

The Next Seven Years of Research on Europe's Society

What can we expect for and from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in Horizon Europe?

After the EU institutions have reached a final deal on the budget of Horizon Europe, now is a good time to look more closely at the programme and its different aspects. I would like to do this from the viewpoint of research on society, through the perspective of the social sciences and humanities (SSH).

Some three years ago, I discussed possible scenarios for social sciences and humanities research in the next Framework Programme (the programme had not been given the name "Horizon Europe" yet) in a short policy brief.¹ I was arguing and hoping for a scenario that I called "a pumping heart for European research": strong research missions on challenges concerning society, democracy and culture at the heart of Horizon Europe. Well, those were big ideas, and the outcome is different. The question today is: What is really the situation for research on our society in Horizon Europe? Does it provide any interesting research opportunities for social sciences and humanities? Is the programme designed to build on expertise from these disciplines? Do policy makers expect contributions from the social sciences and humanities for solving Europe's problems?

Before I will try to answer these questions: Let us look back.

A brief history

From the very beginning of conceptualising Horizon Europe, there was great interest – both by the research community itself and by stakeholder organisations and policy makers – in giving the social sciences and humanities a stronger role than they had in its predecessor programme Horizon 2020. The European debate was reflected in a sequence of strategy documents that paved the way towards Horizon Europe. Social sciences and humanities expertise was considered important in the ground-breaking Lamy-Report, the famous Mazzucato Paper, an insightful European Parliament's report, as well as in dozens of policy briefs and statements by European

¹ A Pumping Heart for European Research, May 2017, era.gv.at/object/news/3301. In this briefing, as well as in the present one, my focus is on the applied, top-down programme part of Horizon Europe called "Global Challenges and Industrial Competitiveness" (the so-called "second pillar" of Horizon Europe), and not on the ERC, the European Research Council, which is central to bottom-up funding for SSH.

organisations like ALLEA, EASSH, LERU, Russell Group or Coimbra Group. Eventually, all of this thinking fed into the proposal by the European Commission.

In 2018, the European Commission put a proposal for Horizon Europe on the table. It included a clearly defined role for the social sciences and humanities. Firstly, one programme line (a Cluster) in the programme part on applied research called "Global Challenges" was dedicated to three areas at the very heart of SSH research: democracy, cultural heritage and social transformation. Secondly, there was very strong emphasis on integrating social sciences and humanities expertise across the entire programme.² The social sciences and humanities were already given more prominence in this Commission proposal than in the final version of Horizon 2020.

Based on the Commission proposal, the shape of contributions by the social sciences and humanities in Horizon Europe was determined in more detail during the negotiations on the Regulation and the Specific Programme with the Member States (with important talks during the Austrian EU Council Presidency in 2018).³ The resulting documents address the social sciences and humanities several times and make them strongly visible.

The political and legal foundation

This more prominent role of SSH is reflected in the political and legal foundation of Horizon Europe, the regulation, agreed jointly by the Commission, Member States and Parliament in September 2020.⁴

The regulation for Horizon Europe mentions the social sciences and humanities at the beginning of the document that defines the general structure of the Framework Programme. Article 4 states that "*Social sciences and humanities (SSH) shall play an important role across all clusters*".

There are six such Clusters: "Health", "Inclusive and Creative Society", "Secure Society", "Digital Industry and Space", "Climate, Energy and Mobility" and "Food, Natural Resources and Agriculture".

Several subsequent articles in the regulation specify future contributions by the social sciences and humanities in more detail:

- Article 6 on the fundamental principles of the programme states that social sciences and humanities should be integrated across all activities of Horizon Europe;
- Article 7, governing the Missions, addresses the social sciences and humanities for working towards achieving the Missions;
- Article 44 on the appointment of independent external experts draws attention to considering necessary SSH expertise for those selected;
- Article 45 on monitoring and reporting as well as Annex V on Key Impact Pathway Indicators highlight the fact that information on the involvement and mainstreaming of the social sciences and humanities in the programme needs to be collected and analysed.

Another important step towards strengthening the role of SSH was the reformed structure of Directorate General Research & Innovation that was implemented in spring 2019. The new organisation chart put societal aspects more into focus. The large Directorate E was called "People". Two units that focus on "Fair Societies and Cultural Heritage" and "Democracy and

² Thirdly, there is the funding of bottom-up ideas in the ERC.

³ A conference on the impact of SSH and the integration of SSH across Horizon Europe Clusters was organised during the hot phase of the Framework Programme negotiations in 2018. Several documents were produced in the context of the conference and can be found here: www.ssh-impact.eu

⁴ General Approach of 29 September 2020, <https://era.gv.at/object/document/5560>

European Values” were installed in this directorate. On the horizontal axis of the organisation chart, new dedicated units were established for “Social Transitions”. These will be looking at societal aspects across the four thematic directorates in DG Research & Innovation.

What’s in it for SSH?

In terms of the policy concept of Horizon Europe, the legal foundations and the administrative expertise within the Commission services, the situation for societal aspects of research and social sciences and humanities disciplines⁵ has improved a lot.

