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EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA
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Strategic Forum for International
S&T Cooperation

Secretariat

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NOTE

From: SFIC Secretariat
To: SFIC delegations
Subject: SFIC Opinion on a New European Research Area

Delegations will find attached the SFIC Opinion on a New European Research Area as approved by SFIC in the written procedure that ended Friday 6 November 2020 (cob).

SFIC opinion on a New European Research Area

This opinion of the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC) is focused on the international dimension of the ERA and the way that this perspective is addressed in the new Commission Communication “A new ERA for Research & Innovation” (COM(2020) 628) and hence does not cover all the elements included in the communication.

Background:

The process towards achieving a European Research Area (ERA) started more than 20 years ago with the ambition to create a single, borderless market for research, innovation and technology across the EU. However, progress in achieving the different ERA priorities has been slowing down and is still uneven and the divide in STI capacities among Member States is persisting. Therefore, and in the context of a general revision of the ERA Advisory Structure, a process to renew the political commitment towards the ERA and recalibrate its priorities has started in 2018.

In this context SFIC

- Recalls the overall goal of ERA (COM (2000) 6; COM(2007) 161; (2009/C 25/01)) and the dedicated ERA priorities (COM(2012) 392; 17649/12) with international cooperation being embedded as a horizontal issue, SFIC being created in this context (16763/08) and with the Council Conclusions 2014 and 2015 (8975/15) and (9351/15) specifically recognising international cooperation as one of the ERA-priorities.
- Acknowledges the progress made so far as stated in the ERA progress reports such as the one of 2018 (COM(2019) 83) and the regular monitoring of the national action plans and the progress made on national level (e.g. WK 9405/2020 INIT).
- Recalls the preparatory work towards the revamping of the ERA such as the Council Conclusions 2018 (14989/18), and the ERAC Opinion on the Future of the ERA (ERAC 1201/20).

- Recalls the SFIC report on a Benchmarking Exercise on Strategies and Roadmaps for International Cooperation in R&I and the SFIC opinion on “Relevance of International Cooperation in Research and Innovation for the EU - boosting the international dimension of the ERA and Horizon Europe”.
- Takes note of the Commission Communication “A new ERA for Research & Innovation” (COM(2020) 628) and the related Staff Working Document (SWD(2020) 214) and the Communication on “Achieving the European Education Area by 2025” COM(2020) 625 both from 30th September 2020.
- Takes note of the association policy under Horizon Europe as the strongest form of international cooperation in the field of R&I that through a new category of association is even wider than under Horizon 2020. This is complemented by other opportunities for entities from third countries to participate in collaborative R&I projects e.g. in Pillars 1 and 2 of Horizon Europe.
- Points out that reaching the goals of major European strategies, such as the European Green Deal and the Digital Agenda and addressing global challenges and developments cannot be achieved by any single European country but require close collaboration with partners from the rest of Europe and across the world. The need for collaboration is particularly important in the field of R&I.
- Notes that major developments, such as in artificial intelligence and big data, that will increasingly shape the world, are emerging from regions other than Europe. A renewed ERA will urgently need solutions based on a joint European approach on how to cooperate with those third countries that are driving forward these developments and on how to position Europe in this rapidly changing environment.

- In consideration of all the above, SFIC expresses its surprise and regret with the limited and not explicit importance given to international cooperation in its own right in the concept of a new ERA in the Commission Communication. While there is a paragraph on the “Geopolitical Dimension of ERA”, this paragraph remains purely descriptive and could have been clearer, more ambitious and include a vision for action.
In addition, notes that none of the 14 concrete actions defined in the Communication focuses on international STI cooperation, or sufficiently reflects a geopolitical dimension, which has been clearly stressed by Commission President Von der Leyen.
- States its support towards a generally open, yet strategic approach towards internationalisation described as “purposeful openness” in the Commission Communication, meaning the alignment with EU policies, taking into account reciprocity and protecting / promoting EU vital interests in close cooperation between the Commission and the international strategies of Member States (MS) and Associated Countries (AC).
- Points out the urgency to join forces towards global challenges and to develop strategies on how to strengthen Europe’s position in the world, together with a strong element of jointly building up strategic intelligence, in a comprehensive manner as our global competitors have long been doing.
- Takes note of the Commission Work Programme for 2021 that includes among the key strategic initiatives to be adopted next year, a Communication on the Global Approach to research, innovation, education and youth.
- Reiterates the SFIC Opinion on international research and innovation cooperation (ERAC-SFIC 1360/19) that has referred to joint areas for cooperation and has clearly pointed out the urge for a strong element of European collaboration in international cooperation in a renewed ERA between the Commission, MS and AC.

