

# The Role of ERICs in the 10th Framework Programme (FP10)

An ERIC FORUM Position Paper

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements, global interconnectedness and societal challenges, the importance of robust Research Infrastructures in Europe cannot be overstated. European Research Infrastructure Consortia (ERICs), currently include 28 organisations. They are an essential element of the European Research Area, transcending national boundaries. After more than a decade of operation, ERICs are proving themselves to be strategic assets and to be among the most effective instruments of Europe for achieving scientific, technological, and societal impact.

The ERIC Forum acknowledges the European Commission's continuous support for ERICs in Horizon Europe, notably through targeted INFRA program calls and initiatives like the European Open Science Cloud (EOSC). These actions have significantly bolstered the operation and upskilling of ERICs, enhancing their contribution to Europe's scientific and innovation landscape. This foundation is crucial for ERICs' continued success, sustainability and growth also under the 10th Framework Programme (FP10).

That programme is poised to be among the world's leading research funding programmes. It will significantly influence the direction and capability of the existing ERICs and their stakeholders. For that reason, the ERIC Forum presents the following considerations for FP10, focusing on funding, consolidation, structural support, governance, innovation, and access:

## 1. **Enhanced Funding Modalities for ERICs to Leverage Assets and Services**

The ERIC Forum recommends increased direct funding from the European Commission for operational support. ERICs have expanded their operations beyond their initial focus of fostering collaboration and supporting fundamental research embedded in their statutes. They now offer services that not only support basic research but also serve investigators that tackle broad societal issues and align with EU policy goals, serving as key instruments in translating policies into actionable, impactful outcomes. This evolution underscores the critical need to safeguard and potentially increase their operational budget under specific funding pillars, as the unique and tangible benefits they deliver - ranging from addressing climate change to advancing health and digitalisation - demonstrate their indispensable role in achieving the broader objectives of the European Union.

However, despite this expanded mission, the support ERICs receive from Member States (MS) remains tied to their original, narrower aims. Consequently, it is essential for the EC to engage in dialogue with MS to support for enhanced budgets under Structural Funds where applicable, recognizing the broadened scope and increased value ERICs now offer in alignment with EU objectives. There is also a clear need to revisit the funding models of past and current Framework Programmes (FPs). Significant leverage for broader impacts can be achieved by direct European

Commission (EC) funding to ERICs, underscoring the EC's crucial goal and responsibility to support these EU consortia in their operation (including financial support for e.g. outreach and educational activities). Through such direct support, the EC not only underscores the mission and impact of ERICs but also amplifies their reach and visibility across Europe and beyond, reinforcing the role of ERICs in advancing research and innovation at a continental level. This enables more effective and efficient utilisation of existing Member State assets – research facilities, repositories, instruments, people – with reasonable additional co-funding. This presents an opportunity for the EC to ensure ERICs continue to significantly contribute to European scientific excellence and competitiveness in alignment with EU policy priorities.

## **2. Recognition of the Existing ERICs as Strategic Assets by their Stakeholders and Resulting Consolidation of the European RI Landscape**

At the ERIC Forum General Assembly in February 2024, it has been acknowledged that the current 28 ERICs are essential and strategic assets for their MS and Europe. Together, they offer the broadest catalogue of services to scientific communities ranging from the social, life, and environmental sciences all the way to astronomy, physics and engineering. Building on the unprecedented achievements of the past decade, Europe now is asked to consolidate the current RI arena and focus in the next phase in terms of support and financial program (FP 10 and INFRADEV calls) on the exploitation of existing ERICs as strategic assets rather than funding more efforts towards projects in preparation for future ERICs. New initiatives can build instead on existing infrastructure whenever possible and consider how their needs can be addressed by working jointly with the ERICs already being in place.

