

#WIRE2024



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Week of Innovative Regions in Europe (WIRE)

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Week of Innovative Regions in Europe Conference 2024 Conference conclusions

Set of recommendations for fostering a high-quality, innovative European regional collaboration and closing the innovation gap

The Week of Innovative Regions in Europe (WIRE) Conference serves as the main European policy forum dedicated to innovation and regional development. In 2024, it was organized by Hungary's National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (NRDIO) under the Hungarian EU presidency in Budapest on November 13-14, supported by the European Commission.

The conference theme aligned with the priorities of the Hungarian presidency and fostered discussions about the European Union's competitiveness in the coming years. This event brought together key players from the innovation and education ecosystems to enhance science-based competitiveness. Discussions contributed to analysing the current state of European regions, identifying challenges, and sharing best practices. The conference placed great emphasis on the importance of reducing innovation gaps within Europe, presenting the experiences of the Eastern and Central European regions, including Hungarian good practices.

Participants stressed the importance of developing interconnected regional ecosystems to strengthen EU cooperation. They agreed that bridging the innovation gap remains a significant challenge that requires action at the European, national, and local level. Achieving effective funding synergies also emerged as a priority, requiring effective planning, awareness raising, and sharing of good practices. The importance of the involvement of all ecosystem actors was stressed, including the need for deeper involvement of the private sector, for example through targeted initiatives such as the Regional Innovation Valleys. During the two-day event, there was a strong call for these thematic areas to be given a central place in the next EU Framework Programme, reflecting the importance of innovation ecosystems in achieving long-term competitiveness.

The program explored various initiatives, concepts, and tools introduced by the European Union, such as the Smart Specialisation strategies, the European and Regional Innovation Scoreboards and the New European Innovation Agenda. To provide a comprehensive and detailed overview, speakers evaluated the effectiveness of these tools, presented successful practices, and highlighted synergies between European and regional funding schemes.

The first day, titled “Role of Regions in Fostering the Quadruple Helix Innovation Ecosystem” covered a variety of topics, including regional development traps in Europe and how to overcome them with incorporating success stories and potential solutions. Discussions were about fostering regional innovation through innovation ecosystems, tools for boosting regional competitiveness, and Hungary’s practice for fostering regional innovation through the TIP (Regional Innovation Platform) concept.

On the second day, titled “Role of Regions in Overcoming the Fragmentation of the European Innovation Ecosystem”, participants explored the 2024 Regional Innovation Scoreboard and its implications, the validity of traditional innovation measurement tools, and strategies for increasing regional competitiveness. Other topics included the dynamics of innovation gaps, the role of regions in fostering innovation, and the introduction of the Regional Innovation Valley concept. The conference concluded with a plenary session on the future directions of the 10th Framework Programme and enhancing synergies between the Framework Programmes and the Structural Funds with Manuel Heitor, the chair of the High-Level Group on FP10.

“The WIRE conference has captured a particularly important moment in the development of the European RDI strategy,” said Magda de Carli, Head of Unit of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, highlighting that the role of regions is also at the forefront of the new European Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. The discussions and valuable ideas presented at the event are expected to contribute to strengthening Europe’s competitiveness through R&I cooperation.



The speakers at the conference emphasised the growing importance of using the European Innovation Scoreboard to measure disparities both between and within member states, noting its increasing relevance as a tool for policy development. They also highlighted the value of international databases, which allow lower performing regions to analyse the practices of leading innovators in detail. This access fosters learning and improvement while opening up opportunities for long-term partnerships between regions with shared interests and challenges. There was a strong consensus on the urgent need to bridge the innovation gap and reduce regional disparities, with an emphasis on designing inclusive solutions. Advancing regional cohesion was identified as a key driver of European competitiveness and economic growth, with inclusivity, flexibility, the green transition, and new technologies seen as essen-

tial components. The potential of local AI was introduced as a solution to support communities in tackling everyday challenges such as city management, public transport organization, and security systems, thereby contributing to the reduction of social and regional inequalities.

