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# Don't panic! Use EU rebrand to make research stronger

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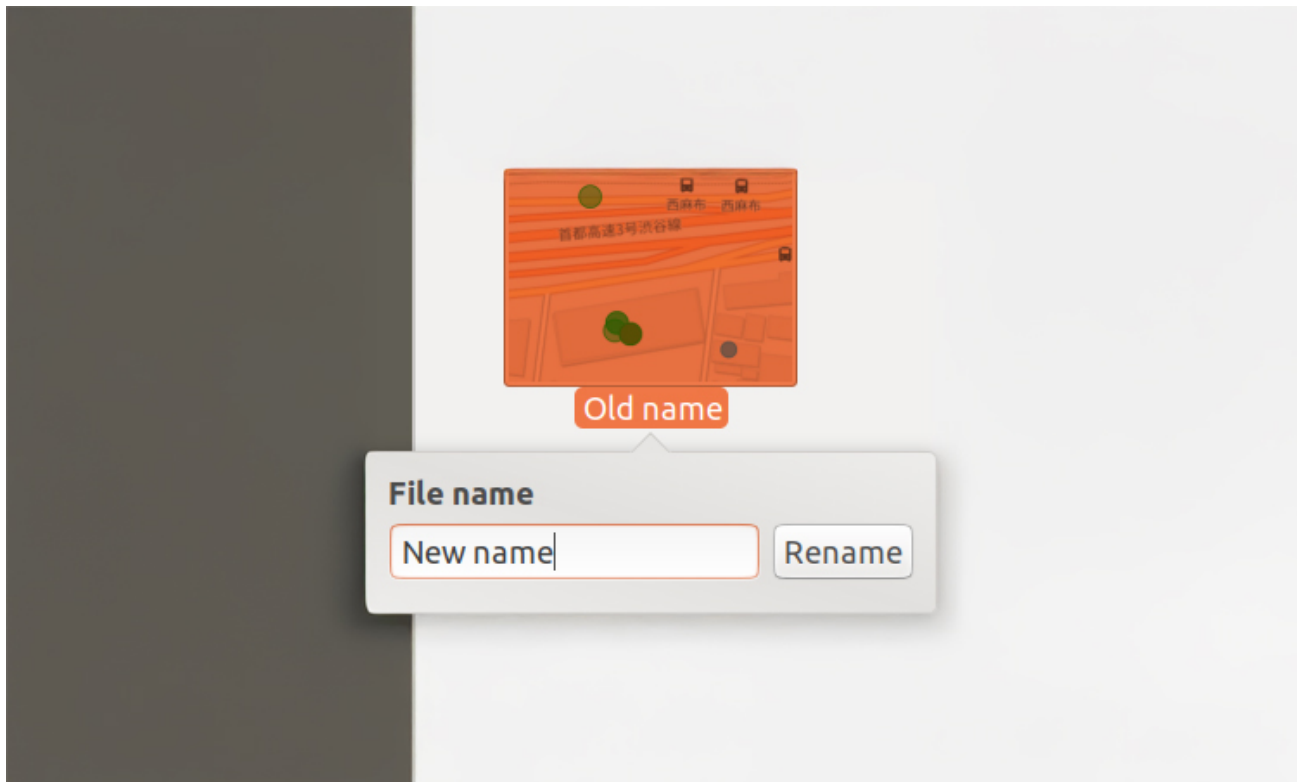


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Let Brussels rename the framework programme—focus on getting the contents right, says Mattias Björnmalm

The European research community collectively spat out its morning coffee when Ekaterina Zaharieva, the commissioner for startups, research and innovation, declared in January that a €200 billion budget for the next EU research programme was “not realistic”.

The anxiety was compounded when Marc Lemaître, the Commission’s director-general for research and innovation, further explained the need to slash the number of EU funding instruments while refusing to confirm whether there will even be a standalone successor to Horizon Europe. It felt like waking up to find someone has quietly reclassified your job title as ‘non-essential enthusiast’.

All this has prompted a rational and well-reasoned response from the research and innovation community—by which I mean existential dread, a spike in caffeine consumption and the quiet sobbing of grant writers.

But fear not. As engineers, we know that when faced with catastrophic system failure, the correct response is not to panic (although panicking is an acceptable interim measure). Instead, we recalibrate, reroute and pretend everything was part of the design all along.

### **Eleven zeroes**

Let’s talk numbers.

Europe needs hundreds of billions to stay in the research and innovation big leagues. The state-owned Bank of China is injecting one trillion yuan (€130 billion) into artificial intelligence. Stargate, a privately funded US-Japanese-Emirati initiative, intends to funnel \$500bn (€480bn) into AI infrastructure.

Even the European Commission has acknowledged the stakes, with president Ursula von der Leyen announcing a €200bn InvestAI scheme combining public and private investment.

The EU’s leadership clearly understands that funding research and innovation is not optional. We are witnessing not a disagreement on necessity but classic bureaucratic shape-shifting.

### **Old wine, new bottles**

In a communication published this month, the Commission set out the road to the next multiannual financial framework. Reading between the lines, this showed that research and innovation are still a top priority, but also that the names Horizon Europe and FP10 might soon be consigned to nostalgic PowerPoint slides.

The heading to section 5 delivers the communication’s take-home message in capital letters: “THE STATUS QUO IS NOT AN OPTION.”