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ERRIN INPUT TO THE FUTURE HORIZON EUROPE (FP10)

ERRIN (European Regions Research and Innovation Network) welcomes the European Commission's proposal for the EU's next long-term budget (MFF), which foresees Horizon Europe continuing as a standalone programme in 2028–2034 with a budget of EUR 175 billion – nearly double the amount available in the current framework. Maintaining the overall structure of Framework Programme largely in line with the current Horizon Europe is a positive sign of continuity and stability for Europe's research and innovation ecosystem. ERRIN is pleased to provide more in-depth reflections on how the proposed Horizon Europe can be further improved to ensure that it creates the right conditions for research and innovation to thrive for a competitive Europe post-2027.

Key recommendations for the future Horizon Europe (FP10)

- **Ensure coherence between Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF).** The articulation between the two programmes should be clearer and more detailed, both on paper and in practice.

- **Maintain strong support for societal transformation, policy innovation and experimentation.** Societal transformation should be strongly supported and seen as an integral part of competitiveness.

- **Strengthen support for the EU Missions beyond 2030.** It is crucial to sustain the momentum of EU Missions in tackling societal challenges, mobilising local and regional stakeholders and deepening systemic transformation.

- **Strengthen support to territorial R&I ecosystems.** A stronger emphasis on connecting territorial R&I ecosystems across Europe is of critical importance. A dedicated long-term investment should be ensured, including a clear framework and portfolio of funding instruments to support ecosystem collaboration across value chains and common challenges.

- **Foster a more inclusive R&I ecosystem to close the innovation gap.** Encourage implementing a variety of measures that ensure coordinators from Widening countries across the Horizon Europe programme and support collaboration between less and more innovative ecosystems to tackle fragmentation and tap into capacities across territorial innovation ecosystems.

- **Remove barriers to participation for smaller actors.** Further attention should be paid to removing barriers for participation for smaller players such as SMEs and start-ups, as well as knowledge institutions lacking research management capacities such as vocational training schools (VETs) and universities of applied science (UAS) across Horizon Europe, including European Partnerships.

Ensure coherence between Horizon Europe and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)

ERRIN welcomes the proposed linkage between Horizon Europe and ECF, as this alignment holds promise for tightly coupling EU research and innovation funding with support to market uptake of innovations, deployment of new solutions and wide implementation of research results. Together, Horizon Europe and the ECF have the potential to complement each other and form a comprehensive framework for supporting Europe's competitiveness, innovation capacity and structural transformation. However, for this potential to be realised, the connection between the two funds must be made more explicit – both in terms of programme design and practice. ERRIN therefore calls upon the Commission to clearly articulate how these two Funds will operate in tandem, ensuring the "investment journey" in practice. At present, the articulation remains largely conceptual, leaving unanswered questions about synergies, scope and coordination in practical implementation.

There is also an absence of explanation on how these instruments relate to the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), and how their synergies will be activated in practice. Experience to date shows that the synergies between EU-level programmes and national or regional funding instruments (e.g. Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy instruments) often remain declarative rather than operational. That is why the inter-connections between proposed NRPPs, the ECF and Horizon Europe must be clear and detailed – both on paper and in practice, with further details on how this coordination can be organised at project level. This will require development of specific guidance or targeted implementation modalities, co-designed with the relevant implementation actors of all three funding instruments.

According to the proposed ECF regulation, the Fund shall be implemented in synergy with other Union programmes: "the rules of the relevant Union programme shall apply to the corresponding contribution, or a single set of rules may be applied to all contributions, and a single legal commitment may be concluded". ERRIN invites the Commission to clarify what the "single set of rules" means in practice.

Both Horizon Europe and ECF should be open and accessible to different types of actors of the territorial R&I ecosystems, including local and regional authorities, SMEs, universities/universities of applied sciences (UAS), research organisations and a variety of intermediaries. These actors all play a crucial role in connecting research and industry, yet they frequently face significant barriers to participate in large-scale EU programmes.

When it comes to programming, programming committees need to be manageable and should not tackle too many thematic areas. For example, the policy windows under Pillar II of the programme are too broad to be tackled by only one programming committee per window. Regarding evaluation, an independent evaluation of proposals should be ensured. Moreover, an effective "investment journey" should be ensured in practice, considering it is rarely linear. The various instruments focusing on higher TRL levels should not require prior participation in other Union programmes.