In terms of budget, the situation has improved as well. The final budget negotiations resulted in additional budget for Cluster 2 “Inclusive and Creative Society”, with an eventual sum of euro 2.280 billion for the period 2021-2027. Cluster 2 is still very small compared to other Clusters. Nonetheless, the last minute budget increase for this Cluster achieved in negotiations with the European Parliament is a success for the European social sciences and humanities research and innovation community.⁶

The ERC is not my focus here, but for social sciences and humanities researchers, the ERC will remain a very important funding source. It will now receive a total budget of euro 16 billion. Over the past few years, the share of ERC funding going to projects from the social sciences and humanities increased from 17 % in 2014 to 25 % in 2018.⁷ If these shares remain stable, some three to four billion euros will go to social sciences and humanities driven research projects through the ERC. Other programme parts that are important in this context are the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, the Research Infrastructures programme, and the horizontal programme parts on “Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area”.

When it comes to SSH research, the Commission’s approach has three tiers: Cluster 2 is for top-down driven, applied, solution-oriented research; the ERC funds bottom-up, blue-sky, curiosity-driven research; the integration of SSH expertise through a transversal approach provides societal aspects of technological and natural science projects.

SSH integration

As regards the contributions of social sciences and humanities expertise to technological and natural sciences projects – abbreviated “SSH integration” in Framework Programme lingo – we should also expect much more from the programme than from its predecessor. The legal basis, the political interest and a community that has gained experience with the problems and virtues of SSH integration allow for a much better outlook than in the past.

A personally highly rewarding experience in this respect were the R & I Days 2019. Interactions with a number of policy makers from different General Directorates of the Commission responsible for different future Clusters showed me that all of them were eager to learn about SSH perspectives. This was true no matter what their field of responsibility was: climate, manufacturing, digitisation or health. Their interest was genuine, and when looking at the evolving documents on Horizon Europe, the uptake is profound.

⁵ When I use the term “humanities”, I also mean the arts. There are some good arguments to mention them explicitly. However, the abbreviation SSH is more established than SSHA, AHSS or the recently proposed SHAPE, so I will stick to SSH in this text. Horizon Europe will also provide more opportunities for the arts, arts-based research and the creative industries.

⁶ For media coverage of the negotiations, read this interesting article by Éanny Kelly and Goda Naujokaitytė in Science Business, 11. December 2020: EU announces budget breakdown for Horizon Europe after 14-hour talks, <https://sciencebusiness.net/framework-programmes/news/eu-announces-budget-breakdown-horizon-europe-after-14-hour-talks>

⁷ European Commission, 2020, Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, Budgets and Disciplines, 5th monitoring report on projects funded in 2018 under the Horizon 2020 programme, p.53: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4f198f8e-4599-11eb-b59f-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-183013539>

“Many societal challenges that need to be addressed through research and innovation are too complex to be overcome by a single scientific discipline”, writes Director General of DG Research & Innovation, Jean-Eric Paquet.⁸ “Technical solutions are often preconditions for new policy outcomes, but in themselves insufficient to have a meaningful impact. The lasting societal impacts that policy-makers seek are often equally reliant on insights from social sciences and humanities.” This is what SSH can contribute: insights on humans, insights on society, insights on individuals and collectives, on attitudes and on actual behaviour.

The final drafts of the Work Programmes of the Clusters for the starting period 2021-2022, due to be published in the coming weeks, are showing great interest in input from the social sciences and humanities. Upcoming calls for projects will see a lot of demand for expertise on societal, cultural, behavioural and economic aspects across Horizon Europe Clusters.

Open questions

Of course, not all is perfect, and the approach of SSH integration has its flaws. However, the firm conviction that a perspective on individuals and on society improves many research projects (and SSH research does not do more, and certainly not less) is motivating policy makers and researchers today to improve the concept instead of giving it up.⁹ “Effective SSH integration is a key determinant of sustainable societal impact”, writes the European Commission.¹⁰ The Commission’s rationale to support social sciences and humanities research more strongly in Horizon Europe was guided by the perception that too many innovations remain on the shelf and are not being used or taken up by society. The idea was that a stronger focus on the societal impact of innovations could help to improve this situation. To this end, social sciences and humanities expertise was seen as a helpful tool.¹¹

The European Commission sees the rules for participation in Horizon 2020 as a limit to more effective and qualitative integration of the social sciences and humanities. Therefore, some rules have to become clearer in Horizon Europe in order to integrate SSH expertise more comprehensively. DG R & I therefore proposes a number of measures in their 5th monitoring report on SSH integration¹²:

- *“A revisited evaluation process under the excellence as well as impact criteria.*
- *A novel category of inter-disciplinary experts for panel evaluations of SSH flagged projects.*
- *New cross-cluster complementarities and synergies in terms of SSH presence across the entire new programme.*
- *A new key deliverable in the form of a societal development plan (SDP), outlining the contribution of SSH fields to the project in question [...] Such an SDP could become a key deliverable, and thus have financial implications for the project.”*

