

Designing the European Competitiveness Fund: Key elements and the FP10–ECF interface

Dated 25 February 2026

The European Commission’s proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework puts forward two central instruments to advance research, innovation, and competitiveness: the next Horizon Europe framework programme (FP10) and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF). FP10 is dedicated to fostering research and innovation (R&I), while the ECF focuses on accelerated development, implementation, and industrial competitiveness. Both programmes will play vital roles, and we fully support a strong FP10 alongside the creation of the ECF.

In this document, we set out our vision for the essential elements of the ECF, with particular emphasis on its interface with FP10, to ensure a cohesive and effective European funding landscape that maximises the impact of R&I to strengthen Europe’s competitiveness and prosperity.

This is a moment of urgency: Europe needs faster delivery and stronger capability-building at scale—not only downstream deployment, but also targeted acceleration of earlier-stage innovations and enabling capacities to close strategic gaps that could undermine Europe’s future competitiveness.

We support the creation of the ECF as part of a coherent European funding architecture that strengthens competitiveness while safeguarding excellence. Recalling our [joint amendments](#) to the FP10 regulation proposal, we are constructively in favour of the direction outlined in the Commission’s proposal for an ECF regulation. This is the right moment to act at a European scale, as political priorities are shifting towards strategic autonomy and competitiveness, with growing emphasis on speed, scale-up support, deployment, and simplification. At the same time, as stressed in our [cover note](#) to the FP10 amendments, we consider that the proposed ECF regulation is not suitable in its current form and requires substantial revision.

1. Our core position

- FP10 and the ECF must be two autonomous, complementary and expert-driven programmes, connected through a clear, structured interface that enables a seamless innovation and investment journey without undermining the distinct purpose of each programme.
- FP10 must remain as the EU's primary instrument for excellent, open and collaborative R&I, including interdisciplinary research and early-stage innovation.
- The ECF should be the EU's primary instrument for accelerating the translation of R&I into impact, through scaling, deployment, and the creation of strong enabling conditions (including ecosystems, talent, and infrastructure), with the ultimate goal of strengthening Europe's competitiveness and prosperity.
- Universities, research institutes and other research-performing organisations underpin this continuum (knowledge, infrastructure, partnerships, talent) and stand ready to mobilise their full capacity to strengthen Europe's future competitiveness and prosperity. They should be enabled to contribute to both programmes and—critically—across the FP10–ECF interface.

2. Why the interface is a system design requirement

With a strong and well-designed FP10–ECF connection:

- excellent research outcomes can be fully leveraged and translated into impact;
- innovation pathways become faster, more coherent, and predictable;
- beneficiaries benefit from seamless progression, continuity of evaluation, clear rules and sustained funding;
- Europe accelerates innovation, retains and attracts talent, and ultimately strengthens its global competitiveness.

However, the Commission's proposal does not seem to fully enable such a balanced and mutually reinforcing connection. Instead, it risks:

- creating a de facto hierarchy in which FP10 becomes subordinate to short-term priorities, thereby weakening excellence, breakthrough discoveries, disruptive innovation and long-term impact;
- importing ill-fitting constraints into frontier, collaborative and interdisciplinary research;

- imposing a single rulebook that simplifies processes for the Commission rather than reducing complexities for beneficiaries.

Connectivity and autonomy must be appropriately calibrated. This requires a well-designed interface between the programmes. It also requires clear legal safeguards in the ECF and FP10 regulations to prevent any direct or indirect subordination of FP10 priorities to short-term competitiveness objectives.

3. A practical model for the FP10–ECF interface

To offer a concrete and effective solution from the perspective of beneficiaries, we propose a structured interface model that safeguards programme autonomy while enabling predictable, low-friction connectivity across programme interface, governance, and operational implementation.

3.1 Programme interface: “bridge generation” and “bridge amplification”

We propose a clear functional distinction:

- **FP10 as the bridge generator:** producing excellent scientific knowledge, innovations and societal solutions, supporting talent, validated concepts and system-level insights.
- **ECF as the bridge amplifier:** accelerating development and uptake through scaling, deployment, ecosystem-building, skills, infrastructure and market creation.
- **complementarity across programmes:** connecting the programmes should allow building on FP10 results and enable genuinely non-linear interactions between the programmes, recognising that the innovation journey does not follow a linear process and may require both progression and targeted acceleration of earlier-stage technologies that fill strategic gaps and deliver competitive advantage.

