friends
of europe

Shaping the next European research and innovation framework

Recommendations from the SSH CENTRE project

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Executive Summary

Europe faces rising geopolitical risk, tougher global competition and growing pressure to deliver the green and digital transitions in a fair way. More money can help, but funding must be designed to deliver real results for European people, the economy and security. Research and innovation (R&I) is not only about new technologies. Rather, it shapes how Europe protects critical infrastructure, adapts to climate risks, strengthens industry, and builds trust in democratic institutions. Right now, a core challenge for Europe is to move faster from ideas to impact, while keeping people at the centre. That means linking R&I investment to clear public goals and making outcomes measurable and widely shared.

The negotiations over the European Union's next long-term funding package are ongoing and therefore offer an opportunity to be more aligned with the challenges brought by the geopolitical context. Against this backdrop, this report sets out recommendations regarding the next European research and innovation framework, that came out of the final conference and citizens focus groups as part of the SSH CENTRE project (Social Sciences and Humanities for Climate, Energy and Transport Research Excellence). The recommendations call for a stronger European research and innovation system through better framework conditions, deeper collaboration, strategic investment, global connectivity, and the integration of social sciences and humanities.

The discussions at the conference, which started with a public panel debate and was followed by a roundtable discussion, underlined that Europe needs a long-term budget fit for a more volatile world, with R&I a core priority, and public funding driving private sector's investment and confidence in Europe's ability to compete. At the same time, conference attendees warned that higher R&I spending at the European level will not be enough on its own, as funding discrepancies and competing political priorities at member states level are leading to reduced support for critical social sciences.

Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) should shape Europe's R&I from the start and not be treated as an appendage. This means that projects should be designed to enable the creation of strong cross-disciplinary teams and the development of "common languages". These disciplines help policymakers and innovators understand the human dimensions of change, including political dynamics, cultural norms, and ethical considerations. SSH is also vital for public trust, especially as fast-moving technologies such as artificial intelligence leave many citizens feeling excluded or anxious.

The upcoming research and innovation framework represents a crucial opportunity to focus on outcomes that matter: societal resilience, economic prosperity and a just transition to a low-carbon economy. Research and innovation can help deliver that, but only if programmes are designed to work in the real world - SSH is essential to this effort.

Recommendations from the final conference

The European and national institutions representatives, the private sector, academics and scientists who joined the conference on "Shaping the next European research and innovation framework" shared a range of ideas to take into consideration, as European institutions prepare to take fundamental decisions on the EU's long-term budget. Among them were:

1. **Improve framework conditions for European research and innovation**
Reduce administrative burdens in EU programmes while addressing wider barriers to competitiveness, such as regulatory complexity, limited private investment mobilisation, and risk-averse innovation cultures.

2. **Strengthen cross-border, cross-sector and public-private collaboration**
Expand support for transnational and transdisciplinary consortia, including industry, policymakers and civil society, and scale successful public-private partnership models that accelerate innovation uptake.

3. **Build a globally and regionally connected European R&I ecosystem**
Attract and retain international research talent, deepen cooperation with trusted partner countries, and ensure fairness and stronger alignment between EU and member-state R&I investments.

4. **Direct R&I investment towards Europe's strategic resilience priorities**
Prioritise funding that strengthens Europe's security, climate transition, health systems, and economic competitiveness in response to geopolitical instability and technological rivalry.

5. **Embed Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) as a structural pillar of European research and innovation funding**
Work towards systematic embedding of SSH across all clusters, missions and partnerships, from agenda-setting to evaluation, to ensure innovation is socially grounded, publicly trusted, and responsive to real societal needs.

Citizen recommendations for Europe's future in Research and Innovation

Capturing citizens' perspectives and expectations was a central component of the SSH CENTRE project. Friends of Europe's citizens engagement unit, Debating Europe, conducted focus groups to ensure that citizens' voices informed the public debates and recommendations to policymakers.

