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From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations
Subject: ERAC Plenary Meeting, 26 June 2024, 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 26 June 2024.

ERAC Plenary meeting, 26 June 2024, Brussels

Summary report

On 26 June 2024, the European Research Area and Innovation Committee (ERAC) held a plenary meeting in Brussels, in the Council premises. It discussed an agenda packed with substantial topics in the area of Research and Innovation (R&I) and adopted two highly **important Opinions**. The meeting was chaired by the two Co-Chairs – the Commission Director-General for Research and Innovation, Marc Lemaître, and Director-General Barbara Weitgruber (Austria). Representatives of seven countries associated to Horizon Europe also participated.

Highlights:

- **Programmes and priorities of the current and upcoming Presidencies of the Council on Research and Innovation (R&I):**

The Belgian Presidency reported about the **outcome** of R&I activities on the eve of the end of their Presidency term (inter alia, approved Council Conclusions on knowledge valorisation and Council Conclusions on the ex-post evaluation of Horizon 2020, and adopted Council Recommendation on research security and Amendment of EuroHPC Council Regulation (2021/1173) in order to include an artificial intelligence (AI) perspective and facilitate access for Small and Medium-sized enterprises and AI start-ups; ministerial policy debate on advanced materials; several conferences and events).

The next Hungarian and Polish Presidencies presented their R&I programmes and planned **priority files** (inter alia, HU: Council Conclusions on strengthening the competitiveness of the EU and overcoming the fragmentation of the European Research Area (ERA) based on the experiences of the implementation of the ERA Policy Agenda (2022-2024); Council Conclusions on the Commission's Communication on Advanced Materials; Council Conclusions on the Partnership for Research and Innovation on sustainable natural resources, the food system and the deployment of the bioeconomy (BIOEAST Partnership)); PL: Council Conclusions on the mid-term evaluation of Horizon Europe; Council Recommendation on the ERA Policy Agenda for 2025-2027; adoption of the extension of the

EURATOM nuclear research program 2025-2027; revised European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) Regulation on research infrastructures).

- **ERAC Opinion on ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 (EPA):** ERAC delegates unanimously supported the draft Opinion on EPA (2025-2027), prepared on the basis of the previous ERAC strategic discussions and presented by the rapporteurs - BE, ES and DE delegations, whose work was highly appreciated. They welcomed the recommendation for a **concise, simple, impactful and ambitious EPA**, and confirmed, *inter alia*, their will to maintain an ambitious validation threshold and broad political support for the approval for each future ERA policy action, based on the existing threshold of 50% of Member States. In this regard, the work of the ERA Forum should now focus on the content of the ERA proposals, which should cover expectations from Member States, outlines of 3-year workplans (when appropriate) and actionable titles. ERAC delegates also discussed and approved some additional proposals from the Commission and delegations, *inter alia* a **survey** on the relevance and viability of the proposed ERA actions for individual Member States, Associated Countries and stakeholders; as well as a reminder on the Commission's **right of initiative**. The survey, to be conducted by the ERA Forum and which should help in reaching the European R&I ambitions, was considered a necessary step in guaranteeing the success and ambition of the EPA and by which each Member State and Associated Country will show its commitment to participate in each action. Seeing that ERAC asks for the survey, ERAC is interested in the results of the survey and it looks forward to these being brought back to ERAC for reflection.

The amended proposal for ERAC Opinion on ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 was **unanimously adopted** and published as Council document 11681/24.

This Opinion, together with relevant elements of the upcoming Council Conclusions of the Hungarian Presidency regarding the current EPA (2022-2024) and the outcome of the ERA conference in September will represent the main contributions from Member States, Associated Countries and stakeholders towards the Commission on the future ERA Policy Agenda (2025-2027).

- **ERAC Opinion on Guidance for the next Framework Programme on R&I (FP10):** The NL and PL delegations - rapporteurs and co-Chairs of the Task Force in charge to prepare the Opinion – presented the final draft, result of intense and longstanding efforts and several plenary discussions. The Task Force had extensive discussions between most Member States, EEA EFTA States and the European Commission, informed by reflections from European stakeholders, the OECD, the European Innovation Council (EIC), the European Research Council (ERC), and the ex-post evaluation of Horizon 2020 with the consultation process supporting this evaluation and the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe.

