



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Dear President,

The Commission would like to thank the Senato della Repubblica for its Opinion concerning the Commission's proposal for a decision of the European Parliament and of the Council on the participation of the Union in a second Research and Development (R&D) Programme jointly undertaken by several Member States aimed at supporting research-performing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) {COM(2013) 493 final}.

With respect to the observations made by the Senato della Repubblica, the Commission fully agrees that supporting SMEs is of utmost importance, as SMEs are the backbone of the European economy and have the potential to contribute significantly to the creation of more growth and jobs in the EU.

In addition, the Commission warmly welcomes the general appreciation expressed by the Senato della Repubblica regarding the continuation of the Eurostars Joint Programme and its support, in particular, for research-performing SMEs. These firms are very dynamic and are able to greatly stimulate growth and jobs, particularly if engaged in transnational R&D collaboration.

The Commission would like to recall that on 22 June 2012, the EUREKA Ministerial Conference in Budapest endorsed a document (the 'Budapest Document') that clearly signals EUREKA countries' willingness to continue their involvement with Eurostars. Indeed, during the Conference, countries committed to substantially increase the programme's financial resources. Consequently, and in order to incentivise and further support final beneficiaries, the EU financial contribution has also been increased. For this reason, while the percentage share of the EU's contribution has been maintained in the Commission's proposal (i.e., one-third of the Member States' contributions), the absolute amount of support for the programme has tripled.

*Mr Pietro GRASSO
President of the
Senato della Repubblica
Piazza Madama, 1
IT – 00186 ROMA*

Taking this into account, the Commission strongly believes that an enhanced range of opportunities for Italy's research-performing SMEs is now on offer, and looks forward to Italy's full participation in the programme. The Commission would like to underline that Eurostars, though part of a wider funding ecosystem under Horizon 2020 for supporting SMEs, is the only programme specifically dedicated to research-performing SMEs and is, in addition, open to any field of R&D. It also plays a key role in bringing together national research programmes, and so contributes to the completion of the European Research Area (ERA). Public-public partnerships under Art.185 TFEU indeed contribute to the realisation of ERA by helping align national programmes.

In this context, the Commission notes the wish of the Senato della Repubblica for more financial participation in Eurostars by the Ministry of Education, Universities & Research and the Ministry of Economic Development & Regional Administration, and agrees with the observation that greater coordination at national and European levels between SMEs should be fostered, with an active role played by the Member States.

This greater national financial participation, like all other national co-financing of programmes and projects supported by EU funds, could be included in the amount of investment eligible for application of the so-called "investment clause" to the national budgetary targets, which would however be considered only if all conditions of eligibility are fulfilled. In its assessment of Italy's draft budgetary plan, released in November, the Commission signalled the risk of non-compliance of Italy's budgetary plans in 2014, and thus deemed it non eligible to the investment clause.

The Commission hopes that these comments address the concerns raised by the Senato della Repubblica in its Opinion and looks forward to continuing the political dialogue in the future.

Yours faithfully,

*Maroš Šefčovič
Vice-President*