Making Europe the epicenter of global scientific talent

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Cecilia Van Cauwenberghe explores investment in scientific minds, aiming to build Europe's future by reflecting on Commissioner Zaharieva's vision for research and innovation that seeks to establish Europe as the epicenter of global scientific talent

Europe is at a focal point in its ambition to redefine the global research landscape. Commissioner Ekaterina Zaharieva, recently appointed to lead the European Commission's Startups, Research and Innovation portfolio, has untapped an emphatic strategy designed to strengthen Europe's role as a dynamo of talent, knowledge, and innovation. Essential to this agenda is an increased commitment to nurturing researchers, particularly early-career scientists and displaced talent, while reinforcing collaboration across adjacent fields and disciplines.

Let us explore the practical and strategic dimensions of the European Union's latest research initiatives. From the €1.25 billion Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) calls in 2025 [1,2] to the €22.5 million 'Choose Europe for Science' pilot program [3], and the vital work of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) [4], these initiatives demonstrate a holistic model where funding, mobility, collaboration, and societal impact converge.

Beyond funding, Commissioner Zaharieva's priorities aim to reshape the very fabric of European science, in terms of structure, rationale, and implications, particularly through the lens of sustainability, policy relevance, and talent mobility.

Researchers, R&D strategists, university administrators, public policy professionals, and international science diplomats who seek actionable insights into Europe's evolving scientific ecosystem, should take a closer look at this.

Reshaping Europe/s research through strategic investment

At the heart of Commissioner Zaharieva's vision is the idea that investment in human capital is as critical as investment in infrastructure. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) program has long been a cornerstone of European research mobility. The MSCA launched in 2025 reveals the most ambitious cycle to date.

Key components include:

- Doctoral Networks designed to train doctoral candidates in academic and non-academic settings.
- Postdoctoral Fellowships to support researchers undertaking international and intersectoral mobility.

- Staff Exchanges enabling flexible secondments between institutions.
- Co-funding mechanisms to amplify the impact of regional, national, and international programs.

The initiative looks beyond science to shape ecosystems where talent thrives. A typical example comes with the inclusion of researchers from Ukraine and other displaced communities, in which the program spots the role of science as a tool for resilience, recovery, and inclusion.

Naturally, under this principle, Europe must not only train the best minds but also retain and attract them. This echoes in the launch of the 'Choose Europe for Science' pilot program, a €22.5 million initiative aimed at making European research careers more stable, prestigious, and visible globally.

Connecting science with society

This transformation is also focused on societal challenges. JRC integrates scientific advice into European policymaking. As the Commission's in-house science and knowledge service, the JRC employs over 2,800 researchers across six sites, to provide evidence-based policy support to ensure that regulation is rooted in technical accuracy and societal relevance.

Examples of JRC's impact include:

- Climate risk modeling to inform the European Green Deal. (5)
- Chemical safety analysis supporting REACH legislation. (6)
- Pandemic preparedness through genomics surveillance. (7)

Zaharieva has repeatedly emphasized that science must serve society and that policies must be science-informed, from a foundational perspective. Thus, by ensuring alignment with the European Commission's 2024–2029 priorities (8) (digital transition, green deal acceleration, and strategic autonomy), the JRC effectively translates research into societal value.

Translating vision into action: Case studies in impact

To better understand how these priorities materialize on the ground, consider these flagship MSCA-funded projects:

- ITN-ENABLE (European Network for Advanced Biomedical Engineering) (9): This doctoral network connects universities, hospitals, and medtech companies across Europe to develop minimally invasive biomedical devices. Researchers are embedded in both academic and industrial labs, receiving training in ethics, commercialization, and regulatory frameworks.
- MSCA4Ukraine (10): Launched to provide fellowships for Ukrainian researchers to continue their work in EU institutions. With over 124 fellowships awarded, it exemplifies science diplomacy and humanitarian resilience.

- REPO-TRIAL (Repurposing Therapeutics for Rare Disease) [11]: Through MSCA co-funding, this project accelerates drug repurposing using AI-based predictive modeling. Involving partners in Germany, France, and Italy, it demonstrates how MSCA supports cutting-edge, cross-border health innovation.

In terms of applied research, the systemic input starts to provide fruit, anticipating future social needs. In 2024, the JRC's bioeconomy modeling informed CAP reform, leading to data-driven rural development policies. Meanwhile, its work on critical raw materials helped shape the European Critical Raw Materials Act. [12]

A future anchored in scientific sovereignty

Looking ahead, Zaharieva's agenda signals a decisive turn toward scientific sovereignty. But what does that mean in a practical sense?

Emerging trends include:

- Geopolitical science diplomacy as a counterbalance to global polarization.
- Long-term career frameworks to reduce brain drain.
- Integrated missions where funding, policy, and education operate in sync.

However, as Europe becomes more ambitious, it must also consider streamlining mobility schemes, facilitating co-investment models with the industry, and setting up a unified science diplomacy platform, to overcome present challenges related to:

- Regulatory complexity that slows research-to-market pipelines.
- Talent leakage to non-EU countries offering more lucrative conditions.
- Fragmentation of funding instruments across regional and national levels.

This vision implies a cultural shift where science is integral to European identity, based on civic infrastructure.

Final thoughts: From initiative to identity

Commissioner Zaharieva's blueprint goes from initial funding calls and pilot programs toward a re-establishment of Europe's research ethos. By prioritizing investment in people, connecting science with policy, and leveraging platforms like the JRC and MSCA, Europe is ready to build identity as a destination for scientific purposes, a place of work but also a place of belonging.

As we move toward 2025 and beyond, the pulse of European research beats with ambition, inclusion, and integrity.

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