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From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	ERAC Plenary Meeting, 13-14 February 2025, Brussels (BE) Summary report

Delegations will find in annex the summary report of the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) plenary meeting held in Brussels on 13-14 February 2025.

ERAC Plenary meeting, 13-14 February 2025, Brussels**Summary report**

On **13 and 14 February 2025**, the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) held a plenary meeting in Brussels, in the Council premises. It discussed an agenda of significant topics in the area of Research and Innovation (R&I). The meeting was chaired by the two Co-Chairs – the Commission Director-General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD), Marc Lemaître, and Director-General of Higher and Vocational Education, Science and Emancipation Feite Hofman (Netherlands). Feite Hofman took over from the outgoing co-Chair Director-General Barbara Weitgruber (Austria) whom the delegations warmly thanked for the work done during her term of office. Representatives of twelve countries associated to *Horizon Europe* also participated.

The co-Chairs gave updates on the recent Commission communications regarding the Competitiveness Compass and on the Road to the next Multiannual Financial Framework, with focus on the R&I aspects. A reflection on **new way of working for ERAC** was suggested and supported by the delegations, with invitation for input in order to find other ways to provide **fast strategic advice**.

Highlights:

- **Programmes and R&I priorities of the current and upcoming Presidencies**

The **Polish Presidency** reported about the ongoing activities on R&I under their term of office, with focus on the mid-term evaluation of *Horizon Europe* as well as on the Council Recommendation on the ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027. Also expected during the Polish Presidency are the adoption of the extension of the EURATOM Research and Training Programme 2026 and the finalisation of the work on Council conclusions on artificial intelligence in science. A reference was also made to the preparation of the Warsaw Declaration on the strategic role of the future Union Research & Innovation Framework Programme for EU competitiveness and beyond.

The upcoming **Danish Presidency's** priorities are under finalisation, with the ERAC plenary planned in October in Copenhagen, as well as conferences on artificial intelligence, science for diplomacy and innovation gap. DK also stressed the interest in forthcoming initiatives such as the EU startup and scaleup strategy, the EU strategy for life sciences and the EU strategy for research and technology infrastructures.

The future **Cypriot presidency** is preparing its programme, which should be announced in December 2025.

- **Closing the innovation gap and creating a ‘fifth freedom’ – from analysis to action**

ERAC held a **strategic discussion** as a follow-up of the statements made on the Draghi report at the previous ERAC meeting in Budapest on 24-25 October 2024. The Letta and Draghi reports highlight several pressing **challenges** faced by the EU, most prominently the issue of the fragmentation of the internal market and the persistent innovation gap, exemplified by the underinvestment in research and development (R&D). Investments currently stand at an EU average of 2.3% of GDP, below the 3% target established at the 2002 Barcelona European Council meeting, and palling compared to major global competitors such as the USA and China.

In the introduction to the debate made by the Dutch delegation, the objectives and the need for concrete proposals and actions were pointed out. It was recalled that the concept of a “fifth freedom” was pivotal as it aims to eliminate barriers to the free movement of knowledge and innovation, thereby fostering a more integrated and competitive European market.

During the discussion, there was a strong emphasis from the majority of delegations on the need for the EU to **reach the 3% GDP** target of R&D investments, including the significance of national commitments and the encouragement of **private investments** and **public-private cooperation** for achieving this goal. Delegations also underlined the importance of **coordinating and aligning EU and national R&I strategies**, policies and investments to mitigate **fragmentation** within EU R&I ecosystems. The future **ERA Act** was mentioned as a potentially important step for stronger and more binding coordination. There was a call for **focusing on strategic technologies and key disruptive areas**, closer **links between R&I and industry policy** and deep tech development to improve global competitiveness, whilst safeguarding the role of unconstrained and fundamental research. Several delegations also mentioned the need to **simplify procedures** and **reduce the administrative burden** to ensure fair and open competition while continuing to address innovation disparities within the EU (**regional dimension and internal innovation gap**).

Discussions also referred to **improving existing frameworks versus creating new ones** and strengthening **regional and international cooperation**, including the associated countries. It was proposed to **promote Europe** as the best place for researchers from all over the world and address barriers to researchers' **mobility**.

It was concluded to prepare a **proposal for a follow-up** of the discussion and to revert to the topic during the next plenaries. In this context, after the plenary meeting the Austrian delegation shared a contribution on the subject (document WK 2512/25 – ‘Leveraging the 90 % - Proposal for a new European Research & Innovation Framework using Art. 184 TFEU’).

