Brussels Messages

Europe can only deliver on its ambitions with research and innovation

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Conclusions from the science-policy conference **Towards the European Fifth Freedom and Global Competition: Voices from Science**, held on 29 June 2026 in Brussels, elaborated by the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, members of the Scientific Council of the European Research Council, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Slovak Academy of Sciences, the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, and the Cyprus Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts.

The following messages are addressed to EU institutions, Member States, Horizon Europe associated countries, and the entire European research and innovation community.

Preamble

Europe faces a critical moment. Negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028–2034 and FP10 will shape Europe's capacity to deliver on its promises. The message from the scientific community is clear: **research and innovation are not sectoral claims but key enablers for Europe's objectives**. To match the United States, China and other global competitors, Europe must combine its distinctive strengths with greater decisiveness. Europe must protect what works and reform what no longer delivers.

1. Treat research and innovation as strategic assets

Europe's future capacity to act depends on the knowledge it can generate, absorb and use. Research and innovation should therefore be treated as a core capability for Europe's economy and wealth, security and strategic autonomy, democratic life and global influence. This requires a shift in political framing: looking towards 2050, R&I should be seen as a foundation for most sectoral policies, not as one demand among many. If Europe underinvests in knowledge, it weakens its ability to act in response to internal and international developments.

2. Agree on a European Compact for Research and Innovation

Europe would benefit from a compact between the R&I community and key political stakeholders at EU level, in the Member States and in Horizon Europe associated countries. Corporate R&D actors should also be included. The purpose: align Europe's ambitions with conditions that allow discovery, talent and innovation to thrive, increasing European added value[1]. Member States should invest in national systems to **finally reach the 3% benchmark**, provide attractive research careers and co-own the European Research Area with the European Fifth Freedom[2] at its core. The scientific community should accept that the scientific system must evolve and improve, while playing a proactive part in the process of change.

3. Protect Europe's scientific fundamentals

Excellent science is one of the foundations of Europe's future. It creates new knowledge, methods, skills, applications and technologies whose full value often becomes visible only over time. Trusting and investing in the best ideas and teams must remain the guiding principle. Europe should define and protect the fundamental values and principles – first and foremost: the freedom of research – that allow scientific

[1] The measurable surplus created by pooling resources, talent, and cross-border expertise in research and innovation activities across Europe; also: the investment return on research and innovation expenditure.

[2] The European Fifth Freedom is the concept of free movement of research, innovation, knowledge, and education across the European Union. It should complement the four existing freedoms in the European Single Market: the free movement of goods, services, capital and people. First put forward in 2007 by Janez Potočnik, the concept gained high traction through the 2024 report "Much More than a Single Market" by Enrico Letta.

activity not merely to function, but to thrive. Europe needs focus and ambition; **reducing science to short-term delivery against predetermined targets would be a mistake**.

4. Keep FP10 strong and recognisable and protect it from budget cuts

FP10 should remain a strong, visible, trusted and autonomous Framework Programme, in line with the European Treaties. Its identity, budget and scientific logic should be protected within the next MFF, especially if the overall envelope becomes tighter than initially proposed. Weakening the instruments that generate insights, foster talent and sustain different forms of innovation and technological development would reduce Europe's long-term capacity in critical areas. Europe can be more strategic while protecting the **prerequisites of breakthrough science**. The European Competitiveness Fund, the European Defence Fund and other instruments have distinct purposes; where they have a thematic relationship with FP10, the interface should be transparent and well governed, balancing short-term goals with long-term stakes. FP10 should primarily **scale up on excellence** before considering the feasibility and sustainability of costly mass investments.

5. Preserve the independence and excellence of the ERC

The ERC is Europe's most recognised **global success story** in funding frontier research and attracting outstanding talent. Its independence, bottom-up logic and excellence-based evaluation are central to its reputation and must be preserved. **Frontier research** explores questions before their future relevance is fully visible, and regardless of whether they will ever be useful. New insights, technologies and applications often emerge from discoveries that were not initially designed as industrial, political or societal priorities. Maintaining investigator-driven research across all disciplines diversifies Europe's future options and reduces problematic dependencies, thus structurally strengthening its strategic autonomy. Giving innovators the **freedom to valorise** knowledge in many possible ways together with nurturing a **culture of experimentation and entrepreneurship** are key to the European pathway from idea to market.