Ensure continued support to societal transformations

Europe needs to continue pursuing its transformation agenda and the green deal objectives. The MFF proposals do not sufficiently address the societal challenges our society is facing. The part of Horizon Europe dedicated to "society" in the current proposal seems limited and detached from the policy windows tackling thematic priorities linked to competitiveness. Overall, there is not enough emphasis on societal transformations in the Horizon Europe proposal post-2027, and in the MFF debate the

society is often framed in opposition to competitiveness. However, societal transformations and competitiveness should go hand in hand, mutually reinforcing each other.

Societal challenges and policy innovation are complex and long-term, requiring more holistic approaches that combine R&I with governance, regulation and societal innovation. It is therefore crucial to ensure that Horizon Europe provides enough space and flexibility to tackle societal challenges and support policy innovation and experimentation.

The EU Preparatory Action Innovation for Place-based Transformation demonstrates the importance of policy innovation and experimentation in supporting societal transformation and territorial competitiveness goals. By building awareness across European territories of the need for transformative innovation policies, the initiative showcases how societal challenges can be effectively addressed from a place-based perspective. The Preparatory Action's collaborative *capacity-building* programme represents a first-of-its-kind approach to developing competencies for co-designing and implementing transformative innovations across policy fields. Through cross-departmental transition teams, participating territories learn to diversify their innovation portfolios, pool and align resources and coordinate actions across levels of governance to enhance the systemic impact of local transitions. Moreover, the challenge-oriented *experimentation journeys* enable territories to apply these capabilities in practice through one-year experimental tracks that test new policy instruments in different fields, such as regulatory sandboxes for innovative energy solutions or transformative public procurement schemes for circular market creation. Such policy experimentation is demanding yet essential for accelerating transitions locally and should be further supported through dedicated calls in the next Horizon Europe programme to strengthen the collective capacity for place-based transformation across all European territories.

Ensure meaningful engagement in future European Partnerships

ERRIN welcomes the positive steps foreseen for the future of European Partnerships, including efforts to reduce fragmentation, lower administrative burdens and refine governance. Strengthening inclusivity by giving a more prominent role to regional, local and smaller actors is particularly important to ensure meaningful engagement in future partnership models. ERRIN calls for establishing more inclusive and transparent partnership framework with enhanced synergies across partnerships to maximise impact at regional, national and EU levels. This would in turn ensure that regional and local innovation ecosystems can fully contribute to Europe's competitiveness, sustainability and long-term growth.

In the Commission's radical simplification efforts in European Partnerships, specific attention should be paid to removing barriers for participation of smaller players such as SMEs and start-ups, which may only have a couple of participations in a given partnership over a programming period, meaning they are typically less integrated in the networks which normally facilitate access. A leaner, more consistent structure across the programming period, allowing for smaller and more focused consortia and shorter time-to-grant, would significantly improve accessibility. For example, the Partnership for Innovative SMEs has a good leverage effect and has been acting as a stepping stone for innovative SMEs to internationalise, including through other Horizon instruments.

The discontinuation of the Co-funded Partnerships raises important questions about the coordination of R&I funding between European, national and regional levels. It is within the current Co-funded Partnerships that some regions have invested, alongside Member States, for example in thematics such as the Clean Energy Transition. It is therefore crucial to ensure that such coordinated approach to R&I funding can continue effectively in the future. Moreover, discontinuing the Co-funded

partnerships should not mean even less support to societal transformations, as many of the Co-funded Partnerships are tackling societal transformations and policy innovations.

More detailed recommendations are available in the ERRIN FP10 paper series on European Partnerships.

Strengthen support to EU Missions and further use mission-oriented approach

The EU Missions are essential for addressing Europe's most pressing societal challenges – climate adaptation, climate-neutral cities, ocean and water restoration, soil health and cancer. The EU Missions align closely with the EU's strategic priorities, including competitiveness, the Green Deal and digital transition. They translate EU-level ambitions into local action, empowering regions and cities to lead systemic change through innovation and collaboration. Additionally, they foster new governance models, cross-sectoral partnerships and citizen engagement – creating lasting impact beyond traditional R&I frameworks.

The inclusion of Missions in Pillar II of the new Horizon Europe proposal means that they would be funded at least until 2030, which is welcome. However, ending EU Missions funding in 2030 would risk undermining progress just as many initiatives begin to deliver tangible results and scale. Continued support is needed to maintain momentum in tackling societal challenges and to deepen transformation. ERRIN advocates embedding long-term funding for Missions, ensuring their evolution and integration into other EU strategies and funding programmes.