Debating Europe conducted a focus group series to gather citizen's perspectives, their hopes, concerns and ideas on research and innovation in the European Union. The citizens consulted in this series of focus groups expressed a strong belief in the importance of science and innovation for Europe's future, but they called for an approach that is more transparent, participatory, socially grounded and ethically conscious, and for communication that makes the European dimension of research visible, understandable and meaningfully connected to their everyday lives. They suggest to:

- **Improve the visibility and intelligibility of EU research**
  Strengthen communication and branding of EU-funded research across (social) media, digital platforms and project outputs, translating funding and results into concrete societal benefits that citizens can easily understand.

- **Strengthen local and contextual engagement**
  Bring research and innovation into community spaces such as schools, universities, libraries and local events, and tailor outreach to local challenges through participatory activities like citizen science and public debates, where citizens can encounter researchers and policy officers.

- **Combine technological innovation with social, political and ethical action**
  Avoid presenting innovation as a "magic" fix by clearly communicating that science and technology require political will, regulatory frameworks and social measures to be effective. Invest in social and behavioural sciences alongside STEM research, to ensure that ethical, societal and environmental implications are systematically considered before new technologies are deployed.

- **Address thematic priorities identified by citizens**
  Direct funding towards areas identified by citizens, including climate adaptation, sustainable energy and security, health and preventive care, social inequality and housing, mental health, digital inclusion, and democratic participation.

- **Ensure transparency and plurality in the use of evidence**
  Work toward clarifying how scientific evidence informs policymaking, strengthen transparency around lobbying and advisory processes, and include diverse evidence, expertise and perspectives in decision-making.

- **Strengthen inclusive and participatory R&I governance**
  Establish long-term mechanisms for meaningful citizen participation in research governance, ensuring diverse representation and addressing barriers such as those related to age, societal and gender.

- **Support science systems and disciplines under pressure**
  Monitor and address political or structural pressures on specific research fields, particularly social science disciplines like gender studies, and mitigate funding fragmentation across member states.

A more detailed analysis and description of the results of the citizens' engagement is contained in the Annex.

Final conference report

Introduction

Debate over the European Union's next long-term funding package is heating up. The European Commission has proposed raising its budget to almost €2tln, matching its ambitions for an "independent, prosperous, secure, and thriving society and economy over the coming decade", as set out in its MFF proposal.

The stakes are high. Squeezed both politically and economically by Putin's Russia, Xi's China and Trump's America, Europe must ensure every euro is spent with optimal effect.

Funding for Research and Development (R&I) is crucial in every area - from bolstering security, to fostering economic competitiveness, and containing global warming.

The Commission proposes doubling funding for the Horizon Europe R&I programme to €175bn through 2028-2034. Its proposals for the seven-year Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) are now being deliberated by the EU's member nations and the European Parliament.

In this political context, Friends of Europe held the concluding conference of the SSH CENTRE project (Social Sciences and Humanities for Climate, Energy and Transport Research Excellence), looking at Horizon Europe within the long-term budget, and the key question of how Europe can better connect scientific and technological advances with the social, economic and political realities that shape their impact.

The SSH CENTRE project has worked for over three years to strengthen social innovation, collaboration between SSH and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) communities and generate policy advice towards accelerating the transition to carbon neutrality. The project has engaged directly with researchers, policymakers, business, civil society and citizens and produced recommendations for the way ahead.

Discussions honed in on the role of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in not just ensuring that fast-moving, often disruptive, innovations in science and technology gain public approval, but also that science and technology deliver knowledge, know-hows and benefits tailored to society's needs, and thereby reinforcing Europe's competitiveness, security and resilience.

