

Proposed FP10 budget and connection with ECF look promising: UNL reacts to European Parliament draft reports

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On 16 March 2026, MEPs Christian Ehler and René Repasi published their draft reports on Horizon Europe, the tenth Framework Programme for Research & Innovation (FP10). The reports respectively cover FP10 and its implementation programme and represent an important step towards designing a strong Framework Programme that supports scientific excellence and strengthens Europe's long-term competitiveness and innovation capacity. On 6 May 2026, Ehler and Dan Nica further published their draft report on the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), which expands on Ehler's proposed connection between FP10 and the ECF.

Universities of the Netherlands (UNL) welcomes these reports, which start from the clear premise that Europe's resilience, competitiveness and long-term innovation can only be built on strong conditions for engaging in scientific excellence and collaboration. An ambitious budget, manageable rules, and guarantees for the financial and substantive autonomy of science are values supported by universities across Europe.

In this reaction, we expand on what we believe to be strengths of the draft reports, while also bringing forth some questions and critiques. UNL hopes that these proposals will find fertile soil in further Parliamentary negotiations and discussions with member states and the European Commission.

Budget

The proposed budget for FP10 of €220 billion is an excellent step. It rightly recognizes the urgency of increasing European R&I investment and ensuring that all phases of the R&I process are sufficiently funded, from fundamental research in Pillar I to innovative solutions under Pillar III, while ensuring participation by all Member States with the new European Research Area Pillar. Though the proposed budget may appear as a radical increase compared to the €95.5 billion allocated to FP9, accounting for inflation and economic growth, the financial burden on the EU is lower than it appears. Most importantly, the geopolitical situation has changed: both the United States and China top the EU in R&I spending when adjusted for purchasing power. The recent Cypriot Presidency proposal that cuts the Horizon Europe and ECF by 4% compared to the European Commission proposal is therefore unacceptable. In a context of rising geopolitical tension, economic fragmentation and intensifying global technological competition, strengthening collective European investment in research and innovation is not only justified but necessary. This also implies that the association of partner countries must be accelerated, as Horizon benefits from the knowledge and financial contributions provided by third countries.

Excellence & bottom-up research

The draft reports emphasize the primacy of scientific excellence, and support simplification for beneficiaries of calls. To support the first principle, Ehler introduces the Fast Track to Excellence instrument – intended to fill the gap between Pillars I and II by providing structural funding for small-scale collaborative bottom-up research. While this appears useful, there are already many funding instruments within Horizon Europe, so any expansion must be well-founded and differentiated from other instruments, including the newly proposed Fast Track to Innovation. Furthermore, as the ERC budget already faces heavy pressure from initiatives seeking to introduce more policy directionality, new instruments must only be funded with additional budget. In no way should the introduction of new instruments lead to a reduction of budget for the ERC, as the bottom-up, excellence-driven instruments in Pillar I are essential in creating the human capital and breakthrough discoveries that drive Europe's long-term global competitiveness and scientific independence. The same could be said for instruments such as MSCA and collaborative research in Pillar II.

Sectoral plans

In his original report, Repasi called for the introduction of sectoral plans under the ERC Scientific Council. The suggested instrument pools the expertise of several institutions in order to advance a science sector as a

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whole, inspired by the Dutch sector plans. In later amendments, Repasi has specified his original sectoral plan ideas to take the form of a pilot for the Social Sciences and Humanities sector (SSH) under Pillar II. This amendment fits better with UNL's position that there is no room for political, thematic, or policy-driven instruments within Pillar I or the ERC. If policy makers wish to stimulate fundamental science on specific themes, this can indeed be done in Pillar II, with ERC-panels serving evaluative roles at most. A sectoral plan for SSH could then be an interesting way to give the SSH-sector a boost at the EU level. In any case, new instruments must be supported by new funding and should not encroach on the proposed budget.

Simplification

Regarding simplification, Ehler reverses the Commission's proposal to mandate the use of lump sums and personnel unit costs. This is positive, as these methods of covering costs can introduce their own complexities and increase expenses in certain contexts. Ehler instead proposes to make Horizon Europe more applicant-friendly – achieving simplification by ensuring that beneficiaries have all relevant information when responding to a call, while only having to submit that which is necessary to evaluate proposals. We would add that if simplification is truly achieved, this could support Ehler's initiative to move to a model where calls are published more frequently – even independently of the work programmes – in order to effectively respond to geopolitical and societal shifts.