The proposal states that "the Framework Programme should finance the research and innovation activities of the Missions, while the deployment and scaling up should be delivered through other EU programmes and national funding." ERRIN stresses that future support to the Missions should be ensured through Horizon Europe and ECF, as well as other relevant EU and national funding.

Under the current Framework Programme, the Missions have demonstrated significant value across a broad range of TRLs and strong capacity to engage diverse stakeholders in deploying innovative solutions. For instance, the Mission on Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities has spurred cities like Turku and Groningen to pioneer multi-stakeholder governance models that engage universities, businesses and residents in implementing Climate City Contracts and decarbonisation projects. Similarly, the Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change has helped regions such as Normandy and South Ostrobothnia integrate climate resilience into their regional strategies and experiment with nature-based solutions and digital twins through projects like RESIST and Pathways2Resilience.

In the Mission Soil, the mobilisation of regional stakeholders under projects like HUMUS and SOILL-Startup are demonstrating how Living Labs can co-create and test soil restoration solutions with farmers, land managers and local authorities, advancing from research to practical deployment. The Mission Ocean and Waters is currently mobilising coastal and maritime regions to pilot innovative water transition initiatives though initiatives such as CO-WATERS and BlueActionBanos and its sister projects.

Across these examples, the Missions are bridging the gap between research and local application, fostering collaboration across governance levels, stakeholders and sectors.

Given these achievements, there is a compelling case for continued investment; however, this should not rely solely on the "societal" part of Pillar II of Horizon Europe. Therefore, it is logical for Missions to be funded through different streams, aligned with the TRL level and the policy windows they contribute to.

Importantly, the Missions have successfully mobilised stakeholders and innovation ecosystems across Europe, creating new forms of collaboration between regions, cities, research organisations, industry and citizens. This mobilisation has been key to turning EU-level ambitions into local action and ensuring that solutions are co-created, tested and scaled within real territorial contexts. In October, ERRIN contributed on the European Commission's consultation on the Assessment of Citizens and Stakeholders' Engagement in the EU Missions. The consultation gathered feedback from key stakeholders across Europe to inform the 2026 Assessment of EU Missions. ERRIN's submission highlighted the network's active involvement in the Missions and the crucial role of regional and local ecosystems to ensure their success.

ERRIN supports a long-term vision where the EU Missions transition into adaptive frameworks that continue to drive systemic change. Most Missions have a longer-term objective that goes beyond 2030, such as turning all cities climate-neutral by 2050 in the Cities Mission. The ambitious 2030 targets are a step in a long-term process, not an endpoint.

The Horizon Europe proposal introduces the concept of "Moonshots'". These are envisioned as large-scale, technology-driven initiatives designed to position the EU as a global leader in strategic and high-impact fields such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and clean aviation. While they represent an interesting proposal to advance scientific excellence and industrial competitiveness, Moonshots should not replace or weaken the mission-oriented approach that directly supports systemic transformation at local and regional levels. ERRIN therefore recommends that FP10 continues to embed the Mission logic, linking research and innovation with governance, citizen engagement and place-based implementation. Future Moonshots should be complementary to Missions, connected to real territorial needs and capable of driving tangible impact on the ground. This dual approach would ensure that Europe remains both technologically competitive and socially resilient, fully aligned with the objectives of the European Green Deal and the path to climate neutrality.

More detailed recommendations are available in the ERRIN FP10 paper series on EU Missions.

Further connect territorial innovation ecosystems (in pillar III and beyond)

ERRIN welcomes that there is a noted need for support measures to strengthen and better connect innovation ecosystems. A stronger emphasis on connecting territorial R&I ecosystems across Europe is essential, building on the experience of Regional Innovation Valleys.

Local and regional authorities play a pivotal role in convening knowledge partners, including universities of applied sciences and vocational education and training institutions, in close collaboration with innovative SMEs. Increasingly, businesses are drawn to ecosystems where cross-pollination occurs between academia and industry, and where societal challenges are actively addressed through innovation.

In addition to supporting excellent individuals, organisations, or companies, ERRIN calls for a system approach and stronger support to connecting place-based R&I ecosystems that ensure lasting impacts. The current instruments such as the European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE) action and Excellence Hubs that connect ecosystems across borders are still too small and fragmented. They do not reflect the urgency to tackle Europe's fragmented R&I ecosystem highlighted by the Draghi report. Europe needs a clear, ambitious support framework to connect territorial innovation ecosystems across borders. This calls for a dedicated long-term investment in the European Innovation Ecosystems programme, with a clear framework and portfolio of support instruments.