This avoids rigid boundaries while providing policy clarity: distinct missions, connected pathways.

3.2 Governance interface: coordination without hierarchy

We support:

- the establishment of two Strategic Stakeholder Boards—composed of experts from various sectors, including researchers across appropriate disciplines—one for the ECF and one for FP10 Pillar II, reflecting distinct mandates, with a structured and regular interface;
- regular exchanges between the two Boards to support coherence, synergies and complementarity, including whole-of-challenge coherence (taking into account multi-disciplinary and multi-sector insights), avoiding siloed approaches;
- separate work programmes for FP10 and the ECF policy windows, that are mirrored in the themes and designed to ensure synergies, but no overlap-by-design.

With the Commission ensuring practical coordination, this governance model would enable alignment while safeguarding autonomy.

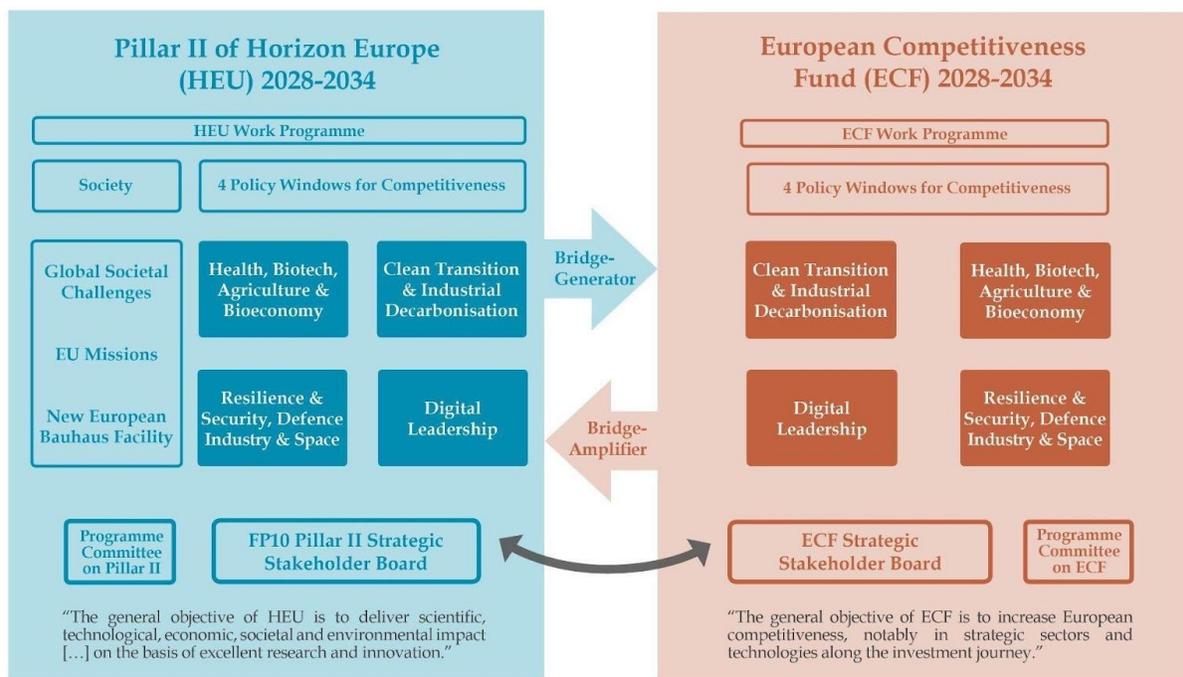


Figure 1. Overview of governance interface of two autonomous complementary programmes. This figure is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive of the full range of potential pathways and synergies.

3.3 Operational implementation: accelerated innovation pathways

To make the FP10–ECF connection work in practice, we support accelerated, predictable pathways that reduce time-to-impact and avoid “starting from scratch” dynamics and enable rapid support where strategic acceleration is required. This suggests the need to explore approaches for fast-track and continuous progression into a subsequent instrument, in which prior results and demonstrated impact are recognised, thereby reducing administrative burden. Any such approach must remain transparent and non-discriminatory: it should not crowd out open competition, and other applicants must continue to access ECF instruments through standard routes.

Keeping FP10 and the ECF as two separate programmes is what makes these pathways workable: it preserves FP10’s excellence-driven research logic and the ECF’s competitiveness logic, while the interface provides continuity between them without importing one programme’s rules and award criteria into the other.

