

European researchers set out EU innovation reforms in *Science*

Aitziber Cortajarena, scientific director of CIC biomaGUNE, participates in the INPACT! initiative, a network that brings together more than 120 scientists and innovators from over 20 countries

Science Policy Forum proposes a clearer route from discovery to market, stronger support for high-risk ideas and better incentives for academic entrepreneurs

Donostia, 25 September 2026. Europe could turn more of its scientific discoveries into new technologies, products and businesses by changing the way it funds innovation and supports researchers, according to a new Policy Forum published in *Science*.

The paper, [*Enhancing Europe's Competitiveness by Empowering Researchers as Innovators*](#), calls for a more continuous route from fundamental research to commercialisation, simpler funding procedures and greater recognition of entrepreneurship within universities. It argues that persistent institutional and funding barriers prevent scientific excellence from generating its full economic and societal impact.

The work is an initiative of **INPACT!**, a network launched in 2023 that brings together more than **120 scientist-innovators from over 20 countries in the European research area**, mainly European Research Council grantees (ERC). Ikerbasque Research Professor [Aitziber Cortajarena](#), scientific director of CIC biomaGUNE, is a member of the INPACT! initiative, that combines researchers' direct experience with economic analysis of European funding programmes to identify reforms that could strengthen Europe's ability to translate research into innovation.

Connecting research and innovation

The analysis focuses on **Horizon Europe**, the European Union's research and innovation programme for 2021–2027. The authors argue that funding remains fragmented and that discoveries with commercial potential can encounter administrative gaps between **European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept grants**, which help researchers explore practical applications, and **European Innovation Council (EIC)** programmes supporting technology development and business growth.

One of the main proposals is to bring **ERC Proof of Concept grants under EIC governance**, creating a more continuous pathway from scientific discovery to technology development and commercialisation. According to the authors, this could

reduce repeated evaluations, simplify transitions between programmes and make support more predictable for researchers and investors.

“Europe has extraordinary scientific talent, but too often we lose momentum between discovery and application. We need a more continuous pathway that allows promising ideas to move from fundamental research towards technologies, companies and solutions capable of generating economic and societal impact,” says Dario Polli, Professor at Politecnico di Milano and one of the lead authors of the Policy Forum.

The Policy Forum also calls for stronger support for **early-stage, high-risk innovation**. Combined annual funding for the EIC Pathfinder and Transition programmes is currently approximately **€500 million**, while their programme-management capacity remains limited compared with advanced research agencies in the United States. The authors recommend reallocating resources towards breakthrough innovation and giving independent programme managers greater authority to guide promising projects.

“Europe is caught in a *middle-technology trap*: we specialise in mature industries such as automotive and industrial machinery, while frontier sectors such as AI and biotechnology remain too small. To strengthen Europe’s competitiveness and strategic autonomy, we must rebuild the pipeline from scientific discovery to market-funding the best ideas and enabling researchers and innovators to turn today’s breakthroughs into tomorrow’s high-tech industries,” says Giorgio Presidente, researcher at Institute for European Policymaking at Bocconi University.

Simpler applications and support for excellent unfunded projects

The authors also argue that European funding applications should be shorter and assessed more directly on the substance of the idea and its potential use.

They propose that national funding agencies make multi-year commitments to support excellent projects that successfully pass European evaluation but cannot be financed from the available EU budget, extending the approach already used through the **Seal of Excellence**.

Universities must recognise researchers as innovators

Reforming European funding alone will not be enough, the authors argue. Universities and technology transfer offices also need to create conditions in which researchers can pursue innovation without being forced to choose between an academic career and entrepreneurship.

The Policy Forum recommends greater recognition of entrepreneurship in academic careers, improved intellectual-property management and clearer routes to patents, industrial partnerships and spin-offs, together with better access to mentoring and entrepreneurial expertise.

These reforms, the authors stress, would not by themselves resolve Europe's wider constraints in venture capital, regulation and business expansion. However, a more coherent system linking scientific research, technology development and entrepreneurship could help Europe capture more of the economic and societal value generated by its research base.

