

## AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT EHLER'S PROPOSAL FOR PILLAR 2

\*This article is also [available on our website](#).\*

Rapporteur Ehler's draft report on Horizon Europe, the 10<sup>th</sup> framework programme, overhauls the governance of pillar 2.

Jumping out is his proposal to establish two new Research Councils, modelled after the ERC Scientific Council and the EIC Board.

But what does it mean for pillar 2 to be “expert-driven, and with shorter turnover”?

This article is my attempt to systematically think through that question. It is the first in a two-part series. Part two will consider the consequences for four groups of actors: researchers, research organisations, member states, and the Commission.

In what follows, I will address the following:

- What Ehler intends to accomplish.
- How to break down the expert-led governance into four steps.
- Five questions that the draft report left open.
- How to “improve, not sever” the tight connection to the ECF.
- Why, in spirit, the draft report and Commission proposal are not that different.

Obviously, this analysis is based on the draft report; you can read [Ehler's accompanying statement here](#). Other MEPs could propose amendments until 9 April, so Parliament's position will change, not to mention negotiations with member states in the Council in the autumn.

That said, support among shadow rapporteurs was noticeably broad when Ehler first presented his draft, and parts are quite similar to what the Commission had in mind, so my bet is on the expert-led Councils staying.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention the [initial analysis \(in Dutch\) by my colleagues](#) at Neth-ER, Emma Zürcher and Matthijs Timmermans, on whose work this article builds.

---

### What Ehler intends to accomplish

“Conditional on reforms, the budget of the new Framework Programme should be doubled,” said not Ehler but Mario Draghi in his report on the future of European competitiveness. “Europe faces an existential challenge [...] to become more productive, while preserving our values of equity and social inclusion. And the only way to become more productive is for Europe to radically change.”

This is the gauntlet that Ehler took up: to reform the programme, double the budget to 220 bn euros, and place research and innovation at the heart of our economy.

In his view, pillar 2, and the broader framework programme, must be focused and agile, with industrial deployment following research, not the other way around. Tying it together is expert-led governance.

First, pillar 2 must be focused. Limited research funding should not be spread too thinly across many topics. The framework programme must prioritise topics that benefit most from EU support, rather than national or private backing. “We must recognise the opportunity cost of choosing one topic over another,” the draft notes. Go big, or go home.

Second, pillar 2 must be agile. Programming should be faster so that funding can respond quickly to scientific or technological breakthroughs. This becomes particularly important when the programme doubles to 220 bn, given the limited administrative capacity of the Commission and member states.

Third, research in pillar 2 must lead to industrial deployment via the ECF, not the other way around. Policymakers are notoriously poor at picking winners, while industry tends to favour incremental over breakthrough innovation. To catch up with China and the US and to escape the mid-tech trap, Horizon Europe must cast a wide net, while the ECF invests selectively and at scale.

Finally, expert-led governance addresses all three challenges, provided the experts involved are at the forefront of their field and have a record of leading-edge innovation.

With these four reforms, the rapporteur intends to secure an ambitious future framework programme—in budget and in scope—that will meet Draghi’s existential challenge.

---

## **Pillar 2 programming in four steps**

On the whole, pillar 2 programming remains remarkably familiar: thematic priorities are translated into individual call texts, and researchers then submit proposals. The main change is in how priorities are translated, or rather, who translates them.

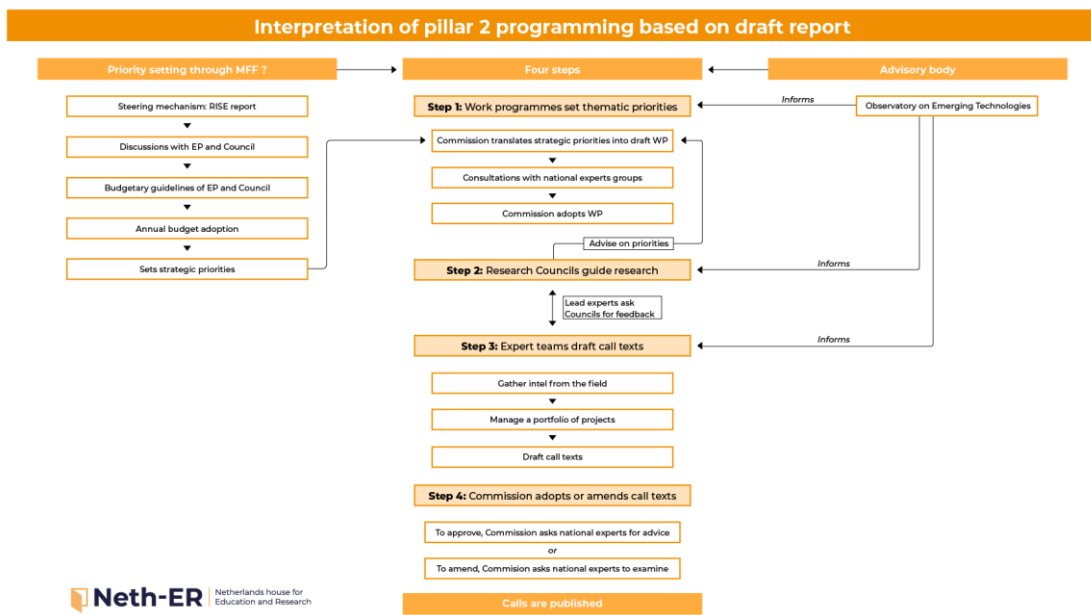
Concretely, I would break down the suggested governance system of pillar 2 into four steps, which I will describe in more detail below:

1. The Commission and member states set priorities through work programmes.
2. Two Research Councils advise on how to carry out that assignment.
3. Expert teams draft call texts and manage a portfolio of projects.

