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NOTE

From:	General Secretariat of the Council
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Towards an ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe

European Research and Innovation Area Committee (ERAC) delegations will find attached a Background Note on the discussion “Towards an ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe,” prepared by the rapporteurs (FR, ES, IT and CZ delegations and the Commission), with a view to the ERAC meeting on 13-14 February 2025.

Towards an ERAC Opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe

Update and discussion

Research & technology infrastructures provide scientific & technological capacities essential for the excellence and competitiveness of European research, innovation, and industrial ecosystems.

The European ecosystem of research infrastructures developed as a backbone of the European Research Area (ERA) since 2000 with the strategic contribution of the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI)¹, which renewed its vision in its ESFRI White Paper 2020². The activities at EU level on research infrastructures³ have notably included specific funding in successive Framework Programmes, including EU support to transnational access and to the development and implementation of the ESFRI roadmap, complementing the core funding from EU Member States and associated countries and other funds such as European Regional Development Fund, as well as a dedicated Council Regulation for a legal framework European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). The new ERA confirmed research infrastructures as a priority for joint action with strong support from Member States and associated countries under the ERA Policy Agenda 2022-2024 (Action 8).

The attention to technology infrastructures⁴ (TIs) is more recent. The EU began working on TIs with a 2015 action plan aimed at enhancing SME access to Key Enabling Technologies (KETs). In 2019, the European Commission defined TIs and identified the main challenges facing such infrastructures in a dedicated Staff Working Document⁵. In 2020, the new ERA elevated TIs place on the agenda, emphasising their synergy with RIs in addressing regional and industrial sectoral needs. The ERA Policy Agenda (Action 12) gives a mandate to the European Commission, together with Member States and stakeholders, to “Develop a coordination mechanism to provide industry with the technology infrastructures needed to test, validate and upscale innovations”. As part of the implementation of ERA Action 12, the Commission established an expert group on TIs, which started its work in February 2024 and has now published its final report.

The recent Council Conclusions on ‘Strengthening the competitiveness of the EU, reinforcing the European Research Area (ERA) and overcoming its fragmentation’⁶ acknowledge the significance of European Research and Technology Infrastructures as strategic assets to boost the

¹ <https://www.esfri.eu/>

² MAKING SCIENCE HAPPEN - A new ambition for Research Infrastructures in the European Research Area - ESFRI WHITE PAPER 2020 <https://www.esfri.eu/esfri-white-paper>

³ [European Research Infrastructures - European Commission](#)

⁴ [Technology Infrastructures - European Commission](#)

⁵ [Technology infrastructures - Publications Office of the EU](#)

⁶ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16179-2024-INIT/en/pdf>

Union's R&I capacity. They follow Council Conclusions dedicated to research infrastructures in 2022⁷ and political Declarations at ministerial level⁸.

The Commission has started to work on a common strategy on research and technology infrastructures including possible actions. Ideally, the strategy should be adopted by the Commission mid-2025 so that it supports the early discussion on FP10.

Research infrastructures as strategic investments were discussed at the ERAC meeting of 26 June 2024 and delegations agreed on the need for a long-term strategy and a holistic approach. Technology infrastructures were discussed at the ERAC meeting of 24 October 2024 and delegations acknowledged the importance of working at EU level and, consistent with the June meeting, called to consider an impact-driven broader ecosystem notably with research infrastructures with an efficient and coherent governance, streamlined funding mechanisms and user-need based. Following up on these two ERAC meetings, we are now moving to a next step by preparing an ERAC opinion on research and technology infrastructures in Europe.

For this purpose, the Commission drafted a mandate (Annex), which was approved by the ERAC Steering Board, containing the main outcomes of the two relevant mentioned ERAC meetings, proposing to frame the ERAC opinion around two main questions, and indicating the process towards this ERAC opinion. Colleagues from the FR, ES, IT and CZ ERAC delegations suggested the experts from their countries to work as rapporteurs, together with the Commission, on the new ERAC Opinion, according to the approved mandate.

