

## *Future of the ERA – Aspirations, remaining questions and way forward*

YERUN – the Young European Research Universities Network – welcomes the European Commission’s recently published [Communication on the implementation of the European Research Area](#) (ERA). This document reflects on the accomplished and remaining work in strengthening Europe’s research and innovation (R&I) landscape. We commend the Commission’s continued commitment to advancing the ERA’s core principles. As an umbrella-association representing young, dynamic and impactful research universities across Europe, this greatly resonates with YERUN’s vision of a vibrant, inclusive, and resilient European R&I ecosystem.

However, YERUN also emphasises that the success of the ERA will depend on the effective implementation of remaining measures highlighted by the European Commission. As detailed in our recent [reflection](#) on the ERA’s progress, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring cohesive coordination among Member States and achieving a streamlined, transparent process for ERA Actions. We call on the Commission and Member States to enhance efforts toward a focused, coherent ERA Policy Agenda that fully leverages the role of universities as hubs of knowledge creation and innovation.

We note in this context the proposed Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva’s recent [responses](#) to the European Parliament ahead of her confirmation hearing on 5 November 2024, which underscore a commitment shared by YERUN on prioritising impact, inclusivity, and the empowerment of Europe’s universities. We praise her acknowledgement of Higher Education Institutions as key R&I actors and central part of the ERA. As such, YERUN [reaffirms our call](#) for increased representation and stronger support for universities in the ERA, recognising their value as bridge-builders in the R&I ecosystems, which goes much beyond their ranking positions into facilitating public value co-creation, nurturing talent and democratising innovation.

Enrico Letta’s [appeal](#) for the fifth freedom to integrate research, innovation, knowledge and education into the European Single Market should not go unheard by Commissioner-designate Zaharieva and the new College. At a recent [event](#) of the [Research matters Campaign](#) – supported by YERUN and other R&I stakeholders – Letta emphasised the importance of reinforcing Europe’s R&I standing and shared values on a global scale. Inspired by Letta’s report, YERUN reiterates our call for a broader understanding of the value of university R&I which amounts to [much more than competitiveness](#). Echoing YERUN’s [considerations](#) for the ERA, we hereby stress that a strong European R&I system requires a greater focus on R&I talent, including attractiveness and sustainability of research careers. The full potential of the ERA can only be realised through the fifth freedom, an improved strategic alignment and coordination of R&I policies, development of enabling framework conditions across the Union, and substantial investments in R&I, both at the EU and the national level. Member States should commit to and urgently attain an even more ambitious level of R&I investments than the current 3% GDP expenditure target, which many have yet to achieve.

Commissioner-designate Zaharieva's vision aligns with [our call](#) for a Policy Agenda that not only refines the goals of the ERA but also ensures tangible outcomes for European citizens. This can only be accomplished in dialogue, with active involvement of citizens, and structured stakeholder engagement on a national and European level, as [proposed](#) by Mario Draghi.

**In view of Commissioner-designate Zaharieva's hearing, there are some outstanding questions where YERUN would welcome answers:**

- Will you take specific steps to implement the **fifth freedom** in practice as a vehicle for achieving synergies between R&I and education, embracing the central place of universities' triple mission?
- What measures will you pursue to address brain drain, ensure right conditions across Europe and improve the **attractiveness of R&I careers**?
- What types of incentives will you champion at the EU level to improve **research assessment practices** into a new global standard, building on the work of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA)?
- How do you plan to improve **valorisation of research results and knowledge for broader societal impact** that extend beyond narrow (and unequally distributed) economic benefits?

We call on Commissioner-Designate Zaharieva to take the opportunity to clarify these doubts and uncertainties during her upcoming European Parliament confirmation hearing, to provide a full account of her vision for the future of the ERA.

Much needs still to be done to achieve our shared ambitions. But we have clarity now on what the problems are. We urge policymakers to act swiftly and decisively in addressing the gaps identified in the ERA's current framework.

As Europe moves forward with the renewed ERA, YERUN stands ready to support the Commission and Member States, in collaboration with other stakeholders, in building an ERA that fully realises the potential of Europe's universities and delivers concrete results for Europe's citizens. A strengthened ERA, with and for universities, is essential for the advancement of Europe's R&I, wellbeing and prosperity, as well as global competitiveness.

**- About YERUN -**

YERUN - Young European Research Universities Network - founded in 2015 and based in Brussels, brings together excellence and value-driven young research universities. The network's objective is to strategically represent its members in the decision-making process at EU level, thus shaping their future and promoting their role in European societies. Further to its policy advocacy activity, the network also strengthens cooperation opportunities among its members in areas of mutual interest and raises their visibility via a dedicated communication strategy.

**- YERUN Members -**



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