Throughout the discussions, it was stressed that a more active involvement of regions is critical, particularly for supporting moderate innovator countries in building their capacities and accessing more opportunities. It was pointed out that 40% of the EIT budget is dedicated to widening regions, which generate 60% of the results, reinforcing the need for continued support to ensure that innovation is spread across all regions of Europe. One speaker emphasised the importance of prioritizing the “widening” of engagement, ensuring all regions can actively participate and benefit from the upcoming framework programme, FP10.

The need to keep less innovative regions up to date in key research and innovation areas was also highlighted, as their active participation is essential for achieving balanced regional development. Addressing the innovation gap between leading member states and moderate innovator countries through capacity building is vital for fostering a more inclusive European innovation landscape. It was emphasised that the creation of tools that are both understandable and accessible, along with distributed approaches, can help bridging the gaps between more and less developed regions, promoting greater inclusion across the EU.

The concept of local AI was discussed as a powerful tool for improving communities' everyday life, addressing issues such as city

management, public transport, and security. The panelists argued that for Europe to strengthen its AI sector, cities must control their own data and consider the social impact of technological developments. This aligns with Europe's unique advantage – the social economy model, which prioritizes social welfare alongside technological progress, setting Europe apart from global competitors. Additionally, the importance of smart specialization as a regional development tool was emphasised, allowing regions to focus innovation efforts while remaining adaptable to new domains such as climate change and resource management. Finally, the conference highlighted how research and innovation (R&I) activities are increasingly recognized in the EU, with the Draghi report deeming them crucial for European competitiveness.



Message

02

Shared and accessible research infrastructures and data boost regional cooperation.

The future of research infrastructures relies heavily on fostering cooperation across borders, especially between Eastern and Western Europe. Regional cooperation can be significantly enhanced through shared research infrastructures, with a focus on minimizing duplication and maximizing resources, particularly through Horizon funds. The speakers at the conference addressed the need to balance the growth of infrastructure with the necessity for clear coordination, and one speaker emphasised the importance of keeping infrastructure methodologies transferable and scalable.

The speakers also agreed on the importance of developing international and national policy measures that connect regional actors. One speaker highlighted that reviewing data and trends from the past helps regional policymakers make informed decisions about future directions, identify potential opportunities, and evaluate where regions' performances need improvement. "Every region has some assets that they can capitalize on," he noted.

New regions were also encouraged to engage in projects that contribute to a more connected ecosystem and European growth. Infrastructures were emphasised as vital forms of interregional platforms, and it was noted that existing data frameworks need to be expanded to collect data on synergies and promote examples of good practice. The key advantages of international datasets include helping regions set clear priorities, monitor performance regularly, identify areas with higher potential, highlight region-specific challenges, build tailored initiatives, compare scores with leading regions, attract investment, and foster long-term partnerships based on common grounds.

The need for an integrative approach in managing research infrastructures was stressed, with an emphasis on collaboration and potential merging where feasible. National-level efforts in infrastructure coordination were also considered

crucial, and the importance of avoiding divisions in infrastructure management was highlighted. One speaker underscored the need to leverage Horizon Europe funds more equitably to boost cooperation and scale infrastructure development, expressing hope that international best practices could be more widely adopted within Hungary's network.

The central point of the discussion was that research infrastructures should promote regional cooperation across Europe without creating artificial barriers. As one speaker noted, "We need to work together whatever the definitions are." Additionally, it was pointed out that innovation goes beyond technological advancements and includes process innovation. Looking ahead, successful regional development will require close collaboration and knowledge exchange between regions to better support SMEs and enhance competitiveness.



Message

03

Strengthening collaboration within the quadruple helix of regions is of crucial importance.

The discussion frequently emphasised putting people at the center of innovative solutions, fostering cohesion between and within regions, and maintaining an inclusive perspective.