The group of rapporteurs had a first meeting on 15 January 2025 and is proposing the following iterative approach and timeline:

- The group is meeting on a weekly basis. Given that the questions of the mandate (in annex) are very broad, the group will identify more specific questions, as a basis for a preliminary consultation of ERAC delegates, which shall be communicated by the SGC.
- This preliminary consultation will be launched early February until end of February.
- Based on this initial consultation, the group will prepare a first draft of an ERAC opinion by end of March. The draft opinion should not exceed 2-3 pages.
- The ERAC delegates will be asked to give a first round of comments on the draft opinion by mid-April.
- A second round of comments on a revised draft opinion will be asked by early May.
- The final draft will be circulated by mid-May for written approval by end of May.

Following the ERAC opinion, the Commission will finalise the strategy on RTIs with a plan for a Communication adopted in July 2025, allowing possible pilot actions under Horizon Europe and feeding the early discussions on FP10. This timeline would also allow to take stock of the

⁷ [Research infrastructures: Council adopts conclusions - Consilium](#)

⁸ [Tenerife-Declaration.pdf](#)

Communication in view of a conference on research and technology infrastructures planned in October 2025 in Denmark, and ahead of decisions on the next financial cycle.

The group of rapporteurs will make an update to the ERAC delegations on the ongoing preparation of the ERAC opinion on the plenary meeting of 13-14 of February and open the floor for discussion. As a contribution to the scene setter, the Commission will present the main conclusions and recommendations of the final report of the Expert Group on Technology Infrastructures.

ERAC Opinion on RTIs in Europe: mandate to the group of editors

Research infrastructures (RIs) as strategic investments were discussed at the ERAC meeting of 26 June 2024. Member States agreed with the need for a long-term strategy and a holistic approach to strengthen an ecosystem of cutting-edge facilities and services in complementarity with other infrastructures, highlighting services both for research and for industrial users. They noted that sustainable funding relies on improving synergies of funding sources, ranging from regional and national to European level and extending into sectoral and deployment programmes, with an increased use of co-financing and co-funding mechanisms. ERAC members also highlighted the need for a strategic governance, building on the European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI) landscape analysis, monitoring and roadmap, and optimising the EU added value of European level funding.

A strategic debate on **technology infrastructures** (TIs) was held at the ERAC meeting of 24-25 October 2024, where the Member States acknowledged the importance of working at EU level on TIs, which support innovation, technology development and industrial competitiveness. They also underlined the need to consider the broader ecosystem context, notably with RIs. ERAC members called for a transparent coordination mechanism for TIs activities, including MS, the EC and stakeholders, with clear coordination roles, capable of initiating and steering strategic investments, establishing common standards and developing guidelines. They also highlighted the importance to align the pilot areas for TIs with the EU priorities, the societal challenges and the smart specialisation strategies, while taking stock of emerging technologies, existing capabilities and the needs of TIs users, especially SMEs.

In this context, it is proposed to frame the ERAC opinion around **two main 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?

This could also cover other topics considering the different landscapes of RIs and TIs at EU level and their complementarity (the ‘supply’ side), as well as the needs of the users (the ‘demand’ side).

2. How to ensure a strategic **governance** that improves the **prioritisation** and pooling of **investments** in RIs and TIs?

This could consider aspects such as the respective roles of Member States, EC and RTIs stakeholders, existing fora such as ESFRI, and sectoral initiatives such as Partnerships, strategic alignment with key EU priorities and tools to monitor the prioritisation and pooling of investments in RIs and TIs.

A small group of editors from the Commission and two Member States should prepare the ERAC opinion in view of an adoption by **written procedure by the end of May 2025**. The editors should consult ERAC delegations and organise online meetings as needed for that purpose. The editors should provide an oral or written **update on the progress** for the ERAC plenary meeting in **February 2024** and discuss the next steps.