6. Make R&I funding more responsive and less complex

Simplification – the reduction of administrative burden – should be experienced by beneficiaries, not only announced at policy level. Researchers and innovators should feel it in applications, evaluation, reporting, audit, project management and time-to-grant. Administrative burden affects participation, speed and trust, thus diminishing the attractiveness of R&I funding. It can discourage excellent applicants, young teams, new entrants and entrepreneurs. FP10 should therefore be based on **trust in R&I teams and user experience**. The scientific community should also identify where rules and practices can be simplified without weakening accountability. Funding calls should be designed in a responsive manner, with **greater flexibility and agility**, and always together with scientists and innovators.

7. Implement the European Fifth Freedom as soon as possible

The European Fifth Freedom should become an operational agenda for the circulation of knowledge, talent, data, infrastructures, technologies, capital and ideas. As an **integral part of an updated European Research Area**, it must visibly improve the daily work of researchers and innovators across borders. By the start of FP10, Europe must reduce concrete barriers: fragmented career systems, weak data interoperability, uneven infrastructure access, slow procurement, incompatible rules, limited mobility and cross-border innovation obstacles. For the scientific community, the Fifth Freedom should mean practical improvements: easier movement of people and ideas, better access to infrastructures, data and computational power, stronger links between universities, research organisations, companies and regions, and fewer administrative barriers, especially with Horizon Europe associated countries.

8. Focus on associated countries and on talent

Horizon Europe associated countries significantly contribute to Europe's scientific strength, talent base and global impact. They should be treated as trusted partners in strategic discussions and cooperation frameworks based on reciprocity. Europe's future depends on whether excellent researchers, innovators, founders and top professionals choose to come, stay, return and build their careers here. Talent policy is therefore central to R&I and competitiveness policy. "Choose Europe for Science" should become practical in all Member States with attractive careers, open recruitment, and cross-border mobility at its core. Europe should confidently aim for brain gain and brain circulation, while avoiding unmanaged brain drain.

9. Build a coherent European Knowledge System

Europe's scientific system has many **strong components**: universities and university alliances, research organisations, academies, infrastructure, R&D-intensive companies, start-ups, and high standards, democratic institutions and a social model providing predictability. These components should operate much more effectively as one integrated **European Knowledge System**. The ERA, the emerging European Innovation Area, FP10, the European Competitiveness Fund and related initiatives should be both coherent and complementary. The raison d'être of regulations and frameworks – old and new – should be assessed critically. Europe should back areas where it can lead globally, strengthen high-performing institutions, such as the ERC, and ecosystems, and scale up promising capacities to critical mass. Enabling both competitive and emerging R&I ecosystems in Europe to valorise their potential will require combined **targeted investments from different parts of the MFF**. European solidarity paired with national, regional and local commitment is key to achieving **more cohesion**.

10. Renew global scientific cooperation, science diplomacy and risk governance

Europe must take **research security** seriously: in dual-use technologies, foreign interference, strategic dependencies, data access, intellectual property and knowledge extraction. At the same time, **risk management should permit cooperation**: some fields should remain broadly open, especially much of fundamental science. Others may require safeguards. A limited number will require restrictions. The aim is tailored risk mitigation, not isolation. **Global scientific cooperation remains necessary**: AI governance, climate change, energy, migration, health, food systems, oceans, space and biodiversity cannot be addressed by any country or geography alone. Europe should develop a clearer external dimension to its R&I policy, with Horizon Europe associated countries as the first circle of cooperation and trusted partners worldwide as the second. **EU science diplomacy** should bridge the primacy of Member States in foreign and security policy, focusing on strategic joint goals and approaches.

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