

From projects to scientific ecosystems

Brussels workshop advances the debate on a European Excellence Initiative for FP10

Workshop held on 22 September 2026 at the Permanent Representation of France to the European Union, Brussels

A debate moving from “whether” to “how”

BRUSSELS, 22 SEPTEMBER 2026 - How can Europe give excellent research teams the time, scale and freedom needed to pursue ambitious scientific agendas across borders? This question was at the centre of the European Excellence Initiative workshop, jointly organised by the Permanent Representation of France to the European Union and the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union, in collaboration with the Polish Science Contact Agency (PolSCA) of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

With more than 120 participants joined the workshop, the event provided a strong indication of the interest surrounding the future architecture of European collaborative research. The discussion tested a simple proposition: FP10 should create space for long-term, large-scale, bottom-up and genuinely transnational scientific programmes that can connect excellent teams across Europe and give them the continuity needed to build critical mass.

The debate comes at a particularly relevant moment. The Council's partial general approach on the future Horizon Europe Regulation states that bottom-up actions may be supported through large-scale, researcher-driven collaborative initiatives and should help counter fragmentation by bringing together both well-established and emerging excellence centres ([Official Council text \(ST 10464/26\)](#)). This language is closely aligned with the core rationale of the Franco-Polish initiative. In parallel, the European Parliament is considering a similar concept, while some stakeholders made proposals in the same spirit.

Evidence from LabEx: long-term excellence funding can change research ecosystems

The workshop opened with evidence from the French Laboratoires d'Excellence (LabEx) programme. **Arthur Guillouzouic**, CNRS researcher at the Aix-Marseille School of Economics, presented a programme that invested around €1.5 billion in 171 research clusters, with individual allocations ranging from roughly €2 million to €30 million and funding initially provided over eight years. Scientific excellence was the decisive driver of selection.

The evaluations presented during the workshop show effects that go beyond producing more research output. Collaborations within funded clusters increased by around 30%, while publications on the scientific themes pursued by the clusters rose by approximately 22%. The studies also identified spillovers to industry: among the most exposed local industry-location pairs, R&D wage expenditure increased by around 15%, with one euro of LabEx funding associated with an estimated €0.78 of additional private R&D wages. One of the main conclusions was that this type of public intervention could be considered as part of a competitiveness policy.

Cyril Renassia and Louis Lambrechts from Institut Pasteur demonstrated what the model can mean in practice through the LabEx IBEID - Integrative Biology of Emerging Infectious Diseases. Existing from 2011, its long-term and agile framework combines competitive research & innovation calls with strategic recruitment for young and senior scientists, flexible core funding including core facilities investment and rapid-response mechanisms. Since 2020, IBEID teams have participated in 18 EU collaborative projects, including coordinations, leveraging around €105 million in co-funding. This ambitious initiative clearly illustrates how combined top-down and bottom-up incentives can foster a transdisciplinary and multi-site scientific community, acting as a springboard for scientist to take on leadership of key European and international priorities.

What researchers need to pursue ambitious science

Aleksandra Pękowska, head of the Dioscuri Centre for Chromatin Biology and Epigenomics at the Nencki Institute of Experimental Biology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, brought the researcher perspective into the discussion. Drawing on a scientific trajectory spanning Poland, France, Germany and the United States, she stressed that ambitious research programmes require more than a succession of grants: they depend on expertise, networks, time and continuity, freedom to take risks, resources proportionate to the scientific question and a strong host institution.

“Scientific excellence is not confined to the traditional European research hubs.”

Aleksandra Pękowska, Dioscuri Centre / Nencki Institute, Polish Academy of Sciences

Her broader message was that what often differs across Europe is not the quality of scientific ideas, but the density of networks, infrastructure and opportunities surrounding them. The implication is a shift from individual projects towards shared scientific programmes and durable ecosystems that are bottom-up, long-term, cross-border, dynamic and capable of building critical mass.

Round table: from the rationale to the design of a European instrument

Moderated by **Muriel Dal Pont**, Vice-President of Université Côte d’Azur, the round table deliberately moved the discussion from the case for long-term funding to the harder design questions. Is seven or ten years of funding itself the answer, or is the deeper issue of “continuity”? How can Europe scale up excellence without simply reproducing its existing geography? What should survive after the funding ends: the consortium, the scientific community, infrastructures, skills or capabilities? And how can long-term support remain open and adaptable?

Nils Wörner, Head of the Brussels Office of the German Rectors’ Conference, presented the logic behind the German Nexus proposal. He argued that Europe could extend the bottom-up principle familiar from the ERC from individual researchers to larger scientific communities: excellent teams with a scientific vision should be able to come together, compete through peer review and start from the science rather than from a prescribed consortium template.

“We should give science the room to determine what is possible, provide a broad framework, and select the best proposals through scientific competition.”

Nils Wörner, German Rectors’ Conference

For Wörner, this would require more than a new funding line in Pillar II: it would imply a change in operating culture, with less micromanagement of work packages and consortium composition and greater reliance on competition, peer review and scientific autonomy.

René Repasi MEP, rapporteur on the FP10 Specific Programme, approached the question from the perspective of trust, institutional strengths and European-scale competition. Drawing on the Dutch sector-plan experience, he argued that research organisations should have more room to build programmes around their real strengths while proposals remain subject to independent peer review. He also underlined the political and practical challenge of scaling such a logic to a Union of very different research systems. Repasi also addressed the programme architecture. Pillar I should not be weakened at the expense of successful instruments such as the ERC, while locating a new scheme in Pillar II would require preserving what makes it distinctively bottom-up. In his view, the exact location is ultimately a practical design question rather than a reason to abandon the concept.

