



**European Committee  
of the Regions**

**SEDEC-VII/010**

**142nd plenary session, 3, 4 and 5 February 2021**

## **OPINION**

### **A new European Research Area (ERA) for research and innovation**

#### **THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

- welcomes the specific reference to the European Committee of the Regions as a key player in the ERA, especially through the Knowledge Exchange Platform and the *Science Meets Regions* initiative;
- stresses that this communication is only a starting point, asks to be involved in the preparation of the new steps as the adoption of a "pact for research and innovation"; considers that the full involvement of cities and regions in the "ERA Forum for Transition" is essential;
- regrets that it has not been possible to propose a fresh approach for a European Education and Research Area; points to the need for a cross-cutting approach to these issues;
- considers that a new ERA should be an opportunity to fully recognise the role of smart specialisations and their collective and entrepreneurial process as one of the cornerstones of current and future European research and innovation performance; stresses the importance of facilitating trans-regional cooperation;
- calls for emphasises the excellence of impacts, which is closely linked to collaboration between science and innovation ecosystems, particularly local and regional ones, and the excellence of ecosystems themselves;
- warmly supports the introduction of the "ERA hub" as an opportunity to give institutional recognition and a tangible form to the concept of regional ecosystems and innovation hubs, and to fully recognise a place-based approach to science and innovation;
- considers that these ERA hubs should be supported directly by the EU, including in financial terms, and that recognition of these ERA hubs can be an important points of support for achieving the European Union's objectives and for implementing the relevant policies;
- hopes that at least 50 to 100 sites in Europe can be recognised as ERA hubs and that this network will be open to a broad range of participants, in particular to emerging ecosystems in the EU-13 and the most disadvantaged regions;
- stresses that the network of ERA hubs could become an excellent framework to boost the emergence of collective research and innovation projects, combining several regional ecosystems and innovation hubs in a bottom-up approach;
- warns of the consequences of the current crises on the most fragile and hardest-hit regions; notes that the ERA is fragmented: agrees that progress on implementation of the ERA has slowed down and that there are still large disparities between countries and regions; considers that these observations are widely shared and oft repeated, but that no political lessons have been drawn from them.

Rapporteur:

Christophe Clergeau (FR/PES), Member of the Pays-de-la-Loire Regional Council

Reference document

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – A new European Research Area (ERA) for research and innovation

COM(2020) 628 final

## **Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions – A new European Research Area (ERA) for research and innovation**

### **I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. points to the conclusions of its opinion on Horizon Europe: Framework Programme 9 for Research and Innovation, which:
  - "calls for genuine account to be taken of the excellence to be found throughout the EU's Member States and regions in order to improve the level of scientific excellence in Europe as a whole and not in just a few large regions and cities";
  - "is disappointed to note the ongoing refusal to recognise the territorial roots of scientific excellence [and] the contribution of regional ecosystems and innovation hubs to the EU's dynamics";
  - "calls strongly for the full participation of local and regional authorities in the strategic planning exercise [...] and for smart specialisation strategies to be taken into account in this context";
  - "believes that territorial impacts should be recognised as integral components of the impact concept when it comes to evaluating the programme and projects";
2. welcomes the opportunity offered by this communication to put forward a coherent strategy for involving all stakeholders in strengthening Europe's research and innovation work; notes, however, the lack of balance in the communication, which focuses too much on the European Research Area (ERA) as a continuation of Horizon Europe, at the expense of the other aspects to be taken into account;
3. supports the ambitious initiatives set out in the communication, which will help equip Europe to meet its global challenges and which could transform the research landscape and strengthen Europe through the development of knowledge. Research and innovation (R&I) must play a key role in supporting the environmental, digital, social and economic transitions facing Europe. These policies should also help Europe overcome the challenge of COVID-19, as demonstrated by the ERAvsCorona Action Plan now running;
4. welcomes the new emphasis the Commission places on engaging citizens in research and innovation matters, calls for such engagement, while respecting scientific freedom, to concern all stages of framing, implementing and monitoring these policies, not being restricted to "guiding" or "informing" citizens, who – on the contrary – want to play an active part; considers that this engagement should firstly be organised at local level, and that the cities and regions are key players in facilitating and developing it, and play an important role in aligning research and innovation with the values, needs and expectations of society. In this way, co-design and co-responsibility for the process and results of research and innovation by regional and local players increase the uptake and acceptability of research and innovation by society. Towns and regions also provide important resources to make the broader Open Science Agenda operational, as this is essential to developing a successful European Research Area;