Financing for the unthinkable

Participants at the conference agreed that the EU needs a long-term budget that equips it for turbulent times. R&I funding has to underpin European independence and prosperity at a moment when Russia threatens wider aggression in Ukraine;

China poses growing strategic concerns; and the United States is no longer trusted as an ally in defence of democratic values. "We have to adjust to this new reality," said one speaker. Geopolitical changes that were, until recently, "unthinkable" are now "irreversible" and require urgent responses. Speakers expressed confidence that Europe would step up in answer to these unprecedented challenges, much like it pulled together in the face of the financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic.

There was broad agreement that R&I investment is essential given the current geopolitical and geo-economic uncertainties. "R&I should not be just an important topic but the most important topic, and investment in R&I the top priority," said an economist.

Moreover, public investment in research should spur private funding, nurturing a culture of confidence that can buttress competitiveness and enhance productivity. In an interconnected world, Europe will likely remain economically intertwined with China and the United States, but greater competitiveness will allow it to take a firmer stance in defence of its interests and values.

"We are being strong-armed by the US administration. Many found that the summer trade agreement, or so-called agreement, was humiliation for Europe" argued a senior official.

To change that, Europe needs more competitive research and innovation, to develop top-notch products and services. "Like it or not, Europe is and will remain dependent on the rest of the world. That's geography. Now we have become overly dependent, but we should not entertain any illusion that we can be fully independent. That's not possible. So yes, we need to be competitive," the official added.

An important positive feature of the 2028-2034 budget proposal is the opportunity to switch towards spending for common public goods for the whole EU, in terms of defence and security, competitiveness, research and innovation, climate action and resilience. That can mark a change with previous approaches to funding that triggered divisive debates on transfers between richer and poorer EU countries, often ignoring the compensatory benefits of exchanges within the single market.

Closing the research and innovation gap, the European way

Participants at the conference lamented the Trump administration's undermining of scientific thinking but saw opportunities for Europe amid the US' backsliding. As one participant noted, "The budget proposal demonstrates that we believe in science. Not so in Washington: they do whatever they can to undermine science. We do the opposite, and that in itself should be a motive for rejoicing."

There was praise for the Chose Europe initiative that encourages researchers to move to Europe at a time when the United States is shutting doors.

"We welcome researchers, and we want to enable anyone in the world to come here in Europe and to do the research that we think is great," said conference panellist

Henriette van Eijl, Head of Unit for Health and Societal Transitions at the European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. "The opportunity to learn from each other, wherever we are in the world, has to be guaranteed."

Europe can also fill gaps created by defunding of research by the United States and other players, particularly in areas such as health, environment, demography and other social sciences.

> *" The opportunity to learn from each other, wherever we are in the world, has to be guaranteed.*

Henriette van Eijl, Head of Unit for Health and Societal Transitions at the European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation

However, conference attendees warned that, even within the EU, some national governments are also cutting back in those areas. While the supranational approach of the European Union can maintain the focus and strengthen the support for "European public goods", the contribution and support for science is not even across European member states. "I live in a country where science funding is becoming ever narrow, particularly if we're talking about environmental science funding; social sciences; and even further, for the critical social sciences that criticise policy structures, policy goals, and question the societal paradigms that we're currently living within," complained one conference participant from the scientific community.

It was made clear that member-state governments should match Horizon Europe spending and make sure that national projects dovetail with EU-backed R&I.

While the increased spending foreseen in the MFF proposal was welcomed, some conference participants cautioned that cash alone will not be enough to raise Europe's competitiveness to the levels required in the current era of global rivalries. "This is not about money. This is about overregulation, red tape, costly red tape. This is about energy prices. This is about the mentality to move the idle trillions of euros sleeping in banking accounts into productive uses," said one Member of the European Parliament. "The European budget is not the miracle solution for competitiveness."

At the same time, the discussions acknowledged the differences between social and economic models between the EU and the United States. There was significant support for a European model that promotes health and social protection – and enforces fiscal prudence, against a US system which has clocked up faster growth over the past few years, but seen ballooning federal deficit and debt, heightened inequality and healthcare and social security support that continues to languish far behind European standards.