“We therefore need a mechanism that preserves the positive effect - nurturing opportunities beyond the usual suspects, while maintaining genuine excellence. In practice, we may need seed funding for a pilot to demonstrate that this is genuinely something different. If it proves its value, the mechanism could subsequently be developed further. The Council text provides an opening, but the exact design is still unresolved.”

René Repasi MEP, Rapporteur on the FP10 Specific Programme

Fabrice Lemoine, Vice-President of the University of Lorraine, connected the debate directly to Europe’s competitiveness and strategic capacity. As he put it, **“Scientific independence underpins Europe’s industrial sovereignty.”** Long-term scientific excellence, he argued, feeds the innovation pipeline and helps prevent scientific dependencies from becoming technological or industrial dependencies. He also shifted attention to legacy, suggesting that the main asset to preserve after seven or ten years should not necessarily be an administrative consortium. It is the scientific community, accumulated knowledge, skills, infrastructures and capacity created through sustained cooperation - assets that can continue to serve Europe after an individual funding cycle ends.

Krzysztof Pyrc, President of the Foundation for Polish Science and professor at the Jagiellonian University, used the development of coronavirus research before COVID-19 to illustrate why scientific capacity must often be built before its future importance can be predicted. When a crisis arrives, he argued, what matters is where knowledge, infrastructure and networks already exist - not who can write the fastest new proposal. The same logic applies to talent: world-class researchers are unlikely to relocate internationally for a short project without a longer-term scientific vision. He argued that **“Excellence does not grow in isolation. It is not enough to identify individual oysters. You need to create the reef - the environment in which they can flourish, interact and create something much larger”**. Pyrc therefore argued for funding a scientific agenda and vision rather than a frozen consortium: long-term stability should coexist with the possibility to change priorities, reallocate resources and, where necessary, change participating teams. Serious scientific review should focus on outcomes and direction rather than generate layers of reporting.

The room pushed the discussion further

The high level of participation mattered not only numerically. Questions from the audience tested the concept against the practical problems it would have to solve. Participants asked whether the Franco-Polish European Excellence Initiative, the German Nexus proposal and approaches inspired by sector plans are essentially responses to the same structural gap; why FP10 is the right framework; and how a scheme in Pillar II could remain genuinely different from conventional collaborative projects.

Before opening the floor, Muriel Dal Pont captured the underlying European challenge as fragmentation. Long-term funding alone would not be enough: the added value lies in connecting people, infrastructures, expertise and research skills across borders. Open consortia, she suggested, could help other researchers and institutions connect to those capacities over time. The discussion therefore increasingly moved from whether a gap exists towards how it should be addressed.

Other interventions went directly to possible failure modes: how would the proposal differ from EIT Knowledge and Innovation Communities or European Universities alliances? How can seven- or ten-year support avoid creating structures primarily concerned with their own survival? What governance would allow resources to move when the science changes? And what is needed to turn the opening already present in the Council text into a workable instrument?

On a bold note, Krzysztof Pyrc concluded the exchange with a somehow provocative thought:

“When different countries - Germany, France and Poland - independently arrive at very similar ideas, perhaps that itself is a signal that there is a genuine European case to address. If a programme of this kind does not fit neatly into current Horizon Europe layout, perhaps the conclusion should not be that we abandon the idea. To the contrary, we should reconsider whether the programme architecture itself needs to evolve.”

Connecting excellence across Europe

For Europe and its cutting edge

The European case is about scale and fragmentation. Europe already has outstanding researchers, institutions and infrastructures; the question is whether its funding architecture allows them to combine strengths for long enough to build critical mass, attract global talent and create durable capabilities. A long-term, transnational and researcher-driven instrument could occupy the “missing middle” between individual excellence and shorter or more prescriptive collaborative schemes - while strengthening Europe’s competitiveness, resilience and scientific leadership.

For Poland and the wider region

A European Excellence Initiative could help excellent teams in Poland and across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region connect more durably to complementary expertise, infrastructures and networks elsewhere in Europe. The objective is not to weaken excellence-based competition, but to recognise that the geography of strong ideas is broader than the geography of dense research ecosystems. Wörner explicitly pointed to high-quality infrastructure in Poland and other newer Member States as an asset for genuine bottom-up European collaborations; Repasi likewise stressed that widening and excellence need not be treated as opposites.

A discussion to be continued

In his concluding remarks, **Manuel Aleixo**, Member of the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, welcomed further exploration of more bottom-up options in collaborative research and highlighted simplification, flexibility, talent attraction and critical mass as relevant considerations for the future programme. He also stressed the need to preserve successful existing instruments, safeguard European-level competition for excellence, consider associated countries and clarify the relationship between European and national responsibilities for research funding.

The workshop was not intended to deliver a finished instrument. It helped move the debate to its next stage: defining how long-term collaborative excellence could work in practice within FP10 - with continuity across funding stages but without rigidity, institutional commitment without institutional entitlement, and strategic European added value without replacing bottom-up scientific agenda-setting.

The organisers thank all speakers and participants for rich and engaged discussion. The Permanent Representations of France and Poland to the European Union, together with PolSCA PAS, will continue the dialogue with the scientific community and European stakeholders as negotiations on the future Framework Programme progress.

Jointly organised by: Permanent Representation of France to the European Union | Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the European Union | Polish Science Contact Agency (PolSCA), Polish Academy of Sciences