

## Open letter to Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation

Ekaterina Zaharieva

Dear Commissioner Zaharieva,

EURASHE **congratulates you** on your new role as Commissioner for Startups, Research, and Innovation. At a time when the European Union faces significant geopolitical challenges, your role is crucial to advancing the priorities outlined by President Ursula von der Leyen, particularly in strengthening Europe's competitiveness.

We are confident that your leadership will **bring fresh momentum** to the Commission's efforts in empowering start-ups, driving research excellence, fostering innovation, and ensuring sustainable growth across the Union. R&I must be at the heart of a strong and united European Union. EURASHE is ready to support you to build a more competitive, sustainable and inclusive Europe.

EURASHE is the **European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education**, the leading voice for applied sciences and professional higher education in Europe. With its 80 members from across Europe and beyond, EURASHE advocates for the interests of more than 500 applied Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Founded in 1991, EURASHE has a mission to promote practice-based education and research at both national and European levels. As a consultative member of the **Bologna Follow Up Group** and a higher education stakeholder in the ERA Forum, we are committed to fostering international cooperation and supporting policy making.

Applied universities have a distinct and crucial role in the European R&I ecosystem. Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) and similar HEIs can be essential **sources of innovation capacity** by transforming knowledge into practical applications and marketable innovations. UAS are deeply embedded in their regions and have strong ties to local industry, civil society and policy-makers. They play an important role in **regional innovation by promoting entrepreneurship and providing research-based training** based on local challenges, opportunities and market demands. The entrepreneurial mindset instilled in UAS graduates is key to driving the necessary commercialisation of knowledge in Europe, ultimately boosting European competitiveness.

**R&I is deeply interconnected with education.** Inclusive and high-quality education lays the foundation for nurturing the next generation of researchers and innovators to work towards solving today's and tomorrow's challenges. It is therefore essential that the services you are responsible for **collaborate closely** with those under the responsibility of Commissioner Roxana Mînzatu.

**Strong support for R&I from the EU** is crucial to unleash its full potential to boost competitiveness in all European regions. In October 2024, EURASHE published its [vision for a future framework programme](#). Irrespective of whether this is a standalone programme or part of a wider competitiveness fund, our main arguments remain the same:

- **Increase the budget to €200 billion** to strengthen European unity, boost R&I capacity, and advance critical areas like green technologies and AI while enabling broader participation and fostering innovation ecosystems.
- **Lower administrative barriers** to enable smaller organisations, such as UAS and SMEs, to access funding more easily, facilitating quicker and more flexible collaboration.
- **Maintain the balance between basic and applied research** to foster scientific discoveries while enabling firms to commercialise innovations, helping Europe to remain competitive with global actors like the U.S. and China.
- **Keep funding programmes that integrate research, education and enterprise**, such as the European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT). This fosters pan-European innovation ecosystems, contributes to scaling up, addresses regional imbalances, and enhances skilled workforce development, particularly in high-tech sectors.
- **Design greater synergies** with other EU funding programmes, for example by increasing pressure to fund Seal of Excellence projects by the European Structural and Investment Funds, and exploring creative synergies with Erasmus+.
- **Enhance the proof of concept** by increasing funding and project duration to foster quick commercialisation of frontier research.
- **Strengthen the widening participation programme** to reduce the innovation gap by improving access to competitive funding for institutions and researchers from widening countries, fostering scientific cooperation, and enhancing R&I capacity.
- **Promote the principle of "as Open as possible, as closed as necessary"** and increase FAIR data, to ensure high-quality, inclusive and reproducible research while balancing openness with the need to protect sensitive knowledge and encourage private investment.

**We are confident that, under your leadership, the European Commission will continue to drive innovation, strengthen competitiveness, and foster an inclusive and sustainable future for Europe.** EURASHE stands ready to support your efforts with our expertise and commitment to the applied sciences and higher education sector.

We look forward to collaborating closely with you and all relevant stakeholders to advance these important priorities and ensure that research and innovation remain at the heart of Europe's economic and societal progress.



**Hannes Raffaseder**  
EURASHE President