The speakers highlighted the critical importance of fostering stronger collaboration between researchers, scientists, and local industry players, while also stressing the need to retain talent within regional boundaries. Engaging SMEs in regional innovation projects remains a major challenge, as local cultural attitudes significantly influence how these entities approach innovation. For example, regions with a more risk-averse mindset may be less open to exploring unfamiliar or high-risk ventures. Understanding these local dynamics is essential for crafting tailored strategies that resonate with SMEs, facilitating their active involvement in innovation efforts, and driving regional economic growth.

The concept of Regional Innovation Valleys (RIVs) was discussed, with the speakers emphasising the importance of strengthening collaboration within the quadruple helix (public authorities, industry, academia, and civil society), noting that RIVs are innovative in fostering new types of collaboration between regions. The issue of engaging companies more in regional innovation ecosystems was also raised, as it is seen as a significant bottleneck to solve. The speakers underscored the crucial role of regional innovation ecosystems in fostering collaboration between researchers, laboratories, universities, and companies, while emphasising the need for cooperation between the private and public sectors.

The importance of practical, innovative tools for fostering better collaboration between stakeholders, such as regional innovation centres, was also highlighted. The role of digitalization in capacity building, reforming administration, and facilitating better communication between enterprises, public administration, and people was another key point of discussion. A major challenge identified was improving collaboration between scientists and industry players. The issue of academia and industry working together more closely in the RDI field was raised, with one speaker noting that advancing cooperation is essential for productivity, although it is not always easy in practice.

There is also a push to make research infrastructures more accessible to the business sector and strengthen connections with it, though researchers' hesitance to cooperate with industry remains a challenge. This process requires time, and

it is crucial to highlight the benefits of such cooperation for researchers. The need to develop activities in green industries, invest in education and research, and enhance collaboration between regions was also stressed. Policy interventions targeting regions with complex economic and social disadvantages were seen as essential, along with structural investments in education, research, and institutions to facilitate progress.

Finally, the importance of collaboration in the future Framework Programme 10 was emphasised, with a call to join forces for a strong research and innovation framework. The challenges of fostering collaboration between different regional stakeholders within the quadruple helix model were noted, with the observation that similar mentalities across regions can both benefit and challenge efforts to share information and coordinate initiatives.



Message

04

Fostering synergies between European policy programs maximizes research and development impacts.

The speakers agreed on the importance of fostering synergies between cohesion-policy programs and Horizon Europe to maximize the impacts of research and development. While structured support mechanisms are already delivering results, aligning rules and ensuring long-term sustainability remains a challenge. To ensure

future success, greater stakeholder cooperation and strategic planning are needed. This includes alignment at both national and EU level, with a focus on long-term planning, user-friendly tools for beneficiaries, and embedding synergies into the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

The speakers emphasised the need for a robust new framework programme that retains its commitment to research, technology, and industrial competitiveness, and also highlighted the urgency of simplifying processes to reduce administrative burdens and make participation easier for stakeholders. Others agreed on the need for a coherent and simplified framework programme to eliminate fragmentation in R&I efforts across Europe. They have added that the European value of the framework programmes lies in partnerships and cross-border collaborations, stressing the importance of closely integrating skills development with research and innovation to ensure future competitiveness.

The importance of developing strategic frameworks with far-reaching goals was stressed. As one of the speakers added, it is essential to have a good infrastructure, governance, monitoring systems, and support networks in place. There was also an emphasis on the

need for a systemic approach to encouraging innovation in a fast-changing and uncertain global context. Speakers noted that in the following years cohesion will need to become just as important as excellence.

Synergies need to be addressed at the MFF level, as they are crucial for leveraging structural funds effectively. Innovation should not be limited to technological or economic advances but must extend to all fields, contributing to broader competitiveness. One speaker stressed the importance of synergies between different funding initiatives and how the region is focusing on regional missions to strengthen collaboration and innovation. She also highlighted advancements in creating synergies under Horizon Europe, drawing attention to the passing of Annex for regulations, provisions for co-funding, and the guidelines developed to clarify what is feasible. These efforts aim to support member states through best practice exchanges and additional tools under the European Research Area.



Message

05

Harmonization of policymaking on the national, regional, and European level is beneficial in the long term.