Pillar II & Councils of Experts

Ehler's draft report reimagines the governance and structure of Pillar II of Horizon Europe, moving from a Commission-led model, to one in which expert councils gain a dominant role in advising on the work programmes and overseeing the publication of call texts. Despite some reservations, this approach is broadly welcomed by Dutch universities, as it addresses the risk that Commission-designed calls can become too narrow or detached from scientific and societal realities. Greater involvement of a broad array of experts can help better align priorities with scientific developments, ensure a solid connection to societal needs, and ensure that all relevant disciplines have a role in Pillar II collaborative research.

At the same time, important questions remain about governance and membership, including how transparency and conflict-of-interest safeguards will be ensured. There is also a risk of overlap between councils, raising questions about coordination, potential cross-membership, and the breadth of expertise applied. Any new structure must avoid adding complexity and should remain consistent with the broader simplification agenda. We hope that more information will be forthcoming on how council members will be selected, how they are expected to balance their positions with other responsibilities, and how balanced input from other stakeholders will be ensured.

Finally, the budget for the 'Society' portion of Pillar II was too low in the original Commission Proposal. Ehler's FP10 report does not yet include an indicative financial envelope for the proposed 'Global Societal Challenges Window', but we emphasize that such challenges can only be tackled with a significantly increased budget and a strong role for SSH in all competitiveness windows of Pillar II.

The connection between ECF and Horizon Europe

A further feature of all draft reports is an "improved close connection" between FP10 and the ECF. In practice, Ehler and Nica ensure that the objectives of FP10 and ECF remain connected, while removing any implication of subjugation of one programme to the other, in addition to guaranteeing separate governance and comitology processes. These are welcome steps, made more so by the fact that a strong connection remains present through measures such as ECF-FP10 Joint Undertakings, Horizon Europe Pathway Actions within ECF, and Joint Programme Committee meetings. These measures should help research find more applications and market uptake, without subjugating research objectives to industrial priorities in the process.

Yet, UNL emphasizes that the division of labour between FP10 and ECF requires clarification. It remains unclear how collaborative research in non-technological areas such as SSHA, health(care), and biodiversity will be embedded in the future structure, particularly where elements of programmes such as EU4Health and LIFE will be integrated within FP10. This is exacerbated by the unclear decision-making behind the division of activities between the policy windows in the ECF proposal.

European partnerships

Ehler proposes a simplification and consolidation of European partnerships. Simplification is a welcome step: with more than 55 partnerships operating under different rules and structures, the current system creates unnecessary complexity and administrative burden, particularly for smaller and newcomer organisations. However, simplification should not automatically mean 'fewer but bigger partnerships', as excessive consolidation risks limiting access for smaller institutions, emerging actors, and widening countries.

At the same time, the R&I community should play a stronger role in shaping partnership priorities and structures. The current process is widely perceived as insufficiently transparent, with business and industry appearing better represented than the broader R&I community. Partnerships must, therefore, continue to support precompetitive research alongside innovation-driven activities.

Dual-use research

Both FP10 draft reports largely omit discussion of dual-use research, one of the most hot-button elements of the Commission's FP10 proposal. Although both rapporteurs have expressed scepticism about the inclusion of dual-use in FP10, the lack of attention in the draft reports may also reflect the fact that, thus far, the Commission itself has provided limited clarity on how this would be implemented in practice. What is clear is that 'dual-use by default' is not an appropriate approach for a primarily civil programme. The vast majority of research projects should not be treated like a military asset or a military threat. Openness, international collaboration, and contributing to broad societal improvement are core scientific values that may be threatened if too heavy an emphasis is placed on military relevance.

This does not imply that FP10 can be fully insulated from research that may have military uses. The focus should, however, be on civilian projects with or without military relevance, with options for a smooth transition to the ECF if a high degree of military applicability becomes apparent. This would be in line with the ECF draft report, which stipulates that defence research is to be exclusively funded through the defence policy window of the ECF.

Removal of Higher Education from ECF report

In their draft report on the ECF, Ehler and Nica removed the mention of higher education and elements such as university alliances in their amendments. UNL strongly believes this should be reversed. Maintaining explicit references to higher education in ECF regulation is essential to ensure eligibility for future funding, including for skills development initiatives.

Further input/concerns

- Personnel Unit Costs should include annual indexation.
- Lump sums should not be subject to financial audits, as this would require a degree of record keeping that defeats much of the purpose of lump sums.
- There should be more focus on synergies between Horizon Europe and programmes such as Erasmus+ and the European Universities Alliances, where relevant.
- The development of the 'Moonshots' proposed by the European Commission remains unclear, especially the distinctions with other activities. We emphasize that a broad array of stakeholders should be consulted, should the moonshots be developed further.
- Not reintroducing the Seal of Excellence to the FP10 proposals represents a missed opportunity, as the proposed Competitiveness Seal appears more ECF-centric.
- We miss a strategy to tackle (AI-fuelled) oversubscription within Horizon Europe.