One of the roundtable participants argued that, if the United States were subject to European fiscal rules, the growth differential between the two economies would likely be negligible. From this perspective, stronger growth in the US has been enabled in part by looser budgetary discipline and rising public debt, an approach many traditional economists in Europe would view as fiscally unsustainable and undesirable to replicate.

Europe should not seek to replicate American growth models or Silicon Valley–style entrepreneurial culture , but one area where it can learn from the United States is in evolving a less risk-averse approach to business that creates better opportunities for young entrepreneurs. "We have to have a different attitude to risk-taking … the key to competitiveness is investment. If you don't risk money, personal energies, material into something new, you will never discover anything interesting."

From the industry side, one participant at the roundtable from the private sector noted how Europe's strength in developing partnerships between the private and public sectors in areas such as healthcare is promoting cutting-edge innovation on this side of the Atlantic.

"It's one of those examples where this is only possible in Europe," they said of a link-up producing ground-breaking advances in stroke and cancer care. "This kind of private-public partnership does not exist in the United States. It does not exist in China." Such partnerships are also contributing to European companies emerging as market leaders in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in healthcare, they added.

Contributors to the debate from outside the EU highlighted the advantages of international R&I cooperation, particularly the inclusion of 'trusted partners' such Canada and the United Kingdom in Horizon Europe-supported programmes.

From appendage to pillar: centring Social Sciences and Humanities

Speakers agreed that SSH must have a central role in Horizon Europe research, rather than as a mere appendage to developments STEM.

"There is a huge appetite and demand for SSH. There is a huge demand for doing more," said van Eijl, "social sciences and humanities: they are absolutely important."

Rosie Robison, Professor at Anglia Ruskin University and co-lead of the SSH CENTRE (Social Sciences and Humanities for Climate, Energy and Transport Research Excellence) project, noted how SSH is essential for appreciation of how innovative developments impact within wider society:

> " *There is a huge appetite and demand for SSH. There is a huge demand for doing more.*

Henriette van Eijl

"In an era where one of the buzzwords is 'simplification,' we all know how complex, in fact, humans and society are," she said. "These disciplines really help us to understand that complexity and bring incredibly important perspectives when it comes to green and sustainability transitions."

Her fellow Anglia Ruskin professor and SSH CENTRE co-lead, **Chris Foulds** expanded on the wider function of social sciences and humanities.

"SSH isn't just about trying to get someone to change their behaviour, or just engage someone, or do the right communications. It can do an awful lot more, in terms of understanding politics and policymaking, how institutional protocols shape action, how leadership and organisational strategy matter," he noted. "Ideas of fairness, justice, religion, what is right for society? These are big questions that I think we can answer. So, it would be a missed opportunity if SSH is just added on to projects or to R&I thinking just as a way of trying to get tech across the ground."

> ❝ *In an era where one of the buzzwords is 'simplification,' we all know how complex, in fact, humans and society are.*

Rosie Robison, Professor at Anglia Ruskin University and co-lead of the SSH CENTRE

SSH can also play a key role in managing public acceptance over new science and technological change, and overcome the growing trust gap between the public, media and political institutions. "Citizens are feeling very disconnected from these new frontiers in research and innovation," said one contributor. "When you talk about AI, especially, citizens are feeling even terrified, even depressed, because they don't feel that they can follow."

Van Eijl insisted the European Commission will cement SSH into the upcoming Horizon Europe framework. She urged SSH communities to step up and apply for funding even in the current research and innovation framework, and for example in the development of the Gigafactories which the Commission has identified as central to Europe's next-generation AI capacity. "I really would like to encourage you to knock on all the doors of these AI Gigafactories. It's also your Gigafactory. It's not only the physics Gigafactory; it's not only the energy Gigafactory; it's also the social sciences Gigafactory."

