

Open Letter to DG RTD

Strengthening Social Science-focused Energy Research in Horizon Europe and its Successor Research and Innovation Programme

Dear Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva,

Congratulations on your recent nomination as European Commissioner. Your selection reflects not only your exceptional qualifications but also the trust placed in your ability to lead Europe towards a prosperous and sustainable future. We commend your dedication to public service and your commitment to advancing the interests of European citizens. We are looking forward to your leadership developing the next European framework programme to succeed Horizon Europe which will certainly shape the European research landscape for the next decade.

As you embark on this important role, we are eager to collaborate with you and your team to address pressing issues facing Europe, particularly in the realm of energy research and innovation. The European Union has long been a global leader in promoting sustainable development and combating climate change, and we believe that strengthening social science-focused energy research will be crucial in achieving these ambitious goals. Therefore, we are writing to share our insights and recommendations on how to enhance the support for such research within Horizon Europe and its successor programmes.

The European Green Deal's success hinges on more than just technological advancements. Social science and humanities (SSH) research plays a crucial role in navigating the digital and climate transformation by understanding public perceptions and values, mapping the determinants of political feasibility, identifying the drivers of transformative innovation, explaining why certain policies fail, and by providing normative benchmarks against which policy innovation can be held.

We, Europe's largest networks of energy researchers in the social sciences, call on the European Commission to revisit the current program design in Horizon Europe funding, which fails to make the most of excellent political science and other social sciences and humanities research in the realm of energy and transitions research. Specifically, we strongly suggest designated thematic calls for topics related to challenges requiring explicit SSH research approaches.

Founded in 2009, the Sustainability Transitions Research Network (STRN) numbers over 3000 scholars interested in sustainability transitions, innovation and the science-technology-society interface. Many of our members work on sustainability transitions within varied sectors across Europe and beyond.

The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) is Europe's leading association for political science scholarship, comprising dozens of institutions across the EU and beyond. The ECPR's Research Network on Energy Politics, Policy, and Governance (Energy-PPG), represents over 350 researchers working on energy policy decisions, political influences that shape them, and the governance structures that guide the entire energy landscape.

Our networks note with concern that the recent annual work programmes under the Horizon Europe research programme, especially in clusters 4 (Digital, Industry and Space) and 5 (Climate, Energy and Mobility) no longer feature dedicated calls for topics related to the social sciences and humanities. We realize that an attempt was made to strengthen SSH research by requiring streamlining and inclusion of SSH research activities in all project applications. This has helped to create niche opportunities for supportive or auxiliary research in all sorts of research activities. However, in practice there were very limited opportunities for SSH researchers to conceive and lead research and innovation actions with SSH research questions and modes of inquiry at the core.

We also acknowledge that some opportunities have been created in the framework of the European LIFE programme. Yet, with its focus on implementation and funding requirements tailored to public authorities and private companies, these opportunities have frequently proved not financially viable for the kind of research organizations represented in the ECPR and STRN.

Social sciences and humanities knowledge is essential for fostering responsible innovation and ensuring technological solutions align with European ethics and social justice concerns. SSH research also helps design effective behaviour change strategies and communication plans, bridging the gap between scientific data and real-world implementation. It is only by integrating SSH research that the European Green Deal can achieve a more holistic and sustainable future that is not only technologically sound but also ethically grounded and socially inclusive. Awareness and understanding of social contexts can also be crucial for this ambitious project to succeed.

We note that the recent programming decisions have not improved funding conditions for SSH research but made it worse. Many of the pressing societal questions associated with the implementation of the European Green Deal remain understudied due to the lack of corresponding research funding. This is particularly true for the following challenges:

- **The political feasibility of ambitious climate action:** While climate scientists have for decades warned us about the gravity of the climate crisis, and STEM

scholars have drawn up different technological pathways that could help humanity navigate it, concerted efforts are largely insufficient and the 1.5-degree target effectively out of reach. SSH scholarship holds the answer to why climate action is limited and failing, perhaps one of the most fundamental questions policymakers are faced with, and one that cannot be reduced to an auxiliary role. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change increasingly admits this to be the case - hence their decision to extend academic input to political science and sociology.

