

COMMENT | EU membership



Game changer?

The EU is preparing to expand. The consequences for research policy could be dramatic

Peter Fisch, former head of unit in DG Research and Innovation, blogs on European research policy at www.peter-fisch.eu

In her state of the union address last month, Commission president Ursula von der Leyen called for the EU to begin preparing to admit new member states. It was the strongest sign yet that after a decade of almost zero progress, EU enlargement is back on the political agenda.

The list of official candidate countries includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. Most are already preparing for membership, although the EU itself, whatever von der Leyen might say, does not look well-prepared for an envisaged target date of 2030.

Strength in numbers?

What will this mean for EU research policy? Let's put Georgia and Turkey aside for the moment—they both face political circumstances that make the issue of EU accession particularly thorny—and focus on the remaining seven countries.

To be frank, a wish-list for new member states aimed at strengthening the European Research and Innovation Area would look completely different. Enlargement is driven by other political factors, and research and innovation policy will have to cope as best it can.

Together, the seven countries have 62 million inhabitants, equivalent to 14 per cent of the current EU population. But in terms of Framework Programme funding, their impact is likely to be much smaller.

For comparison, Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic, with a combined population of 60 million, have so far received just 3.2 per cent of Horizon Europe funding. The new kids on the block might, at best, grab 3 per cent of the research budget—if the rules of the game stay the same.

But what if admitting seven new member states proves a game-changer? Until now, the Central and Eastern European Countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007 have gone along with the guiding principle that Framework money is distributed according to merit and quality.

After nearly 20 years inside the club, these nations have learned that competing on these terms is far more difficult than they had expected. The potential newcomers know this and realise that their national research and innovation systems, diverse as they are, have little chance of competing in the current system.

Allied to frustration in Central and Eastern Europe, this could translate into mounting pressure

for 'special support'. This is an obvious request with respect to Ukraine, but other countries are likely to follow suit.

Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe have used less than 5 per cent of their budgets for 'widening' activities aimed at bringing lagging research systems up to speed. The programmes have also sought synergies with the cohesion funding targeted at poorer regions. These initiatives calmed the waters, but they were not strategic, and their impact on the ground seems limited.

Post-2030, this might no longer be enough. The EU will face the question of whether, in a larger and more uneven union, its research and innovation policy should still be geared almost entirely towards rewarding 'excellence', or whether it should turn substantial resources towards capacity-building in a more systematic way.

Ramifications

Against this background, I can see three major ramifications for European research policy. First, the accession of several low-wage countries will aggravate the existing brain drain from the south and east of the continent towards the west and north. Achieving the 'brain circulation'

that the EU hopes to see will become harder than ever, requiring a makeover of policy.

Second, the prospective new member states will not be natural supporters of a strong European Research Council whose funding is based on excellence alone. For the foreseeable future, their chances to succeed will be very slim, and while their research ministers are likely to have warm words for the ERC, their finance ministers will be scrutinising the low return on investment.

Third, at the risk of puncturing the relief around the recent EU-UK association agreement on Horizon Europe, how will the UK government feel about paying into a future Framework Programme that prioritises developing research capacities in the Balkans and Ukraine?

Bumpy road ahead

The road to enlargement, including negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework covering the years from 2028 to 2034, will be bumpy. Research advocates would be unwise to simply dig in and hope for business as usual. A better idea would be to start facing up to the coming challenges and develop policies suited for an EU that might have up to 34 member states in less than a decade. 🗳️



“The prospective new member states will not be natural supporters of a strong European Research Council whose funding is based on excellence alone.”