



EU-LIFE Statement

The future of European research: 5 key actions for a competitive Europe

Amidst the announcement of Ursula von der Leyen's new College of Commissioners and their specific [missions](#), and the release of 3 pivotal reports – by [Letta, Draghi](#) and [Heitor Group](#) – informing politicians on the way forward for Europe's competitiveness, Research & Innovation (R&I) emerged as a core driver of Europe's prosperity.

Ursula von der Leyen said it clearly in her mission letter to Ekaterina Zaharieva: "*Europe's competitiveness (...) will require putting research and innovation, science and technology at the centre of our economy*". While the economic rationale resonates with politicians, there is also widespread acknowledgement that a resilient, robust and world-leading European R&I ecosystem is vital for a healthy, prosperous and sustainable future for the citizens and the planet. The realization that life science research is an important pillar for the future of humanity and critical for Europe's future is echoed by EU-LIFE institutes, as leading research performing organisations in the life sciences across Europe.

However, the devil is in the detail. How exactly R&I will be empowered to contribute to the competitiveness of European economy, improve health and impactfully address global challenges? As specifics of the European Commission's proposal for the next political and financial cycle continue to emerge, **EU-LIFE provides its reaction and points out 5 key actions for the European Commission, the European Council and the Member States to focus on regarding the future of European research.**

Be ambitious, yet realistic

As hinted by the reports and mission letters to the Commissioners-designate, Europe needs to aim for greater impact through its R&I programmes. This means to be ambitious and aim for longer-term, more impactful outcomes: more focus on research and more innovation, compared to the current programme which has a too strong focus on implementation.¹⁻³ At the same time, be realistic and acknowledge that the aims can only be achieved by raising the investment as clearly stated in Draghi's and Heitor Group's reports: double the investment on R&I - and ring-fence it through the whole financial cycle.^{1-3,6-8} However, doubling the investment to at least €220 billion would only be sufficient if the current R&I portfolio is maintained. If the portfolio increases, e.g. by including priorities such as industrial strategies and defence, the investment must further increase. As innovation stems from high-risk high-gain approaches, ensure the doubling of the investment on the European Research Council (ERC) and increase the budget for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA)⁴ and the European Innovation Council (EIC), particularly on the earlier stages of innovation⁵.

Empower the ecosystem

Be mindful on how scientific processes work and promote the ways that truly support a flourishing R&I ecosystem to face global challenges, in realistic timelines. As underlined in the reports as well as in the mission letters of the Commissioners-designate, invest in people and promote talent. This should be achieved through investing in rewarding research careers, effective knowledge transfer and cutting-edge

research infrastructure. Similarly, improve excellence of research institutions in a quality-based, open, equitable, fair and diverse way, be it through existing or new mechanisms such as Draghi's "ERC for institutions" idea.²⁻³ These elements will be key to embrace the fifth freedom put forward by Letta's report, creating freedom of movement of knowledge and innovation through meaningful collaboration between universities, research institutes and businesses. This is how R&I contributes to a strong European industrial strategy: by strengthening the European Research Area.

Ensure coherence

Ensure coherence of the R&I programme. Scattered, non-cohesive instruments hidden in between other strategic objectives of the EU will not provide the needed European leverage on competitiveness and innovation. Whereas the ERC and the EIC have been clearly recognized as centrepieces for the future of research by Draghi's report and Ursula von der Leyen's mission letters, a deafening silence was cast upon the essential MSCA programme, only attenuated by the Heitor group's report. Along with the ERC²⁻³ and the EIC⁵, the MSCA⁴ programme as a key instrument to attract, develop, and retain talent⁴ must remain a priority in the upcoming financial cycle. Importantly, all three must be grouped coherently in a R&I single umbrella that prioritises independent, expert-driven governance. However, do not fall into the trap of considering that these excellent programmes will deliver high impact without excellent research infrastructure and clear investment in bottom-up, discovery-driven and quality-driven collaborative research across Europe and globally.^{1,9-13}

Strike the right balance

Find a balance between the need to streamline priorities and the need to allow for discoveries to flourish in Europe. The reason why public and private funding should invest in R&I lays in its contribution to the competitiveness of the economy, a safer and more sustainable environment, the wellbeing and the prosperity of citizens. Contextualizing R&I, therefore, is important. However, this cannot mean an obsessed focus on directionality, i.e. top-down policies on how and when researchers and innovators shall develop new ideas and solutions. On the contrary, strong, resilient and impactful excellent research requires a clear bottom-up approach with researchers and innovators in the driving seat. Similarly, public and private investments must be balanced wisely. Make sure to invest public funding where the private sector cannot step in: the high risk/high reward parts of the R&I cycle.²⁻³ Industrial strategies should not overshadow the critical need to invest public funding in fundamental research.

Keep it simple

Revolutionise R&I by translating political recognition of its worth into financial investments, but do not pulverize the structure of European R&I programmes. Plan for an evolution of Horizon Europe that breaks siloes inside the programme and contributes further to the common effort of making a healthy and prosperous Europe.

An upgrade of Europe's competitiveness and R&I strategy is overdue and of great importance. EU-LIFE offers the expertise of its community and leadership to accompany the reform process.

Barcelona, 17 October 2024



Relevant EU-LIFE position papers referenced in the text

Horizon Europe strategy

¹ [EU-LIFE answer to the Public Consultation of EU R&I Programmes 2014 – 2027](#)

Future Framework Programme

³ [Towards FP10: EU-LIFE's guiding principles for FP10](#)

⁴ [Towards FP10: EU-LIFE reply to High-Level Group Consultation on HE and FP10](#)

⁵ [Towards FP10: EU-LIFE's vision for Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions \(MSCA\)](#)

⁶ [Towards FP10: EU-LIFE's vision for the European Innovation Council \(EIC\)](#)

Horizon Europe budget

⁷ [Reaction of EU-LIFE to the next framework programme budget agreement](#)

⁸ [Europe needs Research & Innovation to address the future: EU-LIFE reaction to the EU Council deal](#)

⁹ [Open letter to the EU Council and the European Parliament to prioritise R&I by committing an appropriate budget for Horizon Europe](#)

Research Infrastructures

¹⁰ [Call for action on small and medium research infrastructures in Europe](#)

Pillar II Health Cluster

¹¹ [How to ensure health safety in Europe: the vision of EU-LIFE research institutes](#)

¹² [EU-LIFE calls for impactful collaborative research in European Biomedicine](#)

Pillar II Cancer Mission

¹³ [Reaction of EU-LIFE: Cancer Mission work programme 2021-22](#)

¹⁴ [EU-LIFE recommendations to the Cancer Mission draft](#)

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About EU-LIFE

EU-LIFE is an alliance of research centres whose mission is to support and strengthen European research excellence (www.eu-life.eu). EU-LIFE members are leading research institutes in their countries and internationally renowned for producing excellent research, widely transferring knowledge and nurturing talent.

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