the added value for your region and the EU
- Plan D(E)C activities for **each stakeholder group**, e.g. a press conference alongside the kick-off meeting
- **Respect the formal requirements** – all quadruple helix actors, role of non-Widening partners

2 Style and process

- **Keep the template structure** and use the call's terminology
- **Write clearly and concisely** – short sentences/ paragraphs, no buzzwords, no repetition, few abbreviations
- **This is not a scientific paper** - use an accessible style and cite international sources
- **Use graphics** to explain key aspects of the proposal
- **Start early** and have an outsider (colleague, NCP) read the draft

KEY MESSAGE: Avoid generic statements and be consistent throughout the proposal!

REA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QUALITY PROPOSAL PREPARATION (INCLUDING THE LINKS TO BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS/WEBINARS) FROM 2026



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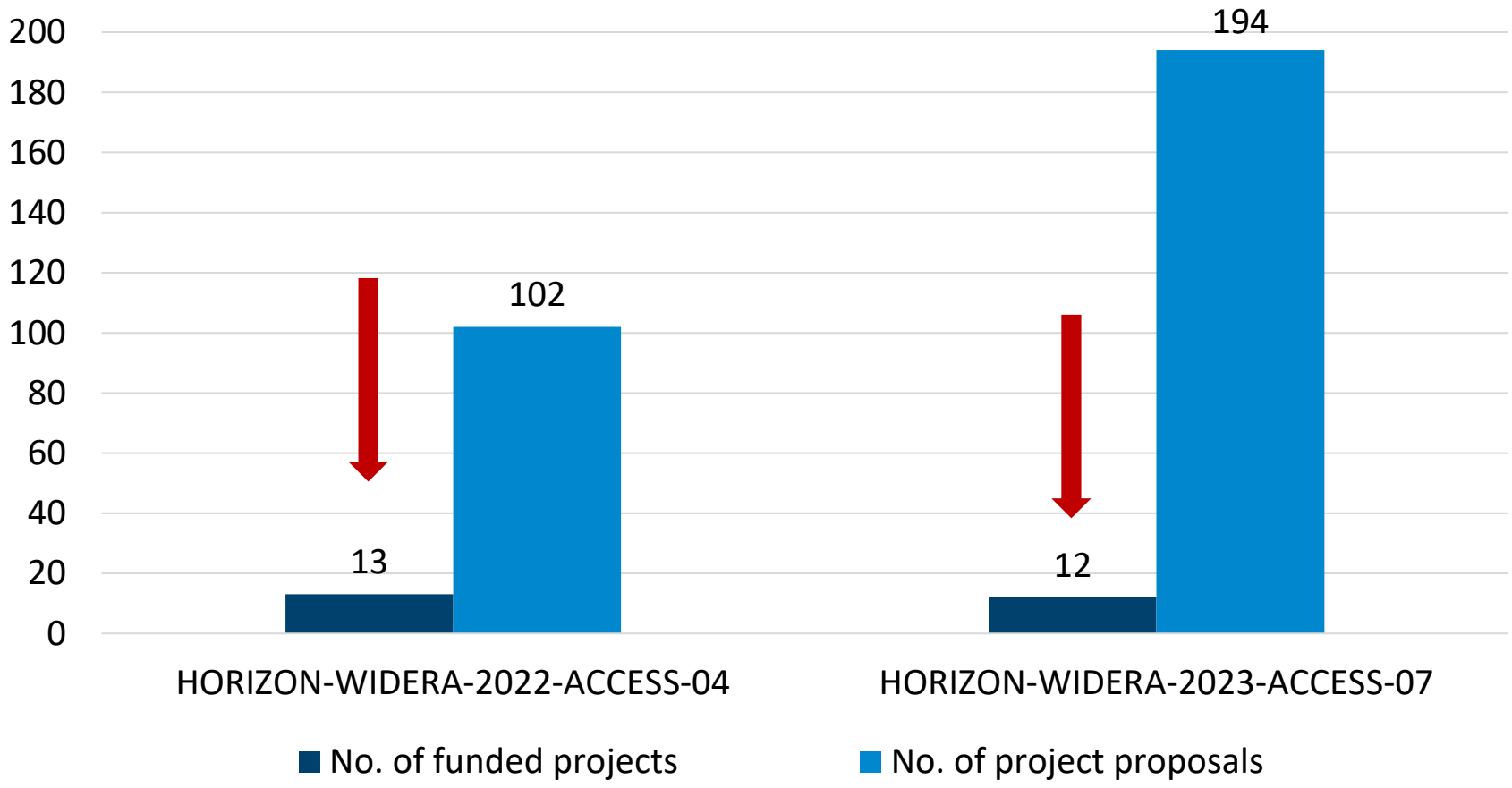
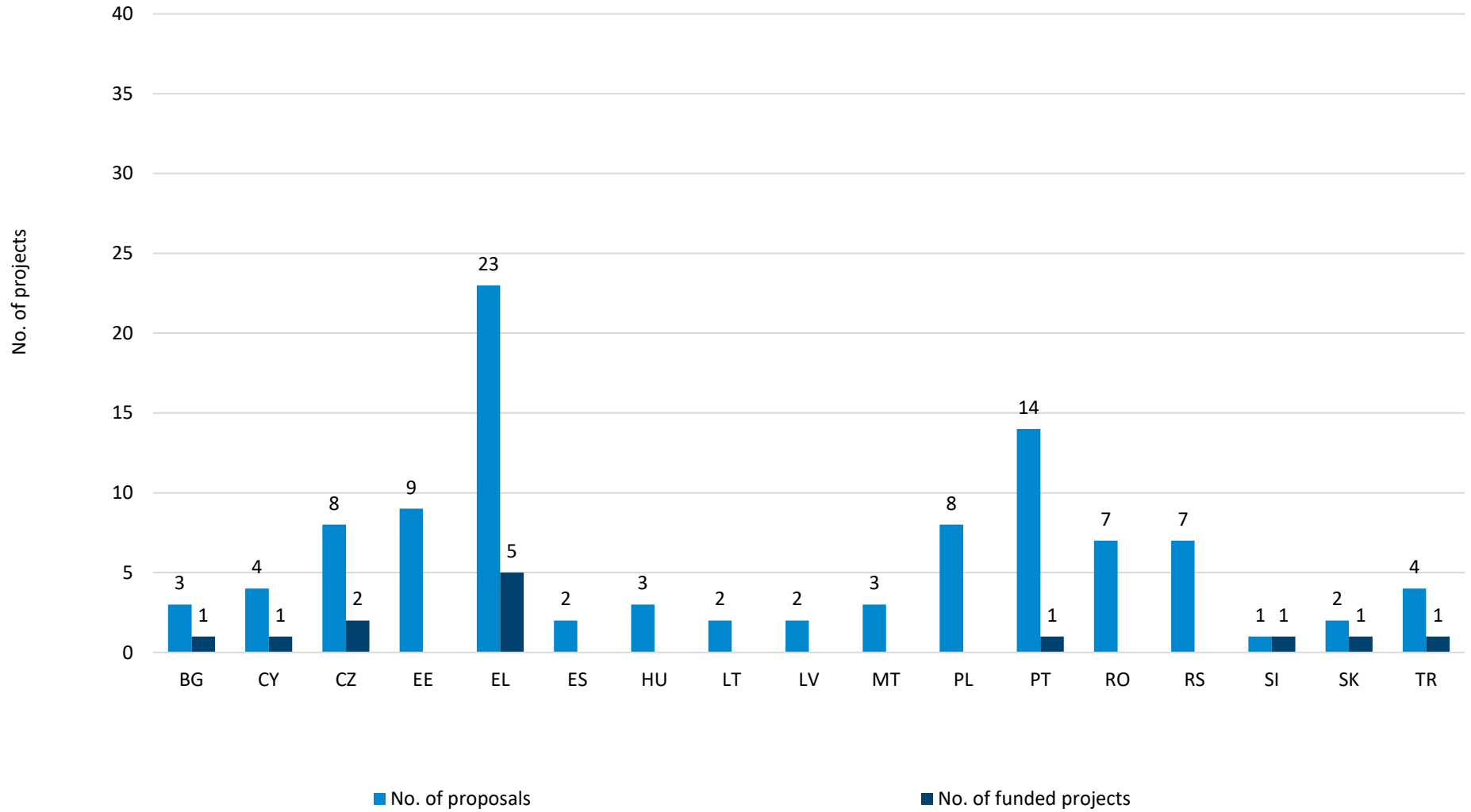
EXCELLENCE HUBS CALLS: 2022 AND 2023 OUTCOMES