- **Acceleration of transition processes across all sectors of the economy:** Achieving European climate change and biodiversity targets requires structural change across the entire European economy and society. SSH scholarship has illuminated the dynamics of change of historical and contemporary transitions and based on that evidence has developed insights into how transition processes can be shaped, both in terms of their speed as well as their direction.
- **Achieving a Just Transition:** Processes of transition towards net zero economies will induce major structural changes, not only in the energy sector but across all areas of economic activity. Social science research is key to developing targeted policies to ensure that vulnerable sections of society are supported through these processes of change, to better distribute the costs and benefits of net zero transformations and create more equitable systems through which societal needs are being met, and to evaluate policy implementation and outcomes.
- **Industrial policy in the context of emerging geopolitical rivalry:** The new Commission features dedicated portfolios on industrial strategy and international partnerships, illustrating the importance of EU strategic autonomy and economic statecraft in a turbulent geopolitical and geoeconomic environment. SSH research can inform the policies and initiatives in these areas, tackling questions like: Which industrial policy instruments might help to strengthen European competitiveness and support the achievement of environmental objectives? How does industrial policy interact with other policies and policy objectives? Which values and norms underpin the recent renaissance of industrial policy and how will/might they change?
- **Public engagement and communication in times of political backlash:** Public acceptance is crucial for the ultimate success of the European Green Deal. SSH research can help develop effective communication strategies to inform citizens about the European Green Deal's goals, benefits, potential drawbacks, and how they might be addressed. This research can also explore public perceptions of different sustainability measures and design strategies to foster public trust and encourage participation in the transition. As we observe growing levels of unrest and pushback against more ambitious climate and sustainability policies, it is of

fundamental importance to understand where these are coming from, what grievances fuel them, and what measures can effectively address such disputes.

- **Ethical Considerations in Green Technologies:** The European Green Deal relies on technological advancements, but these innovations raise ethical concerns. SSH research can examine the ethical implications of new technologies like carbon capture and storage or large-scale renewable energy projects. This research can help develop ethical frameworks for technology development and deployment.

While technological advancements and economic considerations remain crucial aspects of the digital and climate transition, the most significant hurdles we now face are socio-economic and political. Public anxieties surrounding new technologies, resistance to policy changes, and ensuring a just transition for all require solutions that go beyond technical expertise and financial investment. This is where SSH research becomes essential. By delving into public perceptions, social values, and the complexities of power dynamics, SSH research equips us to navigate these challenges. It empowers us to design policies that are not only effective but also socially acceptable, fosters public trust in the transition process, and ensures a fair and equitable future for all.

We therefore call upon the European Commission to reconsider its previous programming decisions. Mainstreaming SSH across work programmes is necessary but on its own insufficient to support excellent SSH research targeting the key research questions outlined above. Specifically, we recommend to re-introduce designated thematic calls for topics related to challenges requiring explicit SSH research approaches during the remaining Horizon Europe funding period. Moreover, we call on you to follow the example of the IPCC and strengthen the role of social science-focussed energy research already at strategic level for the Horizon Europe successor research and innovation programme.

By supporting SSH research, the EU can unlock the full potential of the Energy and Climate program. Investing in SSH will not only address the critical social and human dimensions of the green transition but also ensure its long-term success and social acceptance. We urge the European Commission's DG RTD to take a leading role in fostering a more comprehensive approach. To further discuss our concerns and detail specific recommendations for integrating SSH research within the program, we would welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person. We believe a collaborative dialogue can pave the way for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future for all Europeans.

On behalf of the ECPR Energy Politics, Policy and Governance network, members of the Steering Committee:

Prof. Caroline Kuzemko, University of Warwick, UK, co-chair of the Steering Committee

Prof. Kacper Szulecki, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and Centre for Development and the Environment, University of Oslo, Norway, co-chair of the Steering Committee

On behalf of the STRN:

Dr. Florian Kern, Institute for Ecological Economy Research, Berlin, Germany, chair of the Sustainability Transitions Research Network

Prof. Dr Wouter Boon Copernicus Institute of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University, Netherlands, board member of the Sustainability Transitions Research Network

The Open Letter has also been endorsed by several leading SSH scientists representing key European research institutions and journals. Please find the list of signatories attached.