> ❝ *It would be a missed opportunity if SSH is just added on to projects or to R&I thinking just as a way of trying to get tech across the ground.*

Chris Foulds, SSH CENTRE co-lead

Rather than positioning SSH as a standalone solution, its integration with STEM fields is key to enhancing education and communication on the benefits of scientific and technological advances, enabling more effective transdisciplinary and societal engagement. "Some of the worst communicators are academics. Academics are good at speaking to other academics, but not to non-academics," noted **Dr. Joy Clancy**, Visiting Professor at Liverpool Hope University. "We have to think about the way we talk."

Several other speakers gave examples of where better messaging can improve public acceptance of change. Clancy mentioned how a focus on the harmful effects of smoke on grandchildren's health was more effective than global-warming arguments in persuading people in Ireland to switch from traditional peat burning. **Giorgio**

Clarotti, Senior Policy Officer, Strategy for People, Health and Society at the European Commission's Directorate General for Research and Innovation, noted that citizens' decisions on installing solar panels were swayed more by the impact on household energy bills than on risks of climate change. Another participant explained that no new technological advances are needed to half global emissions by 2030, if governments, business and citizens can be persuaded to apply the means already available.

> *We have to think about the way we talk.*
>
> **Dr. Joy Clancy,** Visiting Professor at Liverpool Hope University

"One of the problems is the difficulty of communication between different communities," one expert asserted. "Scientists don't speak enough to businesspeople. Scientists and businesspeople don't talk enough to policymakers. Policymakers don't talk enough with scientists. With a few exceptions, citizens don't know enough what is possible, you have to pitch your argument so people who are not scientists can relate"

A false dichotomy? Integrating competitiveness and societal wellbeing

Various participants at the conference, both as part of the panel debate and during the roundtable discussion, raised concerns that the focus of the MFF on enhancing Europe's industrial and economic competitiveness risks neglecting societal needs. Illustrating the Commission's perspective, Henriette Van Eijl insisted that was not the case: "Let's not go into 'either-or' … it is societal wellbeing AND societal competitiveness AND delivering on societal needs. We need all of this together and we need to have it better linked. When we talk about competitiveness, I think there's a very large misunderstanding, because, for us, competitiveness is about being able to deliver on public-health needs, to deliver on climate needs, to deliver on societal needs. So, competitiveness is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end."

> *Let's not go into 'either-or' … it is societal wellbeing AND societal competitiveness AND delivering on societal needs.*
>
> **Henriette Van Eijl**

An industry representative during the roundtable discussion noted that support for innovation and competitiveness had to go hand-in-hand with development and infrastructure funding. Medical innovation, they noted, was little use if health systems and hospitals are crumbling under the weight of staff shortages and failing infrastructure. "We need both, if we truly want to be competitive."

One way that SSH can help business and policy application is by producing and analysing disaggregated data that breaks down information into detailed categories, such as gender, age, ethnicity or income and produces are a detailed portrait of societal needs.

"Without that data, we don't know the exact size of that issue," explained Clancy. "That is good link between social science research and the technical fields." She noted, for example, that business studies have revealed that diverse workforces are better for company performance and returns.

Towards a stronger European R&I framework

Overall, the event showcased unanimous support for ensuring an increased role for SSH in European research programmes. Amidst the tumultuous geopolitical developments, the debates recognised the need for an EU budget with a strengthened focus on innovation and competitiveness alongside societal and environmental resilience. Within these goals, more and better spending on R&I is essential. Although the proposed MFF may not be a 'miracle recipe' for a more competitive Europe, it might be enough to help waken 'Sleeping Beauty Europe' just in time to secure its sovereignty, prosperity, and societal cohesion and values.

ANNEXE - Final series of Debating Europe Focus Groups with citizens on Science and Society

The aim of this final series of focus groups was to gather citizen's perspectives, their hopes, concerns and ideas on research and innovation in the EU ahead of the final event of the SSH CENTRE project. These final online group discussions took place between 17 and 24 September 2025.

