

LETTER TO EC PRESIDENT URSULA VON DER LEYEN

President Ursula von der Leyen
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Dear President von der Leyen,

As research, innovation and education stakeholders, actively involved in sharing and contributing to European research, innovation and education policy, we are very pleased with the central role and increased investment you foresee for research and innovation (R&I) in the future EU policy, echoing also Mario Draghi's very inspiring report.

The idea of developing a policy-based Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and a European Competitiveness Fund is very interesting and reflects the dire need to better focus and steer EU investment. However, it also comes with challenges. In this letter we would like to share with you some insights and some recommendations on the new approach to the MFF, and the future of EU R&I funding in that approach, which we hope you will duly consider.

First, we are concerned about the future of the Framework Programme (FP) for Research & Innovation. The non-appearance of Horizon Europe's successor (FP10) in the mission letter to the commissioner-designate Zaharieva and in the written responses of Executive Vice-President-designate Séjourné on the EP hearing questions, is worrying. While we appreciate the goal to move to a more focused budget with less programmes, we strongly underline the need to keep the FP for Research and Innovation, as well as the Erasmus programme. Both have a long-established track record, and the projects/activities funded through these programmes are at the heart of your priorities for the EU's future. The FP has developed into a well-known one-stop-shop for researchers and innovators. Having one programme bringing together different R&I related funding streams also facilitates global engagement and cooperation with third countries, especially associated countries. So, we call on you not to split up the FP but to maintain, also in the next MFF, one strong and autonomous FP.

Second, as mentioned in your Political Guidelines 2024-2029, R&I investment needs to be increased. We repeat the call from the Draghi report and more recently the report of the High-Level Expert Group on FP10, for the EU to set the example by doubling the funding for R&I in its own budget and to foresee a dedicated budget of at least €200 billion for the next FP for R&I, FP10. We strongly support your and Draghi's call to double the

funding for the European Research Council (ERC). However, this additional funding should not be at the detriment of the autonomy of the ERC Scientific Council and of the bottom-up character of ERC funding, both essential for the ERC's success and reputation. Autonomy and full bottom-up character should be guaranteed in any future scenario.

Third, we would like to emphasise the importance of safeguarding the budget of EU programmes like Horizon Europe and Erasmus+, from being tapped annually to fund new initiatives, cover unexpected costs, or reduce overall EU spending. Shifting from a programme-based to a policy-based budget structure would not fully prevent this issue. We strongly recommend that the future FP for research & innovation (FP10), and the future Erasmus programme have a protected, ring-fenced budget. Additionally, we suggest that the new MFF incorporates at least one flexible budget line to address unforeseen costs and fund emerging initiatives.

Finally, we are concerned about the idea of moving FP10 or part of it into a European Competitiveness Fund. As already highlighted above, we believe that splitting up the FP would be a mistake. But moving the entire FP into a European Competitiveness Fund is also problematic as it would likely lead to more and overall top-down steering, with less opportunities for the very needed creative, novel approaches or complete bottom-up funding without topic prioritisation. If all funding would need to be linked to, or driven by competitiveness, areas of direct societal relevance such as health, biodiversity or cultural heritage, risk falling short of the much-needed new knowledge and solutions that can result from R&I.

As highlighted in the Draghi report, EU competitiveness needs to be fed by undirected, bottom-up research. And as clearly stated in the High-Level Expert Group report on FP10, undirected, open programmes such as ERC, but also the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) and European Innovation Council (EIC) Pathfinder Open fund a higher percentage of proposals in areas of EC strategic priority, and earlier and faster than focused calls do. The open, bottom-up nature of these programmes should therefore be maintained and protected. EU R&I funding needs less steering, to allow for more creativity and openness. So, while FP10 can and will play a crucial role for EU competitiveness, it should not be driven by it. Increased EU competitiveness will be the result of a strong, ringfenced and autonomous FP that will allow R&I to shine at its fullest.

Last but not least, we would like to highlight that we do not advocate to maintain the status quo. Improvements in how EU R&I is funded can and should be made. In this spirit, we welcome the FP10 High-Level Expert Group's proposal to embrace experimentation on smaller scales before completely overhauling the FP and the MFF. Moreover, it is crucial that this is done in full co-creation through structured engagement of stakeholders, as also suggested by Mario Draghi's report. This will make sure that beneficiaries' voices are heard and taken into account.

We wish you all the best for your second term of office and your ambitious plans and we look forward to a positive exchange on how to strengthen European R&I, including for competitiveness in the future.

In appreciation of your consideration,



Kurt Deketelaere
Secretary-General of LERU



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