The EIC remains an important instrument to support the market impact of European deep tech excellence, and the significant budget increase is a welcome measure to help the EIC meaningfully achieve its objectives. While big tickets are needed to meaningfully support European scale-ups, it is positive that this exists alongside continued and preferably increased investments in European Innovation Ecosystems, and – from the perspective of Horizon Europe – particularly the integration between them. To support a European innovation model, it needs to be ensured that the next generations of scale-ups can grow from anywhere in the Union, through good links between innovation ecosystems that generate easier access to the relevant ecosystem players and resources including infrastructure, investors and research competences. The effort to support European Innovation Ecosystems should build on the experience of the Regional Innovation Valleys and complemented with 'seed' grants to build connections and relations, including where relevant through cascade funding.

More detailed recommendations are available in the ERRIN FP10 paper series on Connected Regional Innovation Ecosystems.

Foster a more inclusive R&I ecosystem to close the innovation gap

In the proposal, Pillar IV will support a unified European Research Area (ERA) through three funding schemes: ERA policies, research & technology infrastructures and Widening participation. This clearer distinction reflects ERRIN's previous calls for separating ERA and Widening in terms of programming.

ERRIN welcomes that the Widening scheme is set to continue. However, there should be no restriction of access to capacity building schemes from 2030 solely to Widening countries that have increased their public spending in the prior year. R&I stakeholders should not be punished if their Member States are not increasing their R&D spending.

In addition to dedicated Widening measures, it is important to ensure that there are project coordinators from Widening countries across all pillars of Horizon Europe. There are excellence and excellent ecosystems everywhere. Therefore, having demonstrators and mentors – and not only followers – from Widening countries is essential. ERRIN has also highlighted the use of tailored positive discrimination criteria in selected calls for proposals under Horizon Europe as a means to increase engagement of stakeholders that are usually less involved in the programme. This has been successfully implemented for example under the Mission Adaptation calls (e.g. RESIST project).

Encouraging collaboration between less and more innovative ecosystems helps tackling fragmentation and tapping into capacities across territorial innovation ecosystems. This is what the Regional Innovation Valleys projects have been testing. In the Widening programme, the Excellence Hubs have also been connecting innovation ecosystems in a smaller scale. Ensuring further support to connecting ecosystems with various innovation capacities helps addressing the innovation gap and ensures lasting impacts within the territories as well as the EU innovation ecosystem. Such support needs to be strongly increased under Horizon Europe but also under the ECF that allows deployment and wide implementation of the innovations that has been tested under the framework programme.

It is also essential to enhance coordination between the Widening sub-programme and other policies sharing similar areas of impact, especially Cohesion Policy and the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs). Reports such as the one prepared by Research & Innovation and Cohesion Managing Authorities Network (RIMA), launched under the ERA action on Access to Excellence, highlight the insufficient use of synergies between Horizon Europe and Cohesion Policy. ERRIN, representing regions directly involved in implementing Cohesion Policy, is well placed to facilitate dialogue on improving these synergies. Better coordinating instruments under Horizon Europe and

Cohesion Policy requires flexibility and responsiveness to evolving priorities. The current Operational Programmes remain too rigid. More flexibility is needed to adjust actions within strategic frameworks, similar to Horizon Europe's dynamic work programmes to generate value and impact.

Furthermore, the COST programme has demonstrated significant contribution. Therefore, it should be continued with a two-fold aim: encouraging wider participation and building capacity and infrastructure in younger research environments.

More detailed recommendations are available in the ERRIN FP10 paper series on Widening.

ERRIN (European Regions Research and Innovation Network) is a Brussels-based platform that gathers over 120 regional organisations in 26 European countries. ERRIN aims to strengthen the regional and local dimension in EU Research and Innovation policy and programmes. ERRIN supports members to enhance their regional and local research and innovation capacities and further develop their research and innovation ecosystems.

This document is based on findings, dedicated exchanges and co-creative bottom-up work on the topic with ERRIN members under ERRIN Strategic Cluster. As the above recommendations are based on various experiences from place-based stakeholders and diverse views represented by ERRIN, all proposals might not be endorsed by all network members.

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