5. welcomes the Commission's commitment to reach 3% of GDP spent on R&D and to set a target of 1.25% for the public effort in 2030 (compared to the current 0.81%), but wonders how these targets can be achieved, given that the recovery plan does not provide for substantial spending on R&I and, for example, moves away from the EU4Health programme proposed by the Commission;
6. regrets that, although there is a Commissioner with a single portfolio covering research, innovation, training and youth policies, it has not been possible to propose a fresh approach for a European Education and Research Area; points to the need for a cross-cutting approach to these issues, which are closely linked to regional policies; hopes that the Communication on the global approach to research, innovation, education and youth, announced by the Commission in its work programme for 2021, will move in this direction;
7. stresses that this communication is only a starting point, which should lead, firstly, to further tangible actions and, secondly, to the adoption of a "pact for research and innovation"; asks to be involved in the preparation of these new steps; calls for this pact to be an opportunity to protect academic and university freedoms, the freedom of expression of lecturers, researchers, students and intellectuals, as well as their freedom of movement, not only within the Union, but also between the Union and all of our partner countries; considers in this regard that international cooperation policy within the ERA must comply with these same principles and is concerned by the rapid erosion of academic freedoms in many countries around the world;
8. points out that proper monitoring and assessment of innovation and research is essential for effective policy implementation. Refers, in this regard, to the opinion on the Regional Innovation Scoreboard and its impact in regional place-based policies, which states that the RIS is an essential tool for comparing changes in the performance of regional innovation policies, and that its influence on regional decision-making should be boosted to improve regional innovation ecosystems and smart specialisation;
9. welcomes the progress made in this communication, which puts forward a more strategic vision of the partnership between the Commission and the Member States, with the involvement of regional governments, which are often responsible for promoting these policies, a more integrated approach to research and innovation issues, and a better focus on the objectives that these policies must meet, as well as their impact on our societies; also welcomes the fact that the communication explores an approach based on a more inclusive, multi-level form of governance, that with the "ERA hubs" it proposes a concept that gives greater recognition to the roles of regional ecosystems and innovation hubs, that it boosts measures for coordination with aspects of higher education, digital education and skills, and that it commits to a more inclusive European Research Area, facilitating access to scientific excellence and the sharing of results;
10. highlights the importance of developing the economy for sharing and the movement of knowledge. The concepts and practices of dissemination of the results – ideas, insights, methodologies, prototypes, inventions, and other similar knowledge outcomes – of research and innovation programmes and projects should be financed so that they are rediscovered, accessed, and applied to active use throughout Europe;

11. supports the proposal to develop inclusive gender equality plans in order to promote, in the field of R&I, the gender equality advocated by the EU, and calls for cities and regions to be involved. Points out here that the actions of the new ERA include Action 12, on gender equality, which aims to boost European R&I potential, and stresses the need to close gender gaps in the context of the digital transition and innovation, encouraging more women into STEAM and ICT courses and jobs;
12. welcomes in particular the specific reference to the European Committee of the Regions as a key player in the ERA, especially through the Knowledge Exchange Platform and the *Science Meets Regions* initiative;
13. objects, however, to a governance approach that still centres on the relationship between the Commission and the Member States, which usually makes cities and regions recipients of public policy rather than active participants in it, and which leaves the Member States to deal with local and regional issues; therefore once again calls for the full and complete recognition of cities and regions as stakeholders to be mobilised in designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating European research and innovation policies, in keeping with the principle of "active subsidiarity"<sup>1</sup>;