The focus group discussion topics while remaining close to the project, avoid specific technical references to allow citizens to contribute based on their differing levels of understanding. As part of the SSH CENTRE project, four focus group series were previously conducted between September 2023 and April 2024, relating to Adaptation to Climate Change; Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030; 100 Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030; A Soil Deal for Europe.

Context and participants' profiles

The discussions brought together 40 young Europeans, predominantly aged 18-30, with some participants aged 31-40. Most held postgraduate degrees, and were employed in fields such as research, academia, youth work, law, cybersecurity, public administration, NGOs, clean energy, digital operations, and the private sector. A smaller number were students or unemployed.

Participants came from a wide range of countries: Italy, Germany, Belgium, France, Estonia, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Greece, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Austria (living and working in different EU cities including Brussels, Madrid, Bologna, Oxford, Cologne, Thessaloniki, Budapest, Rome, Trento, Hamburg, Wrocław and Paris).

Most participants had some indirect or direct connection to EU institutions, science, policy or communication, but repeatedly stressed that their level of awareness is not typical of the wider public.

Summary of the results

Across all groups, participants expressed a broadly positive attitude toward science and innovation, while simultaneously highlighting a persistent gap between European research activity and citizens' everyday awareness. EU-funded research is perceived as important but largely invisible, often recognised only through major moments such as the COVID-19 vaccine or high-profile grants. This visibility gap is most

pronounced in Southern and Eastern Europe, where participants noted weaker media coverage and lower public engagement with science.

Participants were clear that technology alone cannot solve Europe's major challenges, even if scientific progress remains essential. While many emphasised Europe's need to "catch up" with global competitors in areas like AI, energy, defence and medical research, they also stressed that political will, social policies, ethics, and behavioural change must complement technological solutions. Concerns about trust and transparency featured prominently: some participants trust that EU institutions rely on evidence, whereas others questioned the influence of lobbying, political bias, and growing information overload.

Citizens consistently called for stronger communication and better outreach to make science more accessible and understandable to the general public, emphasising that research becomes meaningful when it is local, concrete, and socially relevant. They supported involving a broader range of actors - especially young people, universities, civil society and industry - but acknowledged barriers such as generational hierarchies, uneven access, and the risk of engaging only the already informed.

Overall, participants envision a Europe where scientific ambition is matched by clear communication, ethical safeguards, and genuine public involvement. Their insights suggest that strengthening the societal foundations of European research - trust, transparency, inclusivity, and visibility - is as important as increasing investment or accelerating technological development.

Recommendations based on citizens' insights

Drawing exclusively on participants' reflections, the following recommendations emerge for European institutions, national governments and research stakeholders.

1. Improve the visibility and intelligibility of EU research

- Reinforce existing EU branding requirements for EU-funded research, ensuring that the EU contribution is clearly and consistently visible across communication materials, media outputs, and project interfaces.

- Strengthen the use of social media and digital platforms (e.g. LinkedIn, Instagram, X) to communicate EU-funded research in accessible formats, recognising that many citizens encounter EU research primarily through these channels, often incidentally or through polarised narratives.

- Collaborate with public broadcasters, trusted media and universities to create regular, accessible segments on EU-funded research.

- Translate abstract budget figures into concrete, relatable narratives: numbers of projects, problems addressed, local impacts, and benefits to citizens.

Benedikt, M, from Germany: *"There's no mention it's EU-funded... you only find out on the website."*

Ingrid, F, from Estonia: *"In Estonia, the only place I see it is our public broadcaster. They publish when the Estonian researchers get ERC grant, which is very big and prestigious. And public broadcasting also has a section for science popularisation, or science news, called Novator. So, first they publish the general news 'this researcher got that big chunk of a grant' and then on that science news channel they go deep into it. But that's really the only place that I ever see stuff like that."*

2. Strengthen local and contextual engagement

- Bring science and research into local spaces where people already meet (schools, community centres, libraries, local events).

- Tailor communication to local concerns (e.g. agriculture, heatwaves, transport).