- **Talents, skills, research careers – how to move forward**

The discussion looked at the next steps that have to be taken on the basis of the **Council Recommendation** on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents in Europe. In the strategic debate, introduced by the Commission, the focus was on issues regarding the most pressing **challenges affecting research careers** and hindering researchers' mobility (attracting and retaining talent, intersectoral and inter-European mobility, career progression and issues pertaining to specific research career phases). It also touched upon **EU-level solutions** to tackle these challenges (relevant examples or initiatives that have proven effective in enhancing working and employment conditions, i.e. policies that create attractive working and employment conditions, competitive remuneration packages and robust career pathways for researchers, shared criteria for recognition and reward of talent, targeted initiatives aimed at reskilling and upskilling the workforce). The question was also raised how can ERAC further **push this debate** (existing policies and tools to be further supported with enhanced policy coordination with a view to developing a framework compatible with a ‘fifth freedom’).

The most frequently raised issues by delegations were on enhancing **career development**, promoting **research assessment**, and the possibilities for more ambitious ways of facilitating **mobility**. Key points included the need for better mutual **recognition of qualifications** and support for researchers, stronger links between the **public and private** sectors, and addressing **financial and social security challenges**.

There was broad support for **enhancing mobility, streamlining career pathways** and ensuring **academic freedom**. ERAC and existing frameworks were seen as important for coordination, with next steps involving the further implementation of the Council Recommendation and the Mutual Learning Exercise outcomes. In this context, knowledge valorisation and inter-sectoral mobility appeared to be of high relevance.

Some upcoming new instruments, such as the ERA Act, were considered to have the potential to drive meaningful change in addressing these issues, along with the levelling up of already existing measures, and the focus on the **implementation of the 2023 Council recommendation** on talents.

- **Towards an ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe - update and discussion**

After the presentation by the Commission of an overview of its action in the context of the ERA Policy Agenda, as well as of the main conclusions and recommendations of the final report of the Expert Group on Technology Infrastructures, the Spanish delegation, as representative of the group of rapporteurs (CZ, ES, FR, IT, COM), delivered an update on the ongoing preparation of the **ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe**, including the mandate, calendar and next steps.

The rapporteurs have worked during January on formulating **specific questions** based on the ERAC mandate for an ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures (RIs & TIs), for comments and replies by the delegations. The objective is to have the ERAC Opinion adopted timely, in order to feed into the European Strategy on Research and Technology Infrastructures (tentative plan of DG RTD - July 2025).

The ensuing discussion reiterated the importance of the topics of **integration, funding** and **digital challenges**. There was broad agreement on ensuring high-quality infrastructures, aligning policies and optimising existing resources. The need of coordination with industry, SMEs and private sectors was emphasised. The delegations reiterated the existing difficulties in **separating the concepts** of technology infrastructures and research infrastructures at national level, and some asked for a clear demarcation between RIs and TIs in a common strategy. Suggestions were made for formalising **definitions, improving access, and prioritising financing**. Delegations underlined the importance of **including the input of the ERAC Opinion** in the future European Strategy.

Delegations supported the proposed main focus of the Opinion around two questions: (1) How to strengthen the ecosystem of cutting-edge facilities and services of RIs and TIs to optimise their role for scientific, technological and innovation excellence and competitiveness, including issues like accessibility, skills development, critical technologies and digitalisation? And (2) How to ensure a strategic governance that improves the prioritisation and pooling of investments in RIs and TIs?, with additional questions to be circulated to delegations. Delegations in this context stressed once more the importance of finetuning **definitions** and involving the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) in the process.

ERAC agreed on the calendar of the adoption of the Opinion:

- Final list of questions distributed to delegations by 24 February 2025;
- Replies by the delegation to the questionnaire by 24 March;
- A series of drafts and iterations with ERAC delegates between April and early May;
- Adoption at ERAC in Gdansk (more visibility) or alternatively, by silent procedure by 31 May.

- **Other items discussed**

The ERAC co-Chair representing the Commission gave an update on the role of R&I in **Ukraine's recovery**, followed by a presentation by the German delegation of the national R&I measures towards Ukraine. The representative of Ukraine, attending the plenary as an observer from an associated country, warmly thanked for the valuable support, which was confirmed once more.

Regarding the modalities of the preparation of the strategic debate on '**Capitalising on excellence and overcoming the innovation divide – challenges and opportunities for the next MFF cycle**', to be held during the ERAC plenary in June in Gdansk, the co-Chair for the Member States introduced the process. It was agreed that the Commission should provide a report with statistical data by **15 April**, and Member States should provide input by **15 May 2025**.

- **Next meetings:** the next ERAC plenaries will take place on **12-13 June 2025 in Gdansk**, and on **16-17 October 2025 in Copenhagen**.