#### A new approach for the European Research Area

14. stresses the importance of the positions set out by the European Research Area Committee (ERAC)<sup>2</sup> (17/12/2019) and by ERRIN<sup>3</sup>, and advocates a new approach for the ERA that will move:
  - drawing on Horizon Europe's scientific excellence-based approach, to an approach that combines excellence in research with knowledge to build, in particular, European leadership with sustainable growth and processes that will bring about a transition to new models;
  - from research strategies to knowledge-based strategies, with an integrated approach to research, innovation, education and skills, involving a wide range of stakeholders – universities, industry, different levels of the public sector, citizens and civil society;
  - from the European Framework Programme and autonomous national research policies to a truly multi-level steering framework and full recognition of the local ties of R&I in cities and regions;
15. urges that stronger emphasis be put on the relationship between research and business while recognising the key role of local and regional authorities in developing entrepreneurial environments and facilitating connections for knowledge transfer: sponsorship of fundamental

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<sup>1</sup> COM(2018) 703.

<sup>2</sup> ERAC Opinion on the future of the European Research Area (<https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-1201-2020-INIT/en/pdf> in English).

<sup>3</sup> ERRIN Recommendations for the future of the European Research Area ([https://errin.eu/system/files/2020-06/200608%20ERRIN\\_recommendations\\_for\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_the\\_European\\_Research\\_Area\\_approved.pdf](https://errin.eu/system/files/2020-06/200608%20ERRIN_recommendations_for_the_future_of_the_European_Research_Area_approved.pdf)).

research by companies, promotion of science entrepreneurship, while adhering to transparency requirements, private investment, support for companies in developing their innovation;

16. calls for greater clarity, in relation to the establishment of the "ERA Talent Platform", on how the Commission intends to: a) ensure continuity with the EURAXESS initiative and the Human Resources Strategy for Researchers (HRS4R), which have been developed up to now to facilitate the mobility of researchers and their career development in order to contribute to the establishment of a single market for knowledge, research and innovation and b) encourage the recognition of research staff in these initiatives and promote mechanisms to support regions committed to attracting and retaining talent, the HRS4R strategy and to support the needs of research institutions and staff;
17. emphasises the need for the work to involve good local/regional coordination and to provide instruments enabling local or regional authorities to play a leading role, such as the Policy Support Facility, synergies between regional policy and Horizon Europe, and the Seal of Excellence. It is essential to facilitate access to information and data to enhance synergies and complementarities between European funds and allow different authorities to work in a more coordinated way;
18. calls for clarification of the concept of excellence by clearly distinguishing between excellence in science, the excellence of impacts, which is closely linked to collaboration between science and innovation ecosystems, particularly local and regional ones, and the excellence of ecosystems themselves, through their specific areas of scientific excellence, as well as their ability to provide strategy and coordination<sup>4</sup>;
19. proposes, while fully reiterating the importance of measures to support scientific excellence in the framework of Horizon Europe, in particular, to fully recognise as a complementary objective of the ERA, the availability in all EU cities and regions of high-quality science that can be harnessed to boost innovation and help society and businesses meet the challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals and deal with today's crises;
20. welcomes the European Commission's facilitation of investments and reforms towards the EU's priorities, especially the green and digital transformations, which have become essential after the COVID-19 crisis;
21. calls for the ERA to promote the links to be developed between strategies for smart specialisation, ERA priorities and their overall implementation; also calls for the ERA to contribute to a better balance between, on the one hand, the indispensable scientific excellence and, on the other hand, the urgent need to close the research and innovation performance gap between states, regions and cities in the EU;

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<sup>4</sup> According to the European University Association, "Excellence is not limited to highly cited publications but needs to be based on the many and diverse contributions of the research community, notably including Open Science practices, citizen engagement, and impact on society."