- Support low-threshold, participatory activities such as citizen science, debates in universities, and local workshops where citizens can encounter researchers and policy officers.

Anna, F, from the Netherlands: *"If you want people to engage, bring the research to where they already gather."*

3. Combine technological solutions with political, social and ethical action

- Avoid presenting innovation as a "magic" fix; explicitly communicate that science and technology require political will, regulation and social measures to be effective.

- Invest in behavioural and social sciences alongside technological research to address behaviours, norms and societal impacts.

- Embed ethics-by-design: require that ethical, societal and environmental implications are considered before the deployment of new technologies.

Flavia, F, from Italy: *"Without political will, science alone can't do anything."*

4. Address thematic priorities identified by citizens

- Align EU R&I investments with citizens' stated priorities:

- Climate change and adaptation (including extreme heat, agriculture, food insecurity).

- Energy and security, focusing on sustainable and strategically autonomous energy systems.

- Health and preventive medicine, including cancer research and accessible care for marginalised groups.

- Social equality, redistribution, and livelihoods, including fair taxation, housing, transport and water.

- Mental health and the psychological impacts of technology.

- Digital divide and digital justice, ensuring inclusive and sustainable use of digital tools.

- Democratic participation and new forms of involvement, particularly in ageing and digitally divided societies.

- Support research beyond EU borders where this is necessary to address global challenges that also affect Europeans.

Ivo, M, from Bulgaria: *"We need to invest in strategic autonomy... I don't feel secure in Europe."*

5. Ensure transparency and plurality in the use of evidence

- Clarify how evidence informs EU policymaking, including the role of scientific advice, impact assessments, stakeholder consultations and political judgement.

- Make advisory processes more pluralistic, involving experts of different ages, disciplines and socio-economic backgrounds—not just established or narrow scientific circles.

- Regulate lobbying with transparency, recognising it as legitimate but requiring clear disclosure of meetings, actors and influence pathways.

- Strengthen transparency tools, such as public registers and open consultations, so citizens can see who is consulted and why.

- Support diverse evidence sources, including youth organisations, civil society groups and independent researchers, ensuring they can access policymaking spaces on equal footing.

- Avoid presenting scientific findings as making decisions "inevitable," thereby preserving space for political choices and public deliberation.

Joshua, M, from Germany: *"If we say the EU only listens to lobbyists, trust collapses... and it's not true."*

6. Strengthen inclusive and participatory research & innovation governance

- Establish long-term, structured mechanisms for citizen, youth and community participation in R&I governance, moving beyond one-off or low-representativeness consultations.

- Use intermediaries - universities, youth organisations, civil society groups - to reach a broader and more diverse cross-section of citizens, not only the most vocal.

- Actively address inclusion barriers, especially generational and gender hierarchies that limit whose voices are heard in research-related forums.

- Ensure diverse representation in advisory boards, missions, expert groups and consultation processes, including young people and early-career researchers.

- Monitor participation dynamics, assessing who contributes, who dominates, and whose perspectives shape decisions.

- Promote scientific literacy and engagement, making involvement meaningful rather than symbolic.

Mariavittoria, F, from Italy: *"Young people are not listened to… it's always older men speaking."*

7. Support science systems under pressure

- Monitor and respond to threats to specific disciplines, including social sciences (e.g. gender studies) that may be politically targeted.

- The EU should mitigate fragmentation and uneven resource distribution at national level, including cases where institutional duplication and political alignment affect funding outcomes.

- Engage citizens in understanding not only the outcomes of research, but also the conditions under which scientific work is carried out (job security, funding, autonomy), to sustain legitimacy and trust.

In sum, the citizens consulted in these focus groups express a strong belief in the importance of science and innovation for Europe's future, but they call for an approach that is more transparent, participatory, socially grounded and ethically conscious, and for communication that makes the European dimension of research visible, understandable and meaningfully connected to their everyday lives.