After a short exchange, when the delegates highly appreciated the work of the rapporteurs and the Task Force, the ERAC Opinion was **adopted**, with one delegation being not able to fully support the text. The co-Chair stressed that this delegation might come back to it and join in the future.

This ERAC Opinion is a contribution to the deliberations on the future direction of the Union's Framework Programmes for R&I, without pre-empting the negotiations on FP10 and/or the Multi-annual Financial Framework as a whole.

The adopted ERAC Opinion was published as Council document 11678/24.

- **Research and Innovation for Europe's competitiveness:** ERAC held an exchange of views on the basis of a background paper prepared by the Commission (document 10681/24). Delegates' discussion was with focus on three main questions, namely on (1) the measures that have been effective to secure higher national public R&D budgets (e.g. definition of investment targets, mobilization of EU funding for R&D) and the measures that seem to have been most effective to support stronger private R&D investments (e.g. provision of grants, tax incentives, financial instruments for business R&D, structural reforms); (2) at EU level, how can the ERA Policy Agenda and New European Innovation Agenda (NEIA) contribute to boost competitiveness and fulfil the “fifth freedom”; and (3) how can the Commission help/support Member States in the process towards competitiveness and the “fifth freedom”.

The delegations shared information on their national experiences and best practices, including on the levels on expenditure on R&I (3% GDP target, confirmed by EUCO), globally supporting the Letta report's recommendation on focus on R&I as collective priority for the Union.

With the “**fifth freedom**” as leitmotiv of the discussion, seen as critical component of the new competitiveness deal, they considered that in the field of R&I no Treaty change would be necessary for it. Public policies should be better designed to encourage private investments and consistency between all incentives should be ensured, acknowledging the diversity of R&I systems and addressing the current shortcomings. RRF has an important role and leverage effect. The discussion referred to the necessary holistic approach for national and EU efforts and collaboration across all levels, the use of European Semester for R&I and the need to continue establishing understanding on the link between investment of R&I and competitiveness for politicians. ERA and NEIA are crucial tools to achieve objectives and provide a common framework. The Commission co-Chair shared the views expressed by the delegations on the need for more both public and private efforts, and noted that private investments were very dependent on the overall economic structure. He also stressed that it was the right moment now to convince on the importance of R&I for competitiveness in the Semester exercise, and called for help with narrative, evidence and data. He informed on some imminent Commission actions, as the upcoming biannual Science, Research and Innovation Performance of the EU report (SRIP) and the work of the European Research Council Executive Agency’s (ERCEA) Expert Group on innovation divide.

- **Research infrastructures as strategic investments:** On the basis of a discussion note prepared by the Commission (document 10685/24), ERAC held an exchange of views, with focus on the issues regarding the empowering of research infrastructures as strategic assets; reinforcing transnational access to research infrastructures and adapting the new user communities; and making full use of digital technologies, notably AI. Delegations confirmed the importance of the research infrastructures, advocated a holistic approach while taking care of the different needs of different types of research infrastructures (e.g. single sited and distributed ones). Furthermore, they referred to the need for enhanced and sustainable funding and governance and a possible long-term infrastructure strategy that would also look into the research infrastructure governance taking into account the current challenges. It was suggested to reflect on **preparing an ERAC Opinion** on the matter. It was agreed that the Steering Board should reflect and discuss this proposal and possibly include it in the next update of the ERAC Work Programme.

- The Commission informed ERAC delegates about the ongoing support measures for **Ukraine**, namely the Policy Support Facility mobilised to develop Ukraine R&I infrastructure and Coordination and Support Actions launched to associate Ukraine to Cities Mission.
- **Next meetings:**
ERAC Steering Board: 9 July 2024;
ERAC plenary: 24-25 October, Budapest.