What the interface should enable in practice:

- **progression without “reset”**: ventures and consortia-derived outcomes emerging from FP10 should be able to progress into the ECF and Startup & Scale-up instruments as they mature, without restarting from scratch at each stage.
- **ecosystem continuity**: innovation ecosystems anchored in universities, research institutes and other research-performing organisations should be supported as aligned innovation environments (testbeds, pilots, living labs, talent pipelines).
- **coherent entry points**: clear milestones and hand-over points, so applicants know when to move from FP10 to the ECF, and what evidence/assessments can be reused.

To illustrate how this interface could work in practice, we set out below possible operational elements for further consideration.

3.3.1 Transition approach enabling “plug-in” progression based on predefined milestones

One possible avenue for further consideration would be a transition approach enabling FP10 projects to plug into relevant ECF instruments once predefined milestones are reached, through an administrative plug-in procedure. Under such an approach, projects reaching clearly defined maturity or impact thresholds could rely, where appropriate, on verified FP10 results, prior evaluations and due-diligence elements, complemented by

the specific checks required by the receiving instrument. In practice, this would allow relevant elements from the FP10 project to be reused, and a targeted next-stage plan focused on scale-up and deployment to be submitted, rather than restarting from scratch. The intention would not be automatic funding or ring-fenced access, but a more proportionate progression process that reduces duplication while maintaining open competition and instrument-specific selection criteria, with prioritisation strictly conditional on predefined, transparent excellence and impact thresholds verified under FP10.

3.3.2 A clear interface with the Startup & Scale-up Fund

Separately, and specifically for Pillar 3 instruments, further reflection may also be useful to ensure a clear and coherent interface with the emerging Startup & Scale-up Fund, so that the overall landscape avoids duplication, gaps, or conflicting eligibility and assessment rules. In that context, complementary roles across the continuum could be articulated as follows:

- FP10: generate excellent knowledge and early-stage innovation; EIC provides dedicated support to de-risk breakthrough innovation and enable early scale-up pathways within FP10, where appropriate.
- ECF: provide follow-on capacity for accelerated development and uptake through ecosystem-level scaling, manufacturing and deployment, cross-border expansion, skills and talent development, and enabling infrastructure.
- Startup & Scale-up Fund (wherever legally located): support later-stage scaling and financing pathways and should be accessible to ventures emerging from collaborative research environments and consortia, not only isolated entrepreneurial pipelines.

4. Where the ECF can have the greatest impact

With the FP10–ECF interface clarified, the question becomes where the ECF can add the greatest value in practice.

4.1 What the ECF should be for

The core objective of the ECF must be to boost Europe's long-term competitiveness and prosperity. The ECF should be an innovation-driven competitiveness instrument, focused on turning Europe's strongest R&I into scale-up and deployment at European scale. It

should prioritise high-impact technological and other emerging innovations and targeted support for uptake, rather than broad, untargeted grants.

Therefore, the specific objectives of the ECF must be to:

- accelerate the wider deployment of the R&I outcomes that independent experts deem the most promising to boost Europe’s competitiveness and prosperity.
- strengthen Europe’s capacity to translate breakthrough knowledge and innovation into impact at scale, benefitting the economy and industry as well as society, through deployment pathways involving R&I organisations, companies, public authorities and other societal actors.

4.2 An emphasis on the most promising innovations

The ECF must stay relevant through technological and innovation shifts by enabling agile portfolio steering across strategic and emerging technologies, including those not yet foreseen in today’s policy windows. This requires:

- continuous technology foresight, supported by independent experts.
- the ability to re-prioritise support towards emerging high-potential technologies when expert insights warrant it.
- project selection based on transparent award criteria focused on quality and broad European value, avoiding politicised selection and ensuring investment is directed to the most promising innovations.
- broad European value must include societal uptake and trust dimensions when relevant (e.g. adoption and regulatory readiness), alongside technological, economic and societal impact.

4.3 Crisis-response agility

Europe may face shocks that require rapid reorientation of investment. Any emergency re-prioritisation procedure, including accelerated and targeted actions, must not bypass award criteria, to avoid locking in lower-quality projects with limited long-term impact. Where speed is needed, the Commission should prioritise agile project management—including, under exceptional circumstances, allowing beneficiaries to adapt the scope of existing projects to address urgent challenges.