- Supports a renewed focus on and commitment to the freedom of scientific research as a universal right and public good and its role in global research collaborations, as stated in the Bonn declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research of 20th October 2020. This includes issues related to risks of international cooperation in terms of e.g. research integrity, treatment of data, protection of intellectual property rights and use of technology.

Recommendations:

Based on the background, the achievements and ongoing revision process SFIC states the following recommendations to the Commission, the Council, the ERA bodies and relevant stakeholders:

1. The Council Conclusions on the Commission’s communication on a new ERA should include a strong element on the relevance and role of international cooperation in STI for achieving the ERA and the contribution of R&I to establish a stable multipolar world order, to stress the Council’s commitment in this respect.
2. Our major competitors such as the USA and China follow bold and stringent strategic approaches, on how to strengthen their own positions. Europe urgently needs an adequate answer on this and MS, AC and COM need to join forces towards developing strategies on how to strengthen Europe’s global role in R&I, together with an element of building up strategic intelligence in a comprehensive manner as our global competitors have been doing for a long time.
3. An updated international cooperation strategy in R&I of the Commission should include a clear reference on the envisaged cooperation between the MS, AC and the Commission in the ERA context. One such example is the joint work on the Commission’s multiannual roadmaps for R&I cooperation with third countries and regions with a stronger integration of the MS and AC perspective and priorities. Another example would be consolidating the participation of MS and AC in the Commission’s strategic dialogues with third countries and regions setting priorities in view of funding opportunities in Horizon Europe.

4. The future governance of the ERA should take into account the necessity of exchanging, coordinating and potentially aligning positions and activities in international STI cooperation and provide for a related structure like the current SFIC, where MS, AC and the Commission can come together on a regular, formalised basis.
5. Bilateral and multilateral scientific cooperation with non-associated third countries and regions should be maintained and better coordinated at European level. In addition to high-level policy dialogues and senior official meetings, MS and AC should also coordinate their activities with these countries, they should share best practices and possibilities for joint cooperation. Protecting the EU's strategic interest necessitates even stronger coordination efforts in the future.
6. Underlines the importance of the future European Research Area to include a visible and ambitious international cooperation section together with concrete actions, focusing on challenges that require international cooperation (e.g. but not limited to green transition, digitalisation, health and especially COVID19). In this context, capacity building activities and facilities for research excellence should also be considered.
7. With view to the content and topics for strategically approaching international cooperation, SFIC sees merit especially in jointly
 - identifying among MS and the Commission priorities for R&I cooperation with third countries and regions along the EU priorities with focus on a stronger alignment of activities and approaches towards the “purposeful openness” objective of the EU;
 - implementing the close partnership between MS and the Commission through policy dialogues, STI agreements and Science Diplomacy;
 - enhancing the strategic intelligence about the R&I systems of relevant third countries /regions; establishment/maintenance of an adequate joint evidence base through collection of relevant data – e.g. via the EU Research and Innovation Observatory (RIO) may be used in this context. This should also include coordinated multi-level foresight and monitoring of the impact of EU's international R&I cooperation;

- supporting a stronger and deepened integration of both associated and non-associated accession countries and, as relevant, neighbourhood countries into the European Research Area. This includes the implementation or upscaling of related activities, including capacity building activities;
- developing a focus on R&I cooperation strategic partner countries and regions such as the Eastern and Southern partnerships and the Euro-Mediterranean region, the Western Balkans, Africa or the Indo-Pacific region;
- promoting the international cooperation aspect in the European framework programmes for research and innovation;
- promoting shared European values in all international cooperation activities and the support of EU/national/regional stakeholders in implementing this;
- assessing the approaches and potential of Science Diplomacy with view to its joint implementation by MS and the Commission and formulating a “European Science Diplomacy Strategy”.

Finally, SFIC would like to underline its commitment and readiness to continue the work of facilitating the further consolidation, implementation and monitoring of the international dimension of the European Research Area, in close cooperation between the European Union, its Member States and the Associated Countries to strengthen Europe as a global STI leader.