## ERA, smart specialisations and regional policy

22. considers that a new ERA should be an opportunity to fully recognise the role of smart specialisations and their collective and entrepreneurial process as one of the cornerstones of current and future European research and innovation performance; stresses that smart specialisations bring together local and regional authorities, research institutions, the private sector and civil society and help regions to gain competitive advantage, stimulate private investment and create jobs; also underlines the key role of the regions in the European smart specialisation strategy and the need to preserve the specific approach of regional smart specialisation strategies, including where national smart specialisation strategies also exist; suggests, in this context, carrying out a cross-cutting and dynamic mapping of distributed scientific excellence and smart specialisations, in a partnership between the regions, the Member States and the European Union; proposes also taking account of the necessary shift from S3 to sustainable smart specialisation strategies (S4) and towards better use of the quadruple helix approach, enabling society to play an active part in the strategy;
23. stresses the importance of using this mapping to contribute to the networking of regional smart specialisations underpinned by scientific excellence and of facilitating trans-regional cooperation, both through Interreg and in particular its interregional innovation investments component, and under Horizon Europe, through practical collective projects carried out by means of the programme as a whole, and especially Pillar 2 thereof, in particular as part of the "missions" and "European innovation partnerships" and in the cross-cutting part of the programme on widening and strengthening the ERA; emphasises the importance of involving towns and regions in "missions" and "partnerships" governance;
24. supports the Commission's aim to guide the development of common technology roadmaps with industry in order to include R&I investment programmes, but is surprised to see that they are only linked to the Member States and industry under the European partnerships planned under Horizon 2020; argues that this should be carried out while taking account of the regions' smart specialisations and the role of regional innovation ecosystems and hubs which also shape industrial value chains;
25. reaffirms the role of cities and regions as partners in the development and networking of research and technology infrastructure and the ESFRI programme; highlights their major role in the emergence, encouragement and promotion of this infrastructure<sup>5</sup>; reiterates, furthermore, that local and regional authorities are key players in the creation of effective regional ecosystems and innovation hubs<sup>6</sup>;
26. proposes moving towards partnership contracts between the regions, the Member States and the EU, to mobilise all stakeholders with the focus on shared research, innovation and higher education, digital education and skills objectives, and on plans to support smart specialisation areas, bringing all EU policies to bear, and not limited to the rules for mobilising the ERDF. This approach could be the subject of a pilot action;

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<sup>5</sup> COR-2019-00896.

<sup>6</sup> COR-2018-03955.

27. recalls that ERDF mobilisation for research and innovation has increased considerably over the programming periods to more than EUR 100 billion for 2014-2020, and that over the same period the financial mobilisation of cities and regions from their own budgets has reached a level which in total represents almost twice the volume of the European Research Framework Programme. These data highlight the issues of coordination between European, national, local and regional policies, as well as the issues of synergies between intervention tools;
28. is concerned at the limited progress made in the field of synergies, due in particular to the slow progress on State aid framework schemes, reiterates its hope that "all funding harnessed to co-finance an action or action programme under Horizon Europe will be subject to the legal rules applying to this programme, in particular those concerning State aid"<sup>7</sup>, and reaffirms its view of synergies as a form of willing cooperation based on the 5Cs principle (coherence, complementarity, compatibility, co-construction, recognition of local stakeholder collectives)<sup>8</sup>; again stresses the need for an effective co-construction approach and control of possible financial transfers by the managing authority;
29. considers that, in view of these factors, the full involvement of cities and regions in the ERA Forum for Transition is essential, in the light not only of the cooperation and coordination challenges to be addressed, but also of the role of local actors in implementing the transformation agenda in relation to crises and transitions;