4.4 Competitiveness anchored in Europe's social model

Competitiveness also depends on sustaining Europe's social model and its foundational values. The ECF should therefore ensure that deployment generates tangible societal value, by making certain that our collective efforts to close the innovation gap in advanced technologies aimed at increasing economic productivity translate into broad-based social benefits.

4.5 Reinforcing Europe's innovation ecosystems

As part of effectively supporting strategic technologies and sectors, the ECF must support Europe's broader innovation ecosystems—the partnerships, infrastructures and talent pipelines needed for knowledge valorisation: translating R&I results into scale-up and deployment delivering sustainable competitiveness now, at pace, and for the long term. Universities, research institutes and other research-performing organisations are key ecosystem anchors and are ready to reinforce their contributions in this role.

We call for ECF to support innovation ecosystems through:

- **strategic research & technology infrastructures:** support the construction and maintenance of shared infrastructures accessible across Europe covering the full continuum of the innovation journey, from research infrastructures to technological infrastructures, including testbeds, living labs, regulatory sandboxes and other facilities that bridge validated results to market introduction and deployment.
- **scale-up and internationalisation support:** help SMEs, start-ups and scale-ups expand and access international markets. It would be counterproductive to include this in FP10, where it is currently proposed.
- **connecting strong European hubs:** Incentivise collaboration between Europe's leading innovation ecosystems and hubs (cross-border "hub-to-hub" cooperation) to create scale effects, shared platforms and faster diffusion of capabilities, alongside continued support for capability-building where needed.

4.6 Reinforcing talent pipelines

Sustained competitiveness requires talents underpinned by relevant education and training systems and talent pipelines, especially in strategic and emerging sectors and technologies. The ECF can contribute to scaling up Europe's capacity to create, absorb

and exploit ground-breaking knowledge and innovations by investing in (interdisciplinary and transversal) skills development and allowing seamless talent flow, including through:

- support for industry–academia collaboration and other types of transnational consortia that strengthen the connectivity between research, innovation and education in strategic technologies and sectors by building on and upscaling initiatives, including the European Universities alliances.
- stimulating investment in lifelong learning for upskilling and reskilling, enabling people, organisations and companies to adopt and deploy emerging technologies and innovations.
- ensuring complementarity and additionality, including through co-financing, of other existing skills development programmes to address skills shortage in strategic technologies and sectors, without creating any pressure on the budgets, governance or [bottom-up character](#) of these programmes.

4.7 Building Europe’s competitiveness in an increasingly contested geopolitical context

Europe cannot build competitiveness and resilience in isolation. The ECF should therefore support trusted international cooperation, aligned with Europe’s economic security and strategic autonomy.

This implies:

- **risk-based economic security:** rules (including EU preference provisions) should be commensurate with the sensitivity of the technology, sector or value chain for Europe’s strategic autonomy. Avoid blanket exclusions; apply transparent, case-by-case risk assessment that includes the costs of non-cooperation.
- **meaningful association:** The ECF must be open to association of non-EU countries, especially with already close European industrial partners such as Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Association should entail participation on the same conditions as Member States and consultation in work programme preparation. Otherwise, association would not be attractive to the detriment of the European Union. Association to the ECF and FP10 should be addressed separately, with full respect for the integrity and governance of each programme.
- **EEA consistency:** Likewise, the EEA EFTA countries must be viewed as close partners with which the European Union must build up European competitiveness. Therefore, the ECF regulation must abide by, and refer to, the EEA Agreement



including Article 81, ensuring organisations and individuals from EEA EFTA countries have the same rights and obligations as those from Member States in EU-funded projects.

5. Our commitment

We call for an ECF that complements FP10's strengths and delivers real scale-up, acceleration and deployment capacity for Europe. This requires well-designed interfaces, transparent award criteria, and simplification that reduces friction for beneficiaries—so the ECF matches competitiveness ambition with delivery capacity. Universities, research institutes, and research-performing organisations are ready to work constructively and proactively with the European institutions and Member States to ensure this architecture is effective in practice and delivers tangible results for Europe's future.

6. Signatories

CESAER - <https://www.cesaer.org/>

Coimbra Group - <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/>

EUA - <https://www.eua.eu/>

EU-LIFE - <https://eu-life.eu/>

The Guild - <https://www.the-guild.eu/>

LERU - <https://www.leru.org/>

YERUN - <https://yerun.eu/>