PARTICIPATION IN 2022 & 2023 EH CALLS IN TOTAL (COORDINATORS)



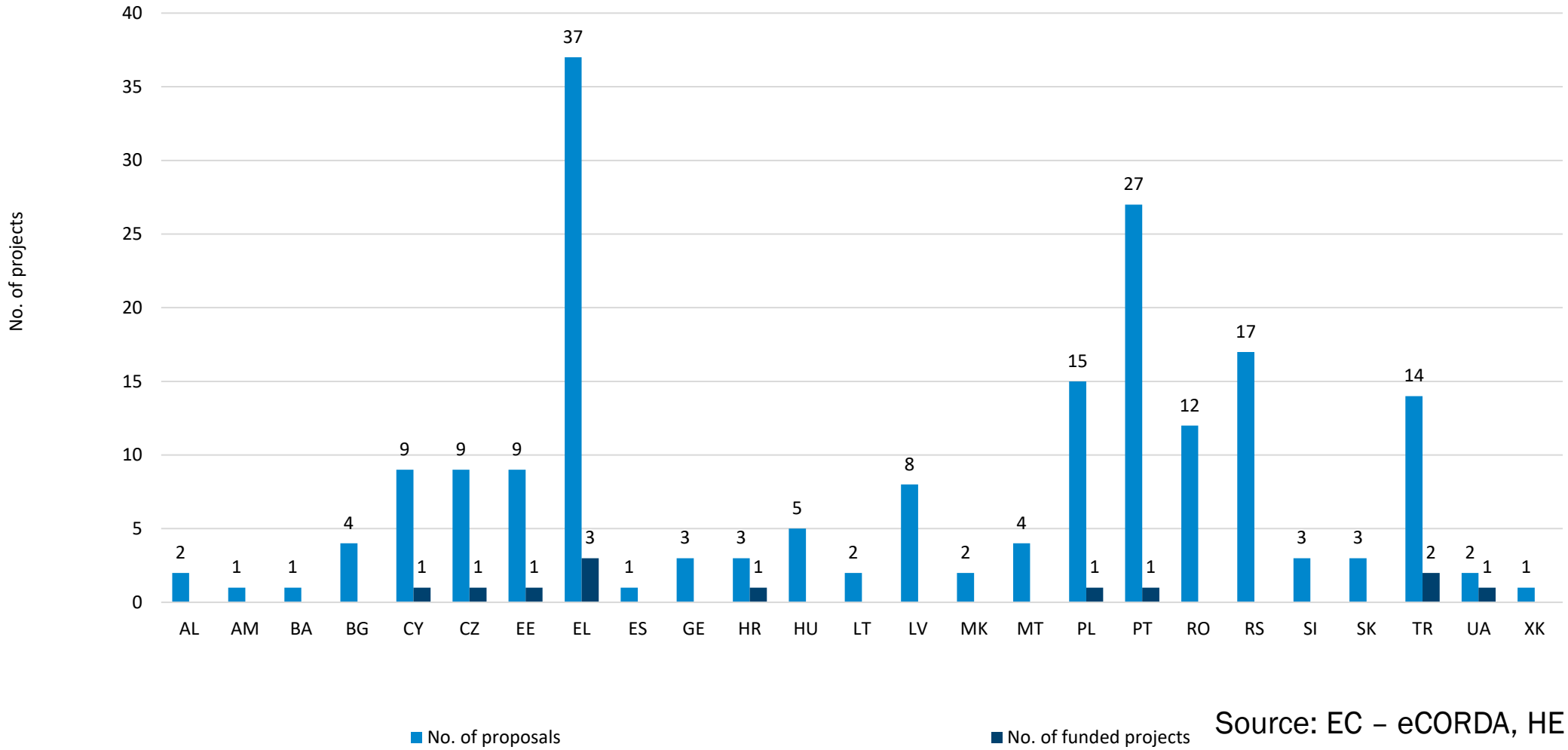
Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026

HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ACCESS-04 (COORDINATORS, IN ALPHABETIC ORDER)



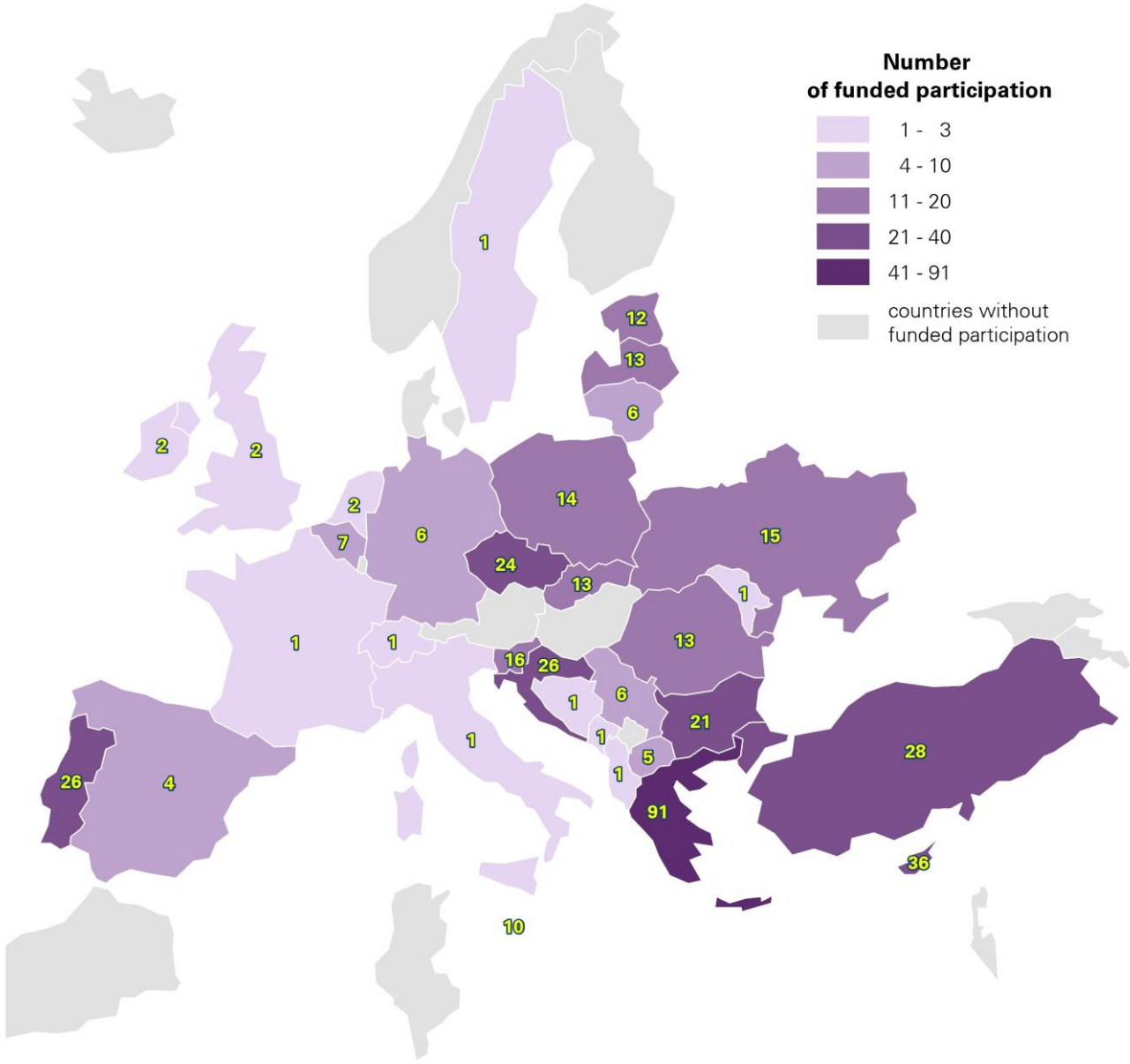
Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026

HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07 (COORDINATORS, IN ALPHABETIC ORDER)



Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026

NO. OF PARTICIPATIONS IN FUNDED PROPOSALS PER COUNTRY



Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026, Vladimír Vojtěch, TC Prague

SOME DATA ABOUT THE CONSORTIA SIZE

Excellence Hubs Call	2022	2023
Average consortia size	15	17
Minimum no. of partners	8	13
Maximum no. of partners	21	24

Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026

HIGHEST TOTAL EU CONTRIBUTIONS PER FUNDED PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

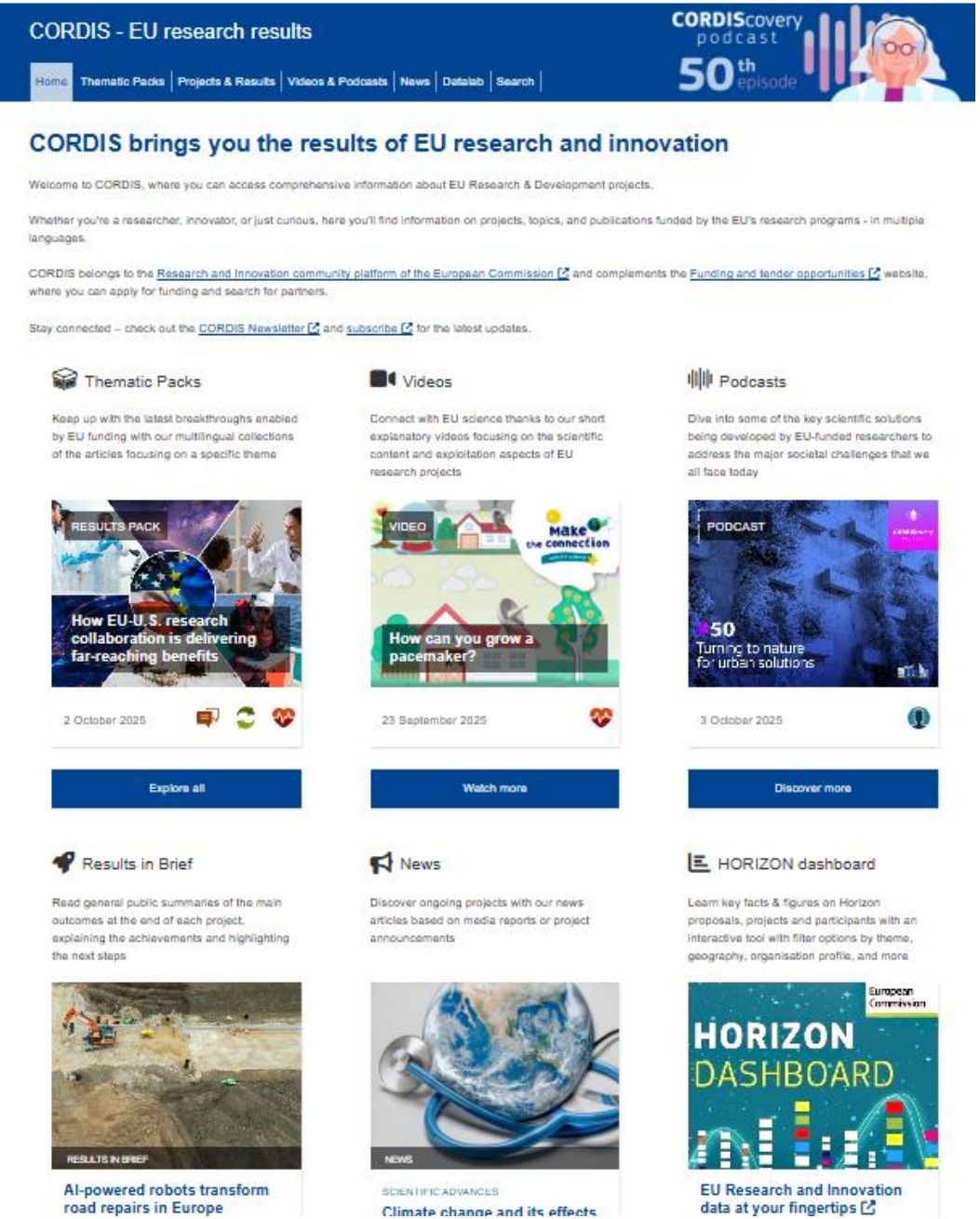
HORIZON-WIDERA-2022-ACCESS-04

ORGANISATION	COUNTRY	No. of participa-tions	€ NET EU Contribution
Masarykova univerzita	CZ	2	3 091 753
VYSOKE UCENI TECHNICKE V BRNE	CZ	2	2 641 614
TRENCIANSKA UNIVERZITA ALEXANDRA DUBCEKA V TRENCINE	SK	1	2 231 925
IDRYMA TECHNOLOGIAS KAI EREVNAS	EL	1	1 720 000
ETHNIKO KENTRO EREVNAS KAI TECHNOLOGIKIS ANAPTYXIS	EL	3	1 633 638
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA	PT	1	1 457 281
TARTU ULIKOOL	EE	1	1 067 275
CMMI CYPRUS MARINE AND MARITIME INSTITUTE	CY	1	937 300
REFRAME FOOD ASTIKI MI KERDOSKOPIKI ETAIRIA	EL	1	907 163
ODTU GUNES ENERJISI UYGULAMA VE ARA STIRMA MERKEZI	TR	1	890 625
SVEUCILISTE U ZAGREBU FAKULTET ELEKTROTEHNIKE I RACUNARSTVA	HR	1	870 410
NEUROIMUNOLOGICKY USTAV SLOVENSKEJ AKADEMIE VIED, v. v. i.	SK	1	823 978

Source: EC – eCORDA, HE – 18/08/2026

HORIZON-WIDERA-2023-ACCESS-07

ORGANISATION	COUNTRY	No. of participa-tions	€ NET EU Contribution
TURKIYE BILIMSEL VE TEKNOLOJIK ARASTIRMA KURUMU	TR	2	1 796 250
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA	PT	1	1 793 286
ETHNICON METSOVION POLYTECHNION	EL	2	1 690 625
FYZIKALNI USTAV AV CR, VVI	CZ	1	1 630 625
UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS	CY	2	1 510 000
UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA	PT	2	1 363 500