⁸ Foreword by Jean-Eric Paquet in European Commission, 2020, p. 3

⁹ There are a number of relevant initiatives, currently the most interesting one is the project “Shaping Interdisciplinary Practices in Europe”, SHAPE-ID-project, www.shapeid.eu

¹⁰ European Commission, 2020, p. 66

¹¹ As societal impact is a long-standing promise of Research Framework Programmes, the real question was how this could actually be measured. Measuring impact is a challenge in itself, but the Gordian knot for this task was cut and a set of indicators developed. The so-called “Key Impact Pathway Indicators” were invented, with the goal to structure the monitoring of Horizon Europe’s progress towards societal impact. The indicators cover three areas: scientific, technological/economic and societal impact. The indicators are intended to measure progress by counting research output and innovations that help to address EU policy priorities and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thus ultimately contributing to people’s well-being. The Key Impact Pathway Indicators are published in the Annex of the regulation on page 135: <https://era.gv.at/object/document/5560>

¹² see above

The outcome of final technical negotiations on the above aspects will determine in many ways the quality of SSH integration in the future.

Another key to success will be the continuous and rigorous monitoring of the implementation of SSH integration in Horizon Europe. Monitoring of SSH integration has been a tedious task in Horizon 2020, but it has contributed greatly to understanding the approach better, and to improving it in many ways. The latest SSH integration report with data from 2018 has just been published by the Commission. It shows again small improvements when it comes to the quality of integrating expertise from SSH into projects.¹³

Other details that will shape the outcome of the programme priorities have not been completely defined yet. For instance, the ins and outs of marking specific research calls and topics for necessary SSH contributions are not clear yet. The technical term for this is “SSH flagging”.¹⁴ Some questions, such as transparency regarding which topics will be flagged, still need to be clarified.

In addition, we do not have a clear picture yet of how social sciences and humanities expertise will be integrated in the research on Missions, the big new instrument in the Framework Programme. As mentioned in the Mazzucato Paper, SSH expertise is essential for achieving the Mission objectives. The very idea of reaching a defined goal, of reaching it not only by means of R & I but also by other interventions, calls for behavioural insight, sociological expertise, knowledge about governance and institutions, as well as cultural and historical context.

Another aspect to be discussed is the role of the social sciences and humanities within European Partnerships. Traditionally, they are highly technology-oriented, but they all have important societal aspects that will need support from specific fields of the social sciences and humanities.

There are also question marks around the social sciences and humanities in the European Innovation Council (EIC), the vehicle for providing European public venture capital. Social Innovation should be part of the EIC, but many details still need to be developed.

So all in all Horizon Europe is calling for social sciences and humanities expertise in many different areas of the programme. It will be the job of the European Commission, the Member States, the stakeholder organisations, the National Contact points, and of course the social sciences and humanities research community itself (but also researchers from the natural sciences and engineering), to get the word out, and to connect the right minds, researchers, innovators and companies.

If we want to deliver on the new vision of Horizon Europe – *Social sciences and humanities shall play an important role across all clusters and should be integrated across all activities* – everyone in the R & I community will need to play their part. This is part of the nitty-gritty everyday work of R&I administration at the Commission as well as in the Member States, in ministries, research councils, universities and non-university research organisations: Bring SSH-expertise on the table; conceptualise it from the very beginning in your programme and its documents; include it in as many calls within Horizon Europe Clusters as possible; have evaluators with expertise in the social sciences and humanities in the review; and require it for real in the consortia that carry out the research.¹⁵

¹³ European Commission, 2020, p. 5 ff.

¹⁴ More information on SSH flagging can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/cross-cutting-issues/ssh_en.htm

¹⁵ These are the main messages from the SSH Guidelines, a short dossier “on how to successfully design and implement mission-oriented research programmes”: ssh-impact.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/guidelines_SSH_FINAL.pdf

What's in it for society?

We know what's in it for SSH, so let's ask what policy makers and society can expect from the social sciences and humanities.

Horizon Europe will give social sciences and humanities scholars, researchers and innovators ample opportunity to produce knowledge about our democracies and the challenges they are facing today, to develop innovations together with Europe's cultural heritage and its creative industries, and to provide insights about the manifold social and economic transformations our European society is facing - from digitisation to migration, inequality and demographic change.

We will see social innovations to counter the next pandemic; society will get new knowledge on the challenges and the potential of artificial intelligence; researchers will provide us with new tools, measures and policy suggestions to fight global warming. The contributions from the social sciences and humanities across all parts of Horizon Europe will provide expertise on human behaviour, society and its processes, institutions and their functioning for solving the big challenges of our time.

Matthias Reiter-Pázmándy

The policy brief represents the personal opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the official position of Austria.

The author is Deputy Head of the Department for Social Sciences and Humanities in the Directorate General for Scientific Research and International Relations in the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF). He represents Austria in several committees in the field of research policy and the social sciences and humanities. He can be contacted here: matthias.reiter-pazmandy@bmbwf.gv.at