

ERIC Forum members' written contribution to ERAC ad-hoc working group on the Future of the ERA

August 2019

Introduction

What is the ERIC Forum?

The ERIC Forum brings together all European Research Infrastructure Consortia (ERICs). ERICs are legal entities based on the COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 723/2009 of 25 June. They are set-up by the European Commission upon request by a Member State and at least two other countries that are either Member States or associated countries. The aim of an ERIC is the establishment and operation of pan-European Research Infrastructures (either single-sited or distributed). At present, there are 20 ERICs based in different Member States/ Associated Country operating in a variety of scientific and scholarly domains: Energy, Environment, Health and Food, Physical Science & Engineering and Social Science & Humanities.

ERICs represent an added-value in the development of the European Research Area (ERA) and a significant improvement in the relevant scientific and technological fields. ERICs grant effective access to the European research community and the infrastructural facilities created and maintained by them. They contribute to the mobility of knowledge and/or researchers within the ERA and to the dissemination and optimisation of the results of research and development initiatives.

The ERIC Forum is based on a Memorandum of understanding signed by all ERICs aiming at providing information, best practices and potential solutions to challenges which can be faced by ERICs in the preparation or in the operation phase. It serves also as a consultation body for all EU and Member States policies related to research infrastructures and their implementation in the ERA.

Context

On 30 Nov 2018, the ERAC received a mandate from the Council of the EU to produce options for a new narrative/paradigm on the future of the ERA, and to elaborate possible future ERA objectives and priorities. [1] In this context an ad-hoc ERAC working group has produced a first draft of "Options for a new ERA narrative" and the ERIC Forum has been consulted within the ERA Stakeholders platform.

On 29th July 2019, members of the ERIC Forum attended the stakeholder consultation meeting organised by the ERAC working group on the first draft narrative. At that occasion, the ERIC Forum was invited to provide a written answer to the key questions related to the draft narrative, and to provide a broad commentary to the document.

This written contribution is a response to the above invitation, based on a consultation of the ERIC Forum. Given the limited time available for this consultation, we have captured the broad consensus of the ERIC Forum, but individual ERICs may have slightly differing priorities and additional inputs to make. The ERIC Forum will further discuss on the documents proposed by the ERAC, being one of the main ERA Stakeholders.

ERIC Forum members' position on the report

About the analysis and the call for renewed political commitment

The ERA should pave the way for the European integration in terms of science, not just free circulation of researchers and knowledge, but also promoting collaboration across Europe. Uniting Europe's research communities and bundling their forces is necessary to meet the societal challenges of Europe. These challenges, such as global warming, demographic change and other SDGs, cannot be reached by individual national efforts. Rather, a concerted European effort is necessary. The report develops, in its chapters 3 and 4, a critical analysis of the current state of the ERA implementation, along the various aspects listed in the ERA 2020 Vision produced in 2008. The analysis and the critical aspects it highlights are broadly reflective of the views of the members of the ERIC Forum.

The report rightfully underlines that while the implementation of the ERA enjoyed strong political support and momentum when first promoted in the early 2000s, that has dissipated on more recent years, in particular after the 2014 Council declaration that the ERA was "established". Correctly, the draft proposed by the ERAC WG underlines that there has been an ongoing progress by the MS in preparing ERA related actions, but that the overall momentum and coordination has strongly halted.

It is crucial that to address the pressing problems we now face, not least in terms of threats to the health of our planet and the productivity of our economies, a new common effort and a stronger momentum must be rebuilt, allowing the Member States to increase their political backing of pan-European and national research policies driven by science and innovation. The wording of the draft narrative should underline that this objective can realistically be achieved only if all Member States act coherently and involve directly all ERA stakeholders. We therefore propose that the new narrative will underline that the ERA still needs a continuous and coordinated effort to achieve the results it has envisaged. We understand and

support the shift in focus of the new ERA narrative: from connecting national and European research actors to promote innovation and foster training and education. We also welcome the willingness to work on EU ethical guidelines. But to make serious progress, the production of guidelines will not be enough.

Coming specifically to the analysis of our field of action in the ERA (research infrastructures as ERA Priority 2b and its connection to open science in Priority 5) we would like to see emphasised that, as in most other ERA priorities analysed, there is room for further action, particularly related to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Research Infrastructures: in terms of investments in technological development and models for uptake, on training and deployment, as well as governance and internationalisation.

On top of this, the full implementation of the ERIC Regulation in the various Member States is very fragmentary and limits the effective setting-up and operation of the ERICs as well as their contribution to the ERA. In particular, national ministries still struggle with the concept of ERICs, which results in several infrastructures still having trouble enforcing their rights. Such are the issues of different interpretations of tax exemptions and the impact of the contractual diversity on the mobility of researchers are strongly affecting most ERICs which operate with a distributed approach in several Member Countries. The ERIC Forum holds expertise on how to improve these implementations of the ERIC Regulation.

About the content proposed for the narrative

We strongly support the concept that knowledge and people are the strategic resources of competitive advantage, and that this requires a strong ERA policy framework. However, in our opinion, the basic priorities of the ERA as set out in the 2008 definition of a “2020 Vision for the European Research Area” still hold true, such as optimal transnational cooperation, circulation of knowledge as well as access to and transfer of scientific knowledge.