## **3. Expanding Geographical Inclusion and Structural Support**

Participation in ERICs by Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries underscores the need for inclusivity, reflecting a major challenge addressed by the EC to rebalance the innovation ecosystems across Europe, as highlighted by the innovation scoreboard. ERICs, particularly those with distributed RIs featuring nodes in the CEE region, are highly beneficial and even key in this rebalancing effort, working in tandem with MS to enhance regional innovation capacities. While Structural Funds have traditionally supported such endeavours, the provision of direct funding to ERICs presents an opportunity to significantly broaden their impact, facilitating more equitable access to cutting-edge research facilities and fostering a more cohesive innovation ecosystem throughout Europe. Carrying the RI costs in a fair and proportionate way is a prerequisite for all MS to have open access to the resources and services ERICs offer. The FP10 should build synergies with EU Structural Funds and include more calls in the Widening Instrument to provide support for access to enhance participation and the development of national nodes within ERICs. This should be further supported with direct funding to ERICs as research infrastructure to support their access for countries that do not participate as ERIC members. This will foster a more balanced and comprehensive European research ecosystem.

#### 4. **Adapting and Enhancing Governance Models**

The governance structures of ERICs, designed to operate large-scale RIs and facilitate collaborative research across MS, are crucial for their success. Insights from new governance models such as European Digital Infrastructure Consortia (EDICs), may showcase the potential of adaptable and innovative governance models for ERICs in the rapidly evolving landscape of European Research Infrastructures. The FP10 should provide the means to ERICs in refining their governance to remain agile and responsive to the changing research environment, ensuring that they continue to meet the needs of the European Research Area (ERA) effectively. Additional funding for governance development and management training in this area could have a significant impact on their effectiveness. This type of funding is outside the scope of most operational and research budgets for ERICs and their nodes. Sustained funding is also needed for internationalization activities (e.g. participation in global initiatives, and international projects and/or cooperation).

#### 5. **Strengthening Innovation and Service to Industry**

ERICs are fundamental to research, providing critical services to scientists in academia as well as industry, and thereby contributing to European competitiveness. The engagement of ERICs with industry in particular, through services and collaboration on research, development, instrumentation or digital platforms for distributed RIs, highlights their role in advancing innovation.

The EC has acknowledged the importance of integrating ERICs with innovation programmes, notably through the EIC activities, which have been explicitly referenced since the EIC's establishment. Given this foundation, there is a pressing need for the EC to not only support but also significantly enhance the visibility and promotion of these critical interactions. ERICs have the potential to substantially contribute to various aspects of the EIC, such as offering access and expertise to start-ups through their business services or playing key roles in specific programmes like the EIC Pathfinder. The EC's active promotion and support of these synergies could unlock tremendous value, amplifying the impact of ERICs within the European innovation ecosystem. Furthermore, FP10 should continue funding calls (such as the INFRATECH calls) that establish stronger links between RIs and industry, and at the same time close the gap between technological development and provision of new services, ensuring ERICs contribute effectively to the EU's innovation landscape. Such innovation and service-related funding instruments - specifically targeting cooperation between ERICs, industry and the public sector - will exploit the potential ERICs have as a result of their unique assets and legal structure.

#### 6. **Facilitating Access to ERIC Services by European Researchers**

For researchers to fully benefit from the ERIC services now available to them, funding for access to and usage of these services (including physical, remote and virtual user access) at the European level should be continuously available. The ERICs are publicly established with a mission to serve the entire European research community, but as such they offer an opportunity for access, not a

guarantee. MS funding is essential, but it is not shared proportionately, often limited to national user access, and not sufficient for all communities to benefit from what ERICs offer. Excellence should be the criterion for entry to access for researchers, not availability of funding. Therefore, EU funding for enabling European researchers to benefit from the broad portfolio of ERIC services (such as the current TNA funding) will be key also in FP10, to realize the full potential of the existing ERICs and essential for their long-term sustainability. Additionally, increased usage of ERICs can be achieved with providing clear incentives for scientists in calls under Pillar 2 or the ERC, including eventually a request for justification by the applicant in case such ERIC services are not being used.

In conclusion, the ERIC Forum looks towards FP10 and its readiness to provide a successful future for the 28 ERICs. A strategic, supportive, and inclusive approach is vital for the sustained growth and impact of ERICs for the coming decade. European Research Infrastructures are foundational to the ambitions of the European scientific community and will continue to lead in scientific excellence, innovation, and collaborative discovery. Adequate EU funding will be imperative to achieve sustained scientific, social and economic impact in the long term.