



Informal Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Competitiveness (Research) 19 July 2021, Brdo Congress Centre

BACKGROUND PAPER – Session 1: *“European Research Area: Translation of shared European objectives to action on national level”*

Introduction

European societies are undergoing transformations that must be underpinned by research and innovation. The knowledge and solutions generated by researchers and innovators enable sustainable responses to societal challenges and aspirations in all policy areas. This natural role of science, research and innovation (R&I) in society became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and it is our responsibility as policy makers to make sure they will also spur the twin transitions towards climate neutrality and digital leadership. We can only do this together, by better synchronising, streamlining and harmonizing our actions on regional, national and EU level, across sectors and actors. This is the essence of the European Research Area.

How has this been done so far?

The European Research Area (ERA) has come a long way in the past two decades and achieved great successes, such as unprecedented researchers' mobility, world-class European Research Infrastructures, support to fundamental research through the European Research Council, an ever more advanced European Framework Programme for R&I and others – progress at the EU level has been continuous.

To support continuous improvement and to provide support to areas where progress has been slower, an ERA Roadmap was agreed in 2015, setting out common priorities. Understanding that the ERA can only be achieved through complementary action at the national level, a majority of EU Member States and Associated Countries subsequently adopted National ERA Roadmaps and Action Plans for ERA. However, their design and implementation, and hence their contribution to ERA, varied significantly. For some countries National ERA Roadmaps and Action Plans guided further strategic decisions and led to better alignment with ERA priorities, whilst in other countries they had a very limited impact and failed to mobilise sufficient commitment and political engagement. Often, a coordinated approach to implement these plans was missing; they were not integrated into national strategies and depended on personal commitment combined with very limited human resources to support their adoption¹. However, a key positive impact of National ERA Roadmaps and Action Plans is related to peer (policy) learning experience tied to an insight into the approach and work of Member States and Associated Countries and into the range of different measures

¹ See executive summary of the Study to evaluate the ERA policy framework / ERA monitoring mechanism carried out by a consortium led by the Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services (CSES) in the appendix.



utilized across Member States and Associated Countries on how to achieve a set of agreed priority actions.

What can we do better?

For improved societal resilience, a more proactive approach is needed in all policy areas. The mainstreaming or integration of R&I in sectoral policies is required to ensure that sectoral policies better contribute (through co-creation processes) to strategically orienting and programming the funding of new R&I, and therefore enable R&I activities to address sectoral policy goals more effectively. At the same time, systematic coordination of our actions, reforms and investments on all levels is required to achieve truly interoperable R&I systems across Europe, and suitable framework conditions in which researchers, technology and knowledge can circulate freely. Effective coordination at national level provides the essential foundations for success, and in turn demands that special attention be paid to the need for sufficient human resources to support design and implementation.

To accelerate policy coordination and reconceptualise the approach for reforming the European Research Area, a Pact for Research and Innovation in Europe (Pact for R&I) is being prepared in cooperation between the Commission and EU Member States, and in consultation with Associated Countries and R&I Stakeholders. The Pact for R&I lays out the first new building blocks of the renewed ERA: (1) **common values and principles** for R&I, (2) shared **priority areas for ERA Actions** and (3) **approaches for policy coordination, monitoring and for framing our ambitions** at EU and national levels in terms of policy actions, reforms and investments. We need to ensure that the ERA respects and builds upon national characteristics and strengths, whilst establishing and embedding common ERA priorities across Member States and Associated Countries.

Based on the Pact for R&I and building upon lessons learnt under previous ERA implementation phases, the new policy coordination approach could include, most notably, the following steps:

1. **Agreement on an ERA Policy Agenda**, providing a set of concrete, time-bound and actionable ERA Actions to achieve shared objectives based on priorities in the Pact for R&I;
2. **Coordination and mutual learning in planning national actions**, reforms and investments which contribute to the ERA Policy Agenda, and on demand support from the Commission in planning, for instance through the Policy Support Facility;
3. **Sharing of information on EU and national actions** implementing the ERA Policy Agenda and contributing to the principles and priorities of the Pact for R&I, through a digital ERA Policy Platform established by the Commission;



4. **Review by the Commission of policy coherence** of national and EU-level actions, as well as national reform measures, providing feedback through **bilateral dialogues**;
5. **Monitoring** of implementation through ERA governance bodies, the ERA Policy Platform and the new ERA monitoring framework, feeding into future revisions of the ERA Policy Agenda.

Questions for discussion:

- Is the new coordination and monitoring approach for ERA ambitious enough to shape and implement the revitalized ERA?
- What kind of support would you expect from the Commission in the various steps of the new approach, particularly in designing plans for national actions to contribute to achieving the New ERA?

Executive Summary

Independent evaluation of ERA Governance (2015-2020)²

The governance of ERA in the period 2015-2020 has realised a number of major successes and positive outcomes. The establishment and operation of dedicated bodies such as ERAC and its Standing Working Groups (SWGs) have strengthened trust between policy makers in the Member States (MS), Associated Countries (AC) and the Commission, and reinforced the sharing of information about ERA-relevant policy measures at EU and national level. This has facilitated the process of setting common priorities and the adoption of an ERA Roadmap in 2015. The ERA Roadmap was subsequently adopted by MS and AC and translated into national implementation and the alignment of ERA-related measures. As the overall study on the ERA policy framework demonstrates, the design of the National Action Plans (NAPs) and their impact on national policies varied greatly across countries. ERA governance at European level and at national level had a significant influence on this impact.