The new ERA narrative for the period after 2020 does not have to be fundamentally rewritten. Taking into account the present low momentum in the implementation of the ERA as well as the general political framework, outreaching to several other actors poses the risk of further diluting the efforts towards the consolidation of the ERA. Instead, it needs to focus on delivering on its goals in a concrete and tangible manner. For this to happen, we agree that renewed political commitment for the ERA is needed, as well as a stronger emphasis on joint coordinated actions at the national, regional and European level.

Communicate a clear and actionable vision

Beyond the content of the new narrative, the structure and language are also critical. It is easy to imagine a set of policy initiatives based on the key language and concepts coming out

of the narrative. That language should be useful and accessible for the full spectrum of European stakeholders. In its current form, the new narrative emphasises ‘knowledge’, and proposes a new, dynamic model which may only have clear understanding by an experienced but limited audience. It is good to have this underlying dynamic model, but the rhetorical reliance on ‘knowledge’ as an understood and accepted common European value may not be widely accepted or understood beyond an elite circle. Conceptually the motivations may be justified, but the text needs to more clearly communicate a clear and actionable vision.

In the case of ERICs, and other RIs, knowledge is realised in very concrete and tangible ways through people and access to assets. In order to communicate effectively in the political and public sphere how the ERA will affect the lives of citizens, we recommend a shift away from abstract, academic policy language, and instead adopt a communication style with a more accessible and direct language that is easily understood. Benefits rather than modalities should be emphasised.

Coming to the titles of the proposed narrative, the need of the ERA is both of an “expansion” and of a “deepening” or stronger “rooting” inside each Member State to allow it to be better connected to the “cultural soil” of their (diverse) scientific environments. Roots are naturally capable to develop “smart directionality” and respond to the differences in the local environment. And this concept may respond better to the need to narrate how the ERA policy framework should embrace Europe’s diversity.

Connect policies

Investments in research and research infrastructures must connect better with adjacent (investment) policies and should be based discussion and coordination at the highest European level. Therefore, the recommendation about the European Semester is welcomed, as it can significantly help aligning the policies of Member States, as well as the implementation of their policies.

The proposed focus on interacting with all relevant sectoral policies while embracing Europe’s diversity is a conceptual aspect which should be embedded in the narrative, and not remain separate declarations without a real impact.

ERICs as a strong example

Regarding the need of concrete and tangible actions we believe that specific examples should be developed, for which the past ERA investments link seamlessly into new perspectives. In this respect, the example of the ERICs is a strong and specific case in which Member States (and Associate and non-Members, in many cases) have agreed to integrate their resources to

respond to global requirements in all fields, from Environment to Medicine, to Social Sciences and Humanities. With the ERICs, the MS/AC developed a backbone of European Entities rooted in most Member States, which effectively act as references for the research environment, but involving also, dynamically, a number of different stakeholders in Innovation, Technology, Industry and Society at large.

The concept of “lighthouses”, as outlined in the last paragraph, is still not completely clear and probably needs some more specific example, to lessen the risk of being seen as yet another “buzzword” in the already crowded glossary of the ERA and EU Framework.

Why not use the examples of the “lighthouse effect” that some historically successful research infrastructures have been providing, with excellent results on the knowledge production as well as on the technological advances? The cases of RI’s – either from EMBL, CERN, ESA and other EIROforum RIs, or from the ERICs and the growing experience of the new infrastructures developed under the ESFRI Roadmap – could have a stronger credibility and impact. These have proven to be well rooted in the different research systems in Europe and have a proven track record which could be a solid reference base for the design of new, real, lighthouses.

Implementation of ERA

Implementation of ERA should also involve the Commission, not only Member States, as EU support needs to step in where there is need for coordination and individual Member States’ efforts fall short. For example, challenge-driven research has been established as a major pillar of research policy in Europe. Challenge-driven research (and directional research), however, must mean flexibility in the way research projects are conducted and, thus, in the funding schemes that are available to them. While research must be oriented towards the challenges at hand, the available funding must be oriented towards the research necessary, not the other way round. For the successful implementation of ERA, the EU and Member States must make sure to provide the funding that best serves the given research needs. The ERIC Forum will periodically produce science policy recommendations to optimize Europe’s research and innovation ecosystem in light of the trans- and multinational services offered by the ERICs. For instance, the first report will address the funding mechanisms for trans-and multinational projects requesting ERIC services, a challenge for both EU and national funding bodies.

How can the ERIC Forum best be involved in the further design and implementation of ERA?



ERIC Forum very much appreciated the initiative of ERAC to invite several stakeholders to the consultation process, demonstrating that the ERAC is open to collaborate with more organisations.

However, to make sure this is not a singular event, we would welcome the current channel of communication to be consolidated and suggest the establishment of a permanent platform for consultation with regular meetings that would allow stakeholders and ERAC to take the pulse of the implementation through the new strategic period. As representative of all ERICs, the ERIC Forum would be happy to be part of such a platform.

[1] Council conclusions of 30 November 2018 on the governance of the ERA: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14989-2018-INIT/en/pdf>

