

YERUN Reaction to the European Parliament Hearing of Ekaterina Spasova Gecheva-Zaharieva, Commissioner-designate for Startups, Research, and Innovation

The hearing of Commissioner-designate Ekaterina Zaharieva brought to light several key points on the future direction of European research and innovation (R&I), many of which resonate with the priorities of YERUN and its member universities.

In today's hearing, echoing the R&I community, she has also welcomed the reports of Letta (1), Draghi (2) and Heitor (3), highlighting the central role that R&I plays in Europe's competitiveness.

Ekaterina Zaharieva emphasised that Europe's fragmented national approaches limit its innovation performance, calling for coordinated action to harness – as she called it – “our biggest strength (...) people with talent and creativity”.

Her five key priorities include:

- 1. Strengthening the ERA through a new ERA Act:** The act will focus on enhancing coordination and collaboration within Europe's R&I systems, improving working conditions for researchers, expanding access to research and technology infrastructures, and upholding the freedom of scientific research. Zaharieva highlighted the European Research Council (ERC) as a successful model, proposing to reinforce it and extend its effective practices across other areas of the Framework Programme (FP).
- 2. Enhancing the startup ecosystem:** The ecosystem will be strengthened through a dynamic environment supported by increased private investment, clear definitions, and simplified administration. Emphasis will be placed on facilitating commercialisation and creating opportunities that allow startups to scale within Europe.
- 3. Boosting R&I capacities with a focus on key technologies:** Zaharieva underscored the importance of investing in strategic technologies that are essential for Europe's global competitiveness, ensuring resources align with technological advancements.
- 4. Promoting gender equality in R&I:** Efforts will focus on improving working conditions, secure equitable access to leadership roles, and ensure programs better support women researchers (such as the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme).
- 5. Securing an ambitious budget for the FP:** Zaharieva advocates for a robust, well-funded programme that is focused, simplified, and strategically designed to support the whole of Europe, improving widening participation and maximising Europe's innovation potential.

Following the discussions and the various rounds of questions from the MEPs, YERUN highlights the central topics and areas of concern as they relate to Zaharieva's vision and responses.

(1) Enrico Letta, “Much More Than a Market”, 2024, [Enrico Letta - Much more than a market \(April 2024\)](#).

(2) Mario Draghi, “The Future of European Competitiveness – A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe”, 2024, [EU competitiveness: Looking ahead - European Commission](#).

(3) European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Align, act, accelerate – Research, technology and innovation to boost European competitiveness*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/9106236>.

Funding, investment and dual use in research and innovation

Zaharieva emphasised the need for increased investment, proposing a 3% GDP target for research and innovation, one that she reminded MEPs was first proposed 22 years prior. She acknowledged that the current level of public investment, which stands at around 2.3%, is insufficient. A truly competitive European Research Area (ERA) will demand coordinated action from Member States to achieve and exceed the current 3% target across Europe. Her commitment to the ERC, with particular emphasis on funding high-risk research was noted, as she even suggested an increase in its budget.

The Commissioner-designate emphasised leveraging private investment and adopting a more 'pragmatic' approach to R&I funding, as comparable with US and Chinese models. Zaharieva's remarks on dual-use research (i.e., projects with both civilian and military applications), focused on an approach akin to what was advocated for in the Heitor report; while preserving a civil focus, we should avoid artificial distinctions between civilian and military, as modern R&I often results in dual-use innovations.

Simplification of bureaucratic procedures

Simplification was at the core of the discussions and Zaharieva proposed a two-phase application process as part of her commitment to streamline the complex and often burdensome procedures in Horizon Europe. It won't be the first time that proposals include a two-phase application process, and while YERUN favours the approach, there are other consequences that come in with it (e.g. highly increased number of applications in the first phase). YERUN welcomes Zaharieva's references for future consultation with stakeholders and MEPs to ensure the proposed measures are aligned with the needs of the R&I community.

She also emphasised that in line of simplification, there will be assessment of overlaps within Horizon Europe (such as between the European Institute of Technology and Innovation (EIT) and the European Innovation Council (EIC), and improvements of programmes, such as the partnerships and missions. Zaharieva affirmed her commitment to the EU's missions as a driving force for innovation, with an emphasis on improving governance, ensuring ownership at the highest level and increasing citizen engagement. YERUN values this approach, particularly as it relates to structured, strategic engagement and the pooling of resources from various funding sources.

Role of University Alliances in regional development and brain drain

Zaharieva envisions university alliances as a means to strengthen research capacity and counteract regional brain drain within the EU. However, while Zaharieva's focus on equitable mobility and regional development is promising, effective implementation will require dedicated support for universities, with special emphasis on universities not in alliances, as central pillars of knowledge creation, co-creation of public value, and democratisation of innovation—beyond rankings and competitiveness.

While the Fifth Freedom would enhance the flow of research, innovation, and knowledge, Zaharieva did not address how to balance this freedom with the need to foster regional competitiveness.

Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) focus and integration

YERUN welcomes MEPs' interest and Zaharieva's support for strengthening SSH in the future FP, especially given the current focus on key technologies. A balanced European R&I system must adequately support SSH to effectively address societal challenges and enable meaningful collaboration with technological fields.

Summary and Next Steps

As YERUN, we remain committed to engaging with the Commissioner-designate to ensure the unique perspectives of young European research universities are represented. In this spirit, we call for further clarity on:

- **Concrete budget commitments** for Horizon Europe and the next FP;
- A robust implementation of the **fifth freedom**, enabling synergies between R&I and education and recognising the essential role of universities;
- Concrete actions to improve **R&I career attractiveness** and retain talent within Europe;
- Address the progress on the initiative on **the Reform of Research Assessment and CoARA**.

A renewed, strengthened ERA with universities at its core is essential for Europe's R&I, welfare, and competitiveness. YERUN stands ready to support this vision, in collaboration with the Commission and Member States, as Europe works towards a resilient and inclusive ERA for all.

- 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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