Notwithstanding the many success stories, at the European level, ERA governance showed some weaknesses and points that need further attention in the revitalised ERA. Four key issues in particular constitute key learning points in terms of what needs to happen to strengthen the effectiveness of the future ERA governance:

1. ***Increase high-level political buy-in and engagement with the ERA process.*** In many MS/AC, high-level buy-in of the ERA policy framework declined in 2015-2020, as the proximity of ERA activities to national R&I policy decision-making decreased and the visibility of ERA was often low in many countries;
2. ***Develop a more systemic and co-designed strategic planning process.*** In the 2015-2020 period, the strategic planning process for ERA was quite haphazard, demonstrating that the co-design process between the Commission and MS/AC still needed to evolve. Stakeholders identified a gap between setting common objectives at a strategic level and defining common operational actions. This led to different interpretations across the MS/AC in terms of what the ERA is aiming to achieve. This gap could increase if clear strategic directions are not elaborated for the priorities defined in the new ERA;
3. ***Ensure the involvement of a wider set of stakeholders*** representing R&I ecosystems in line with the substantial ambitions of the new ERA. In the 2015-2020 period, stakeholder involvement at EU level was predominantly centred on EU R&D stakeholders representing the academic research community. Industry and more applied-oriented research and innovation stakeholders became disengaged from the ERA debates; and
4. ***Address the unbalanced and in some cases limited implementation*** of ERA measures across EU Member States. While ERA implementation has been successful in a good number of MS/AC, progress in implementing structural and institutional reforms, increased R&I investments and the implementation of key ERA measures was often unsatisfactory in many countries. While there are many underlying reasons for this (discussed at length in the Final Report on the Evaluation of the ERA policy framework/EMM³), adaptations are needed to improve national and European governance processes that could contribute to accelerating progress on areas of ERA implementation where less progress has been made.

Table 1 below provides a concise summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the current ERA policy framework across a number of key functions in the ERA governance cycle. These focus mainly on the European level of ERA governance and the interaction with national governance structures and processes. Policy Brief 2 which focuses on evaluating the previous ERA Policy framework and on developing recommendations for the future policy framework contains a more comprehensive assessment of the findings from the study related to ERA governance.

² This executive summary covers a specific Task of the Study to evaluate the ERA policy framework/ ERA monitoring mechanism carried out by a consortium led by the Centre for Strategy & Evaluation Services (CSES)

³ ERA Monitoring Mechanism

Table 1 Summary of advantages and disadvantages of ERA governance (2015-2020) and potential adaptations for the new ERA

	Advantages	Disadvantages	Potential adaptations for the new ERA
Joint agenda setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trust building between MS/AC and COM in ERA governance bodies Voluntary nature leaving flexibility to adapt to national context Concrete achievements across priority areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High level policy buy-in was weak in most countries, hampering national implementation Dominant focus on measures for academic research system, also related to their over-representation in ERA governance/ stakeholder fora 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic involvement at Ministerial level Clearer vision and definition of what is to be achieved within each of the four new broad ERA priorities Multi-level governance approach with involvement of wider range of Ministries/ R&I funding agencies and wider R&I stakeholders in line with broader ERA priorities SWG-type thematic groups with more flexible configuration Synergies with broader policies and funding initiatives (twin transition, RIS, Recovery and Resilience Facility)
Transnational learning and incentivising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy learning important for dissemination of good practices SWGs vehicle for policy learning COM as facilitator (framework conditions, policy support & financial support) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MS with limited human capacity have difficulties to engage in all ERA activities Policy Support Facility (PSF) not aligned with NAP development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of Policy Support Facility (PSF) to be more aligned with the development and revision of NAPs Support of peer learning in SWGs-type groups or through use of new instruments in Horizon Europe
Translating the joint agenda into national implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NAPs provided clear framework of actions and priority-specific actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In some cases, NAPs not developed in coordination with relevant ministries/agencies and stakeholders and remained in 'inner circle' Timing between ERA and national policy cycles can hamper NAP development (lack of synchronisation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better and more common guidance for future NAPs, set up as iterative process with stakeholder involvement Stronger coordination in MS/AS between relevant Ministries/ funding agencies / regions by ERA priority or action Increase synergies with other EU policies and programmes (e.g. ESIFs/ smart specialisation, RRF) Support from PSF/ Technical Assistance for reforms Bilateral dialogues between MS and Commission
Monitoring and evaluation (EMM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EMM produced biennially Limited burden on MS/AC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No monitoring and data systems in some MS Low level of involvement of national actors Practically no link between monitoring and reorientation of implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic progress assessment at Ministerial Level Operational follow-up in European Semester Closer involvement of national stakeholders in EMM Technical support for national data-systems
Process of accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open Method of Coordination fits well with Partnership approach Peer pressure supports reforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apart from peer pressure in ERA bodies no accountability with consequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bilateral dialogues between MS and Commission Stronger alignment between monitoring, progress reporting, with periodic reviews of progress and revision of NAPs where necessary.
Stakeholder involvement across the cycle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong stakeholder involvement in some MS/AC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholder Forum not systematically used Focus on academic research community Disengaged industry and applied research oriented stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broader engagement of stakeholders in umbrella platform to avoid silos Engagement of relevant stakeholders on thematic areas in the new joint ERA Policy Agenda