INSTYTUT CHEMII BIOORGANICZNEJ POLSKIEJ AKADEMII NAUK	PL	1	1 062 500
INSTITUT ZA MOLEKULARNU GENETIKU I GENETICKO INZENJERSTVO	RS	1	1 058 900
LVIV POLYTECHNIC NATIONAL UNIVERSITY	UA	2	1 056 978
IDRYMA TECHNOLOGIAS KAI EREVNAS	EL	1	1 055 000
VALSTYBINIS MOKSLINIU TYRIMU INSTITUTAS FIZINIU IR TECHNOLOGIJOS MOKSLU CENTRAS	LT	1	1 020 975
SIHTASUTUS KESKKONNAINVESTEERINGUTEKESKUS	EE	1	1 004 450



FUNDED PROJECTS

CORDIS

- Projects´ basic data including abstracts and objectives, reporting and results

2022 Excellent Hubs projects

2023 Excellent Hubs projects

QUESTIONS? DON´T HESITATE TO CONTACT ME!

Petra Fedorová
ERC and WIDERA (Widening) NCP

+420 725 571 738

fedorova@tc.cz

http://www.tc.cz/en, http://www.horizontevropa.cz/en

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NCP_
WIDERA.NET

HORYZONT
europa

Foster a place-based innovation culture in Widening countries

INTERNATIONAL EXCELLENCE HUBS WEEK 2026

Info Day

23 October 2026

on-line: MS Teams

Coffee break.
We are back at 11:15 CET!

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The Research Component: Conditions, Pitfalls, and Winning Strategies

A structural playbook for designing the R&I anchor within International Excellence Hubs.

Excellence Hubs Info Day | Friday, 23 October 2026

Gemini Notebook

A hub without a strong research component becomes a mere networking project.

A hub with excellent research becomes a sustainable ecosystem.

- Generates scientific excellence and novel knowledge.
- Enables long-term, structural international partnerships.
- Attracts talent and leverages private investment.
- Builds the ultimate credibility of the Hub.

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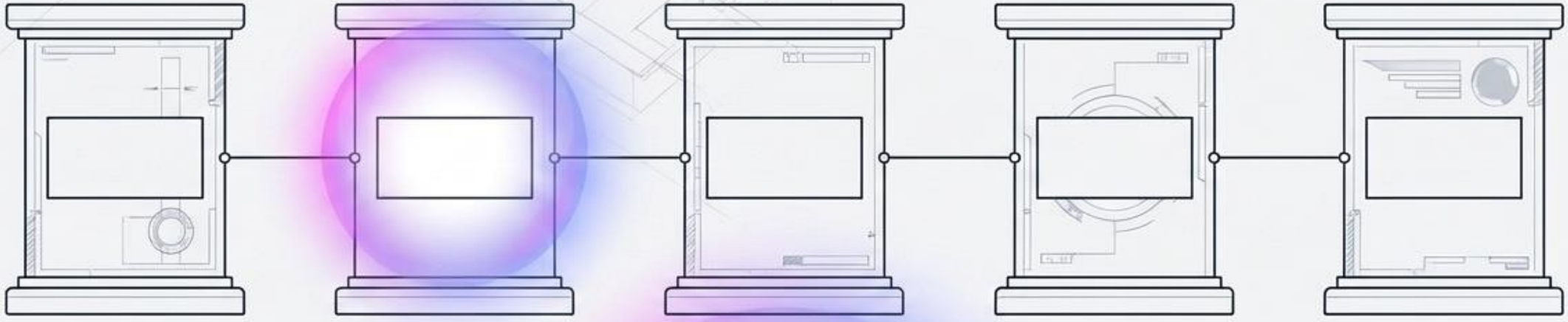
The Engine of the 5 Pillars



Pillar I
(Joint R&I Strategy aligned with RIS3)

Pillar II
(The R&I Component). Closes knowledge gaps and develops science with true market potential.