The speakers agreed on the importance that, in today's interconnected world, policymaking cannot be restricted to a single level – it must be a multi-layered approach that balances national, regional, and European needs and ambitions. On the regional level, collaboration between neighbouring countries can foster shared solutions to common challenges, such as infrastruc-

ture development, environmental sustainability, or regional security. Effective policymaking requires alignment across all levels – national, regional, and European levels. Local priorities should be considered within the framework of broader European and global goals. Multilateral cooperation is essential for tackling cross-border challenges.

One speaker recognized the need to tailor responses to societal challenges outside of traditional market mechanisms, emphasising that one of the key spheres for the future is strengthening Europe's R&I ecosystem. She stressed the importance of considering the territorial dimension and local innovation ecosystems. Better coordination between European and national funds is necessary to maximize the impact of research investments and to support high-quality proposals. Regarding the future of EU initiatives, one speaker highlighted the importance of regularly revising tools to stay up to date with new technologies and aspirations to include AI and cloud computing technologies into future data collection methods.

The necessity for more collaboration was emphasised, with a particular focus on the role of municipalities as dynamic motivators and the critical synergy between European, local, and regional levels. The true European added value of framework programmes lies in partnerships, networks, and large-scale collaboration across Europe. There is a need for local and regional dimensions, which are critical for fostering collaboration and connectivity across the continent. Europe must address structural issues

through coordinated reforms and increased strategic investments. Policymakers should play the role of "honest brokers," creating a platform that different stakeholders can trust and that addresses their needs.

One speaker raised the issue of generalization in EU projects, reminding the audience that more attention should be paid to localities and specific needs. "Success will attract more success," she highlighted, referring to the position of leading innovator countries. She emphasised that decision-makers should focus on the positive discrimination of lower-performing territories when distributing European resources. "We should have more dialogues on the local level to understand what would make a real impact," she concluded. Another speaker highlighted the need for designing solutions that are adaptable to different environments, especially for regions with different cultural heritages and social norms. She stated, "The thematic focus is calling all the actors in the ecosystem to decide on shared priorities and work on them cross-border. Policy can put directionality at the core and create a system that aligns the different agendas on these shared priorities."



Message

06

Place-based innovation ecosystems give a unique aspect to European competitiveness.

As most speakers at the conference agreed, place-based innovation ecosystems play a vital role in shaping Europe's competitiveness. They capitalize on the unique strengths, traditions, and opportunities of each region. These ecosystems enable closer cooperation between local actors such as public authorities, businesses, academia, and civil society, while fostering interregional collaboration that strengthens European research and innovation as a whole.

Speakers stressed that regional ecosystems are not only drivers of innovation but also key tools for dealing with issues such as brain drain and talent retention through targeted programmes

and innovation procurement. The territorial dimension of innovation was highlighted as essential to ensure that policies are inclusive and responsive to local needs. As the digital transition progresses, its inclusive potential is growing: technological development can happen virtually from anywhere, allowing individuals to work globally while remaining in their local communities.

The overarching conclusion of this message is that Europe's innovation strategy should embrace its territorial diversity, ensuring equal opportunities in all regions and strengthening the synergies between local resources and European-level competitiveness.



Message

07

Simplification and coherence in the European R&I framework improves efficiency.

Several speakers stressed that more simplification and coherence are crucial in the future of the European Research and Innovation (R&I) framework programmes. Simplifying funding applications and reducing bureaucratic burdens was identified as a crucial step to increase the efficiency of proposals, improve accessibility and enable more researchers and institutions to take full advantage of European opportunities, especially at regional level.

The need to simplify the proliferation of instruments and initiatives, focusing on fewer but more efficient and targeted programmes was also emphasised. According to the speakers of the conference, clear objectives, user-friendly processes and thorough testing with relevant target groups are needed to increase the impact of EU initiatives.

Overall, it is clear that a more accessible, streamlined and data-informed R&I system is key to achieving more impactful participation from regions across Europe, leading to improved competitiveness.



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