#### Contribution of regional ecosystems and innovation hubs to the dynamics of the European Research Area

30. recommends that local or regional good practices be assessed and developed when drawing up the criteria for compliance with the enabling condition for smart specialisation strategies, as laid down in the Regulation on Common Provisions for the Structural Funds. It should be pointed out that good governance of the national, regional or local smart specialisation strategy should form part of the process of drawing up the regional ERDF programmes, in which each regional and local authority must demonstrate the progress it has made on implementing its S3 strategies, including, among other things, measures for international cooperation. This would appear to be an excellent opportunity to develop and share good practices, for example, through platforms such as Science Meets Regions or the Knowledge Exchange Platform (KEP);
31. warmly supports the introduction of the "ERA hub" as an opportunity to give institutional recognition and a tangible form to the concept of regional ecosystems and innovation hubs, which the Committee has been promoting for several years, and to fully recognise a place-based approach to science and innovation; calls for the swift implementation of this proposal and proposes using the Knowledge Exchange Platform (KEP) to clarify its terms of reference and to facilitate the start-up of pilot projects. Also welcomes the Commission's intention, in cooperation with the CoR, to take this initiative to a strategic level, promoting synergies

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<sup>7</sup> COR-2018-03891.

<sup>8</sup> COR-2017-00854.

between R&I, education, upskilling, reskilling and training instruments, and mobilising the cohesion funds; urges that this initiative not be limited to the sole aim of facilitating access to excellence;

32. draws attention to several pitfalls to be avoided: the discussions to be held must take into account the experience of the digital hubs or of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), but the ERA hubs should not be limited to these reference points or confine themselves to organising an "interconnected knowledge space" centred on the exchange of good practice and the circulation of knowledge – moreover, Europe does not need a "hubs of hubs"; the ERA Hubs should not merely be a tool for reducing the innovation gap, and nor should they serve once again to highlight only the world-class university sites that are already strongly supported by the Member States and the Framework Programme;
33. proposes, instead, that groups of stakeholders, regional (or interregional) ecosystems and innovation hubs be recognised within the framework of ERA hubs if they share the following cumulative criteria:
  - the existence of a knowledge strategy, offering an integrated approach to higher education, digital education, lifelong learning, including upskilling and reskilling, research and innovation;
  - the involvement of all stakeholders, on the basis of the quadruple helix model, which emphasises the involvement of citizens and local public actors that come from a democratic system;
  - the capacity for collective coordination, strategy definition and shared decision-making when it comes to adopting priorities and allocating resources;
  - economic and social performance in terms of territorial impact in all areas: training, innovation, job and business creation, services provided to businesses, public services and the third sector, the contribution to transitions and social and cultural innovation, social cohesion, active citizenship and cultural creativity (e.g. using the Innovation Scoreboard <sup>9</sup>);
  - having smart specialisations at European and international level in areas of scientific excellence relevant to the ERA hubs, or being on a trajectory that makes it possible to reach this level quickly and credibly;
  - involvement in thematic interregional or European smart specialisation networks and partnerships;
  - a background of involvement in European research, training and mobility programmes for researchers and students;
34. considers that these ERA hubs should be supported directly by the EU, including in financial terms, through a partnership based on three pillars:
  - recognition by the EU of these ERA hubs as important points of support for achieving the European Union's objectives and for implementing the relevant policies; this entails the ERA hubs being taken into account both in conducting the ERA Forum for Transition and in Horizon Europe strategic planning;

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<sup>9</sup> COR-2020-00517.

- European support for strengthening key support tasks (strategy, coordination, Europeanisation, internationalisation, training, talent attraction, innovation and transfers) and improved access to the various European programmes, including Horizon Europe;
  - a commitment by the ERA hub stakeholders to strengthen their strategic capacity and the quality of smart specialisations, to increase their involvement in Community networks and programmes, and to develop cooperation within the European network of ERA hubs;
35. hopes that at least 50 to 100 sites in Europe can be recognised as ERA hubs and that this network will be open to a broad range of participants, in particular to emerging ecosystems in the EU-13 and the most disadvantaged regions;
36. stresses the crucial role of cities and regions as initiators and orchestrators of extensive collaboration projects for societal innovations in tackling societal challenges. ERA hubs should act as instruments in developing necessary competencies and practices in accelerating this progress;
37. stresses that the network of ERA hubs could become an excellent framework to boost the emergence of collective research and innovation projects, combining several regional ecosystems and innovation hubs in a bottom-up approach. These consortia could usefully harness the legal tool of cofund actions, which exist under Horizon Europe, and which can also be used under Pillar 2, which is perfectly suited to develop synergies between the Framework Programme, regional policy and the budgets of cities and regions;