Pillar III (Investment Plans for commercial viability)

Pillar IV (Conceptual Design of Pilots/Demonstrators)

Surround: **Pillar V** (Accompanying Measures: Skills, visibility, citizen engagement).

Gemini Notebook

Defining the Boundary Box

Node 1: Budget & Proportions

Target 10% to 40% of the total budget. There is no fixed maximum, but it must be a balanced Coordination and Support Action (CSA). An overly dominant research part compromises credibility.



Node 2: Structural Independence

The R&I component must be isolated into a distinct, dedicated Work Package, broken down into meaningful tasks and sub-tasks identical to a traditional RIA project.

Node 3: Maturity Expectations

The target Technology Readiness Level (TRL) spans from TRL 3 to TRL 7, ensuring the research has genuine commercialization and deployment potential.

Gemini Notebook

Two Valid Paths to Topic Selection

Selecting the Scientific Challenge

Path A: Regional Smart Specialization (RIS3)

Identify a common denominator across the regional strategies of the consortium.

Explain the exact reasoning for convergence in the proposal.

Path B: European Policy Priorities

Target macro-goals, specifically the Green and Digital transitions.

Detail the precise aspect being addressed and forecast the economic benefits.

The Convergence Point:

The strongest proposals often map a specific regional RIS3 strength directly onto a broader European digital/green priority.

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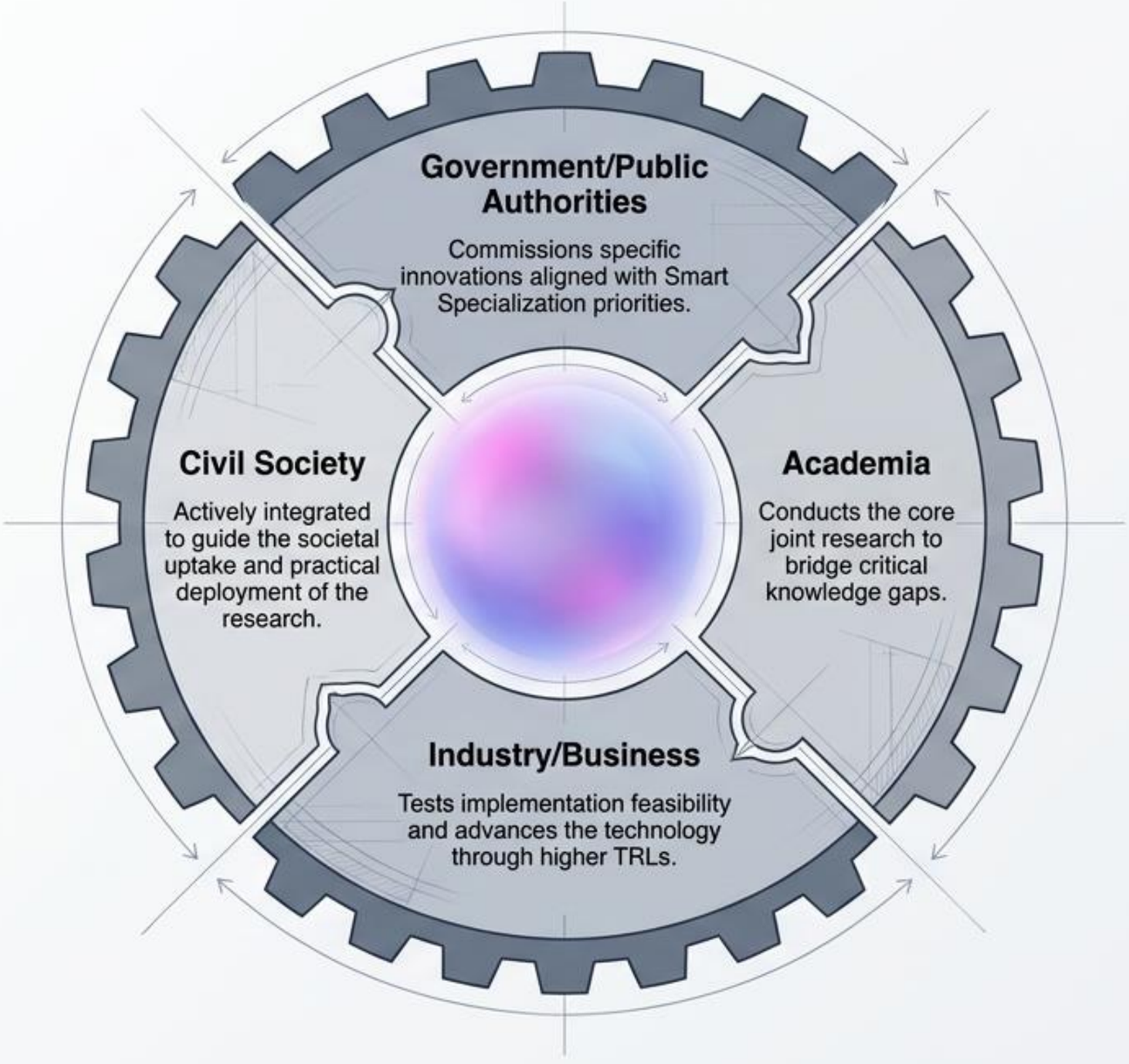
Operationalizing the Quadruple Helix



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Structural Warning: Keep Research Inside the Consortium

The Wrong Way

Using the R&I budget to run **external** FSTP grant competitions.

