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UNLOCKING EU FUNDS FOR ALL

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The European Union's budget is a powerful lever for change, competitiveness, cohesion, climate action, and social inclusion. Yet many stakeholders—especially smaller organisations, first-time applicants, and actors from less developed regions—struggle to access EU funds due to complexity, administrative burdens, and lack of clear guidance. Stakeholders consistently report overlapping requirements, fragmented portals, and disproportionate documentation requirements. Simplification is not merely a technical fix, it is an enabler of fairness, impact, and legitimacy. It empowers more Europeans to benefit from shared investment, strengthens trust in EU institutions, and increases the efficiency and visibility of EU action. Renew Europe should lead a pragmatic agenda for simplification: one that is citizen-focused, digital-first, results-driven, and fair. Therefore, we propose a set of horizontal simplification principles to be considered in the next MFF to support fair access, coherence across programmes, and reduce administrative burden.

- Expand the use of **flat-rate and lump-sum payments**, especially for smaller and medium-scale projects, to reduce reliance on detailed invoices and simplify cost reporting.
- **Harmonise rules across EU funds** to make requirements more consistent and easier to navigate.
- Accelerate the rollout of **fully digital systems** for applications and reporting to cut paperwork and improve efficiency.
- Apply the **single audit principle**, ensuring one trusted audit is sufficient and avoiding repeated checks.
- Introduce **proportional controls**, adjusting audit intensity based on project size and risk.
- **Clarify eligibility and procurement rules** to reduce delays and avoid misinterpretations.
- **Increase flexibility in programme management** to allow easier fund reallocation and longer eligibility periods.
- Improve **coordination with national laws** to avoid conflicting requirements, especially in procurement and state aid.
- Shift to **multi-stage selection processes** with transparent criteria.

One-stop digital access

- Create a unified EU funding portal with shared login, programme comparison tools, pre-filled applications for returning users, and real-time tracking.
- Ensure the portal is mobile-friendly, multilingual, and accessible, and improve overall user experience through intuitive navigation, clear guidance, and user testing.

- Integrate standardised templates and budget tools to simplify application and reporting processes.
- Guarantee interoperability between EU, national, and regional systems to prevent repeated data entry and uphold the once-only principle, according to which administrations cannot ask citizens to provide the same information multiple times.
- Support the full transition to digital administration, making online tools the default for communication, application, and reporting.
- Leverage AI and digital tools to streamline procedures, reduce paperwork, and automate routine tasks.

Simplified procedures

- Streamline core application forms and limit the number of pages so that the focus is primarily on project relevance, value, EU impact and feasibility.
- Use clear, user-friendly language in all guidance materials and templates.
- Ensure timely support via national or regional contact points with guaranteed response times.
- Expand and standardise the use of simplified cost models (lump sums, flat rates, unit costs) across programmes to reduce paperwork and audit demands.
- Allow flexibility between cost categories to ease project management.
- Apply common eligibility and evaluation criteria for similar actions across programmes to simplify navigation and improve coherence.
- Simplify compliance through the use of self-declarations (e.g. on eligibility, capacity, conflicts of interest), with full documentation required only when necessary, mirroring the European single procurement document. Obligations remain, but the burden is reduced, especially for SMEs.

Transparent and progressive project selection

- Shift to multi-stage selection processes with early feedback and transparent criteria to improve quality and reduce wasted effort.
- Provide intermediate guidance and early rejections with constructive explanations.
- Publish selection criteria, scoring rubrics, and success rates to increase transparency and trust.
- Promote co-creation of guidance with stakeholders, especially from SMEs, civil society, and underserved regions.

- Encourage and facilitate mentoring and coaching schemes, including peer networks and project incubators, to support new applicants.

Proportionate monitoring and audit requirements

- Shift monitoring from ticking boxes to outcome-based evaluation, using concise narrative reports substituting, where necessary, technical submissions.
- Promote digital-first, automated reporting tools with real-time updates and auto-generated progress data.
- Apply the single audit principle and the 'once-only' rule to reduce duplicate checks and repetitive data requests across governance levels.
- Require detailed documentation only in cases of underperformance, legal concerns, complex funding or management structures or suspected fraud.
- Limit financial corrections to actual irregularities, avoiding statistical extrapolation.
- Ensure that audit and reporting obligations be proportionate to the scope, scale and level of risk of the supported actions.

Cross-Programme coordination and synergies

- Harmonise rules and evaluation criteria across programmes with similar objectives to simplify access and enable cross-programme synergies.
- Create a joint call calendar and encourage synchronised or bundled calls across funding lines.
- Introduce a "Seal of Excellence" to allow strong but unfunded proposals to be considered for other EU or national funding.
- Develop a synergy navigator tool to help applicants identify complementary programmes and combine funding sources effectively.

Recommendations from Member States

/based on the 2023 [Renew Europe study](#)/

- Simplify application procedures, particularly by digitalising them (like French "ASAP" reform or Austria's SME digitisation instrument KMU.DIGITAL).
- Use intermediaries (e.g. business support organisations, financial institutions, clusters) to disseminate information and assist applications.

- Provide single, clearly identifiable contact points for SMEs to navigate available support options efficiently.
- Avoid treating SMEs as a uniform group; instead, target sub-categories based on sector, size, or thematic relevance (e.g. digital, green).
- Encourage collaborative and collective projects, involving SMEs and larger firms, to generate synergies and scale impact (like in Spain through PPP in PERTE initiative).
- Base the design of support measures on ex-ante needs assessments and investment gap analyses.
- Avoid fragmentation of funds across too many small-scale, stand-alone initiatives.
- Include customised accompanying services (e.g., advisory and capacity building) to boost SMEs' absorption capacity (e.g. Croatia's providing SMEs with business consultancy support or Estonia creating better conditions for exporting companies to operate in foreign markets.).
- Involve SME representative bodies in both the design and monitoring of programmes.



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