#### COVID-19 crisis, innovation divide, the distribution of excellence: cohesion at the heart of the ERA

38. warns of the consequences of the current crises on the most fragile and hardest-hit regions, and notes that the 2008 economic and financial crisis resulted in the collapse of investment in research and innovation in certain regions, particularly in the countries of Southern Europe. The Committee therefore reiterates that the Next Generation EU recovery plan and the next Multiannual Financial Framework should provide greater support for higher education, digital education, lifelong learning, including upskilling and reskilling, research and innovation to help meet the ERA objectives and that, within this framework, the ReactEU programme and the Just Transition Fund should also be harnessed in line with the operational programmes adopted by the regions and their smart specialisation strategies. This is essential because regions need more support for recovery before they can become resilient;
39. calls on the Commission to explain how, in the current context and without increased support, Member States whose level of investment in R&I is below the European average could achieve the target of a 50% increase in such investment over the next five years, an objective which the Committee nevertheless supports;
40. notes that the ERA is fragmented: EU funds are not sufficient to fund collaboration between regional innovation ecosystems, and research results are rarely shared with the general public and other regions, even within a single Member State; at the same time, regrets that supranational R&I programmes traditionally benefit small and relatively "closed" networks of prestigious universities, research centres, large industries and regions containing a capital city,

which in many cases have already participated in previous Framework Programmes or which have a substantial presence in Brussels;

41. agrees that progress on implementation of the ERA has slowed down and that there are still large disparities between countries and regions, as indicated in the 2018 ERA Progress Report. The convergence of European, national and regional research and innovation systems is inadequate, resulting in a damaging concentration of R&I sites of excellence across Europe that leaves entire regions behind. It is in addition producing an unbalanced environment for the mobility and movement of knowledge, running counter to the ERA's policy objectives;
42. considers that these observations are widely shared and oft repeated, but that no political lessons have been drawn from them, and that the current budgetary choices, if maintained, will not make it possible to remedy these shortcomings, will ensure that all the talk about closing the innovation gap remains nothing but wishful thinking, and will render the mechanisms for spreading excellence and expanding the take-up of tools inadequate and unable to achieve the desired policy objectives.

Brussels, 5 February 2021

The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Apostolos Tzitzikostas

The Secretary-General  
of the European Committee of the Regions

Petr Bližkovský

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	A new European Research Area (ERA) for research and innovation
<b>References</b>	COM(2020) 628 – final
<b>Legal basis</b>	Article 179(1) TFEU
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Own-initiative opinions, Rule 41(b)i
<b>Date of Council/EP referral/Date of Commission letter</b>	
<b>Date of Bureau/President's decision</b>	
<b>Commission responsible</b>	Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC)
<b>Rapporteur</b>	Christophe Clergeau (FR/PES)
<b>Information memo</b>	16 October 2020
<b>Discussed in commission</b>	
<b>Date adopted by commission</b>	25 November 2020
<b>Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)</b>	majority
<b>Date adopted in plenary</b>	3, 4 and 5 February 2021
<b>Previous Committee opinions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional Innovation Scoreboard and its impact in regional place-based policies<sup>10</sup></li> <li>- Research infrastructures – The future of the European Research Area (ERA) from a regional and cross-border perspective<sup>11</sup></li> <li>- A renewed European Agenda for Research and Innovation<sup>12</sup></li> <li>- Horizon Europe: Framework Programme 9 for Research and Innovation<sup>13</sup></li> <li>- Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions: Strategies for resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth<sup>14</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation</b>	

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<sup>10</sup> CDR 517/2020.

<sup>11</sup> CDR 896/2019.

<sup>12</sup> CDR 3955/2018.

<sup>13</sup> CDR 3891/2018.

<sup>14</sup> CDR 4757/2017.