Outcome: Ineligible or heavily penalized.

The Risky Way

Running **loose internal competitions** among consortium members.

Risk: Negative evaluation if the rules aren't strict, strategy alignment is weak, or winners aren't deeply integrated into the work plan.

The Right Way

One **large joint project**—or **several smaller, highly coordinated projects**—executed directly by consortium partners.

All activities are pre-defined in the Work Package, aligned with the cross-border strategy, and designed to test collaboration capacities.

Outcome: Maximized alignment, deep partner integration, and strong evaluation potential.

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Through the Evaluator's Lens

Why is this research needed?

Excellence

Ambitious questions, scientific novelty, clear methodology, and long-term vision beyond the state-of-the-art.

What changes because of this?

Impact

Contribution to regional/EU priorities, innovation potential, and tangible capacity building in Widening countries.

Can they actually do it?

Quality of Implementation

Complementarity of partners, access to top-tier infrastructures, appropriate resourcing, and realistic work plan.

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Diagnostic Matrix: Assessing Proposal Strength

The Anatomy of a Winning R&I Component	Common Structural Pitfalls
Topic Origin: Driven by clearly identified knowledge gaps and excellence.	Starting with available partners and inventing a topic to fit them.
Consortium Roles: Complementary expertise with shared scientific ownership.	Excellent institutions operating in silos; Widening partners relegated to administrative roles.
Program Scope: Limited, ambitious objectives with measurable success indicators.	Overly broad research questions with too many disconnected pilot studies.
Capacity Building: Integrated directly into the research (skills transfer).	Treated as an isolated work package disconnected from actual science.

Gemini Notebook

Learning from Real Evaluator Critiques

> "The state of the art is not sufficiently assessed for the research component... excellence is not well presented."

Fix: Explicitly define current technological limits and dedicate a specific sub-task in the Excellence section to methodological advancement.

> "...aims to create pilot projects but lacks clarity on pilot projects, target user groups, and details about the technologies involved."

Fix:
Replace generic pilot descriptions with concrete target demographics, specific TRL benchmarks, and exact operational deployment locations.

> "...the methodology lacks a clear explanation regarding the ecosystems involved... governance of these ecosystems are unsatisfactory."

Fix:
Map every partner to a specific phase of the research cycle. Prove access to infrastructure is formally secured, not just assumed.

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Anticipating and Mitigating Structural Risks

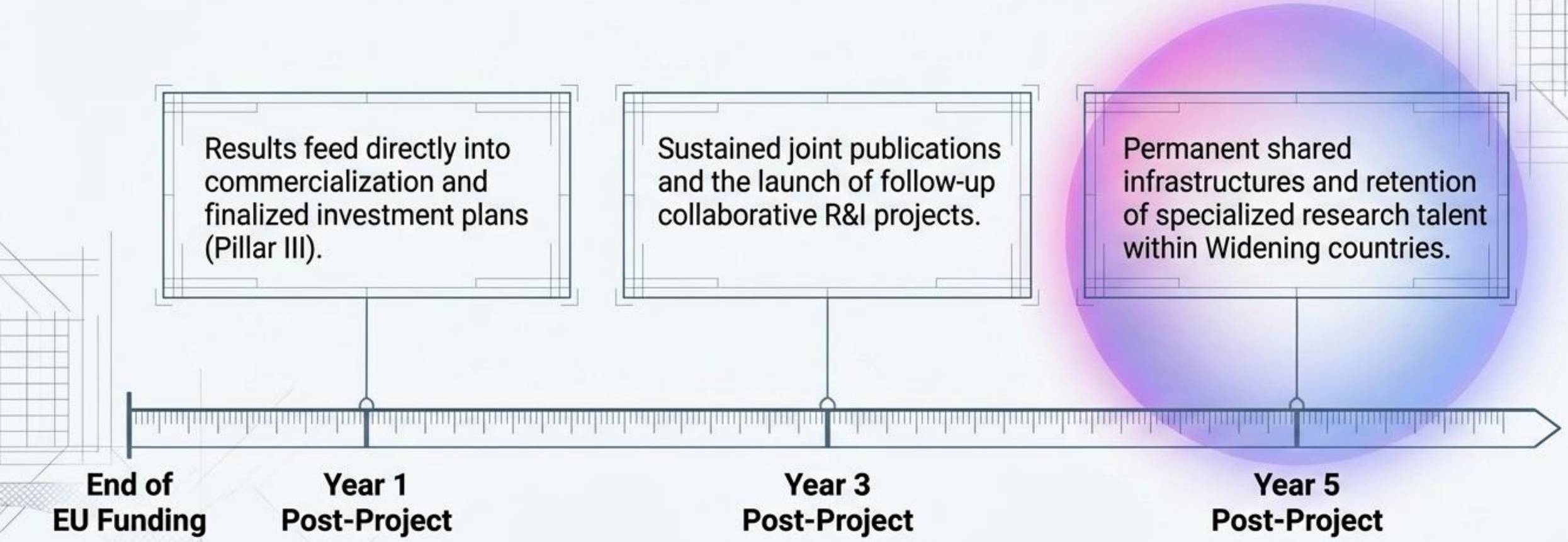
A project without risks appears unambitious. Demonstrate mature foresight.