"To translate more scientific discoveries into new technologies, products, and services that reach the market, we would benefit from a clearer pathway in our institutions, with well-defined steps, predictable timelines, and streamlined procedures. Making the entire process easier to navigate could empower more of us to transform knowledge into solutions for society. I strongly believe that embracing innovation can give new momentum to our careers, reshape how we approach our work, and enable us to play a strategic role in strengthening Europe's global competitiveness while addressing unmet societal needs," says Amanda Silva Brun, Director of research at the CNRS and one of the lead authors of the Policy Forum.

"Translating research findings into applications with impact is a vital part of the mission and commitment of CIC biomaGUNE. In the Basque Country, we already have an ecosystem and valuable tools for facilitating this process, some of which are highlighted in this work. It is important that we continue to develop and support these tools, and to encourage insights like this to identify current obstacles and to move more quickly from top-level research to innovation", commented **Aitziber Cortajarena, scientific director of CIC biomaGUNE**.

About the Policy Forum

Enhancing Europe's Competitiveness by Empowering Researchers as Innovators is published as a **Policy Forum in Science**. The article underwent external peer review and revision before acceptance.

The paper is an initiative of **INPACT!**, a European network of scientist-innovators established to share experience, identify barriers to research commercialisation and contribute proposals to strengthen Europe's research and innovation ecosystem.

Bibliographic reference

Amanda K. A. Silva Brun, Giorgio Presidente, Mangala Srinivas, Valentina Cauda, Alberto Fernandez-Tejada, Christine L. Mummery, Rami I. Aqeilan, Thomas Thum, Mehmet C. Onbasli, Robert Colebunders, Gianni Ciofani, Davide Iannuzzi, Marios Avraamides, João T. Barata, Romana Schirhagl, Ana Cecília A. Roque, Luana Dessbesell, Chloé Dupuis, Marco Paggi, Kerstin Kinkelin, Gerard J.J. Boink, Antonella Bongiovanni, Kevin Braeckmans, Kerem Pekkan, Lorenzo Moroni, Twan Lammers,

Xiao Xiang Zhu, Adriele Prina-Mello, Carlo S. Casari, Max C. Lemme, Thomas Wolbers, Achillefs N. Kapanidis, Erdem Yörk, Jan S. Kirschke, Philipp-Leo Mengel, Giulio Cerullo, Volker Hessel, Víctor A. de la Peña O'Shea, Aitziber L. Cortajarena, Frank Kirchhoff, Harald H.H.W. Schmidt, Imre Berger, Anne Houdusse, Edgar R. Gomes, Frederic Amant, Tambet Teesalu, Joan Ballester, Juan José Vilatela, Raymond M. Schiffelers, Fabrizio d'Adda di Fagagna, Roman Jerala, Cristina Canal, Sophie Demolombe, Gaetano Gargiulo, Giovanni Volpe, Andrea C. Ferrari, Daniel Gros, Clemens Fuest, Dario Polli

Enhancing Europe's Competitiveness by Empowering Researchers as Innovators

Science

DOI: [10.1126/science.ady2388](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ady2388)

Sobre CIC biomaGUNE

El Centro de Investigación Cooperativa en Biomateriales, [CIC biomaGUNE](https://www.cicbioma.gune.es/), miembro de Basque Research and Technology Alliance ([BRTA](https://www.borta.eus/)), es un centro de investigación sin ánimo de lucro situado en Donostia que lleva a cabo investigación de vanguardia en la interfaz entre la Química, la Biología y la Física con especial atención en el estudio de las propiedades de las nanoestructuras biológicas a escala molecular y sus aplicaciones biomédicas. En 2018 fue reconocido como Unidad de Excelencia "María de Maeztu" por cumplir con requisitos de excelencia, que se caracterizan por un alto impacto y nivel de competitividad en su campo de actividad, en el escenario científico mundial.