Risk Category	Probability	Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Recruitment Delay	Medium	**High**	Implement early recruitment strategy and utilize pre-existing consortium talent pools.
Data Access Limitation	Medium	**High**	Establish formal data-sharing agreements prior to grant signature; map alternative open-source datasets.
Experimental Failure	Low	**High**	Design modular work packages with built-in backup methodologies and pivot points.

Gemini Notebook

Designing for Ecosystem Sustainability

What remains five years after the project finishes?



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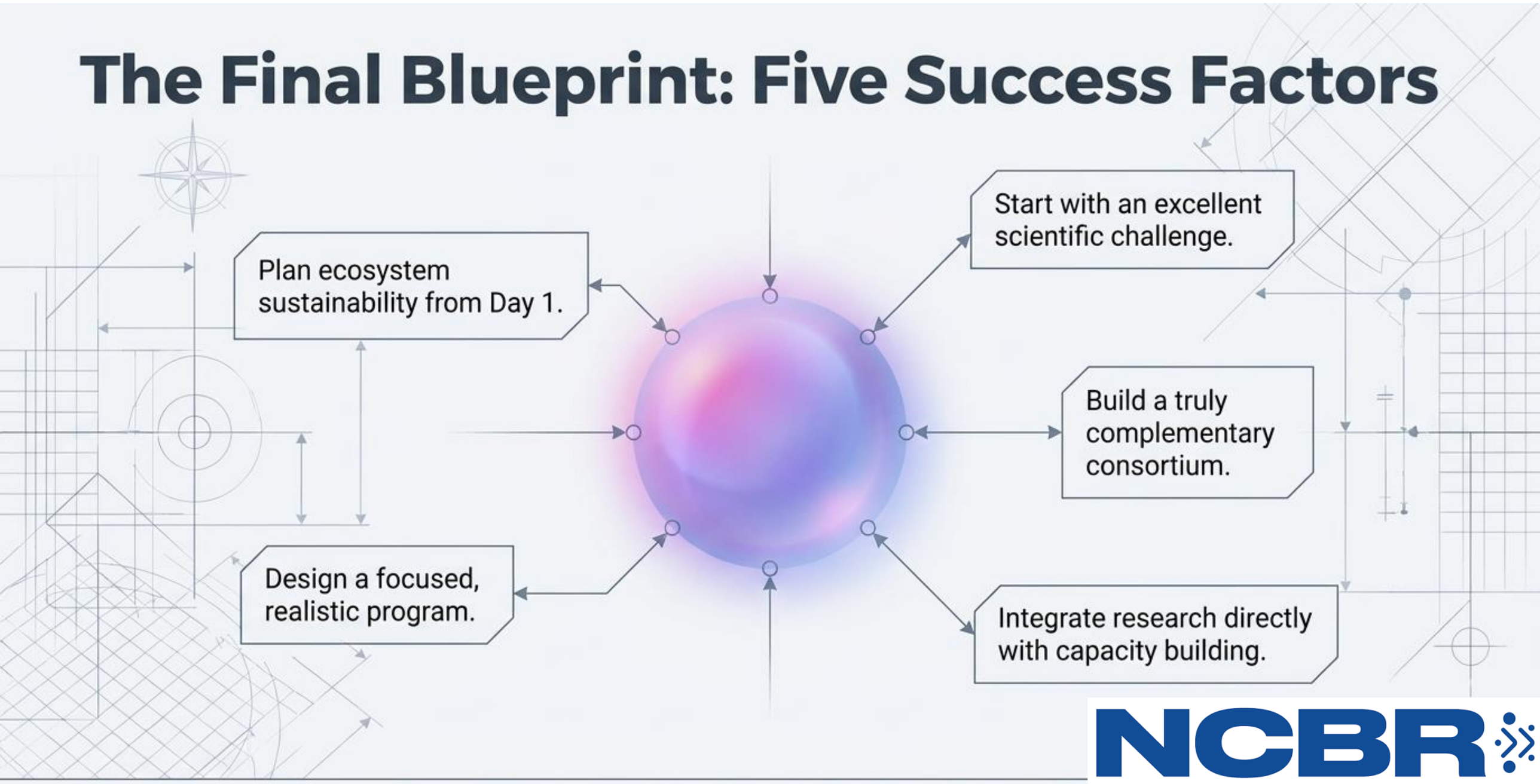
The R&I Component Pre-Submission Checklist

- [ ] Is the R&I component isolated into its own discrete Work Package?
- [ ] Is the budget allocation balanced (falling within the 10-40% optimal zone)?
- [ ] Are the specific roles of all four Quadruple Helix actors explicitly mapped to research tasks?
- [ ] Are all joint research activities executed directly by the consortium (no unauthorized FSTP)?
- [ ] Do the expected outcomes clearly bridge the gap to commercial investment (Pillars III & IV)?

Gemini Notebook

The Final Blueprint: Five Success Factors



Expert Contact: Maria Szlachta, DKPK NCBR | maria.szlachta@ncbr.gov.pl

NCBR

Krajowy Punkt Kontaktowy
Programów Badawczych UE