- The Commission and member states approve call texts or adapt them if serious concerns arise.

A helpful comparison is rally racing. The Commission is the organiser, setting the objectives. Expert teams drive the cars as best they can. In the passenger seat, Research Council members help navigate the car from start to finish. And at the finish line, the Commission waves the flag, checking whether the rules were followed, as judge and arbiter.

Let's go through the four steps.



*Interpretation of pillar 2 programming based on the draft report.*

### Step 1: Work programmes

Step one is to adopt the work programmes.

The draft report suggests that pillar 2 work programmes cover the bare minimum. They identify the main thematic priorities, allocate the budget for each, and include a call for expressions of interest to assemble an expert team for each priority.

That's it.

Notably absent are call texts. They are published independently some time after the work programmes are adopted. This separation is necessary to incorporate expert input while preserving the Commission's prerogatives and financial accountability, as we shall see later.

Work programmes are to be prepared and adopted by the Commission following consultation with national expert groups. Input will also come from the two Councils, which shall advise the Commission on the priorities for each window, and from the Observatory on Emerging Technologies, to be established under the ECF.

Each of the five windows gets a work programme, including the Global Societal Challenges window.

There will be three rounds of work programmes, each spanning three years. This means the final year of one programme overlaps with the first year of the next, so ongoing priorities can carry over while new ones are added. (Calendar note: new work programmes in 2028, 2030, and 2032.)

Moonshots and missions are elevated to general instruments, meaning they can be supported across multiple windows and, preferably, other programmes. Notably, the new instruments in pillar 2—Fast Track to Innovation and European Demonstrators—are not part of the governance system and follow the same procedure as the rest of FP10.

Finally, a technical note. Ehler suggests adopting the work programmes as delegated acts, as they are limited to thematic priorities and related budgets, essentially supplementing and fleshing out the objectives of FP10. Until now, work programmes have been adopted as implementing acts.

This does several things. First, it allows separating work programmes and call texts. Second, it gives national experts a bigger say than in the ECF proposal. Third, it grants Parliament and the Council the right to object if the work programme overstepped its mandate (which has been extremely rare historically) and even a veto (which, to my knowledge, is unprecedented).

The main point here is that public authorities should set political priorities, while experts decide how to accomplish them.

---

## **Step 2: Research Councils**

Step two is the work of the Research Councils, which are the linchpin in this system.

The draft report suggests establishing a Council for European Competitiveness Research to oversee the four competitiveness windows linked to the ECF, and a European Council for Global Societal Challenges Research to oversee the societal window.

Each Council shall comprise at least fifteen prominent experts from science, innovation, industry, and civil society. Members shall be appointed part-time by the Commission for five years, with one extension of up to six years.

The Councils have four tasks:

1. To advise the Commission and national experts on the thematic priorities of the work programme and to attend the relevant meetings.
2. To guide the selection of expert teams by advising the Commission on calls for expressions of interest. For example, they may specify additional selection criteria or recommend weighting.
3. To oversee the work of the expert teams, mainly by providing feedback on draft call texts.
4. To establish a code of conduct and clear rules on conflicts of interest for themselves and for the expert teams.

An obvious comparison is the ERC Scientific Council, although it is not perfect. The Scientific Council's responsibilities extend further, including ERC strategy, evaluation procedures, and the composition of evaluation panels, none of which the Councils may do.

Essentially, the Councils serve as the supreme advisory body for pillar 2. They advise the Commission on work programmes and expert selection. Even feedback on call texts is ultimately advisory, as the Commission must decide whether to adopt or adapt them at the final stage.

---

### **Step 3: Expert teams**

Step three is to draft the call texts, which is done by expert teams.

For each thematic priority in the work programmes, the Commission will appoint at least one lead expert, supported by an expert team, following a call for expressions of interest.

The Commission shall select them based on four criteria: scientific expertise, a track record of innovation success, commercial experience, and management skills. Their appointment is full-time, valid for up to five years, and non-renewable. To clarify, these experts are not the same as the Council members.

The expert teams have three tasks:

1. To draft calls for their thematic priority. Draft calls are developed on a rolling basis until the allocated budget is fully committed. Before submitting a draft call to the Commission, the lead expert shall present it to the relevant Council for feedback.

2. To engage with industry, academia, civil society, and the investment community to gather intelligence on emerging needs, technological developments, and market dynamics, ensuring that calls reflect real-world opportunities and challenges.
3. To manage a portfolio of projects in their area across the entire project lifecycle, offering support, facilitating access to relevant networks, and fostering connections between projects where there is shared interest or where closer coordination could bring additional value to the Union.

The Commission may appoint one official to a team to ensure compliance with EU rules and objectives. I expect this to become standard practice, alongside at least one project officer from the executive agencies assisting the team.

The model here is the EIC programme managers who steer a challenge and manage a portfolio. Unlike the individual programme managers, however, the expert teams are not involved in evaluating proposals and will probably oversee larger budgets.

---

#### **Step 4: Approve or amend**

Step four is for the Commission to either approve or amend the call texts.

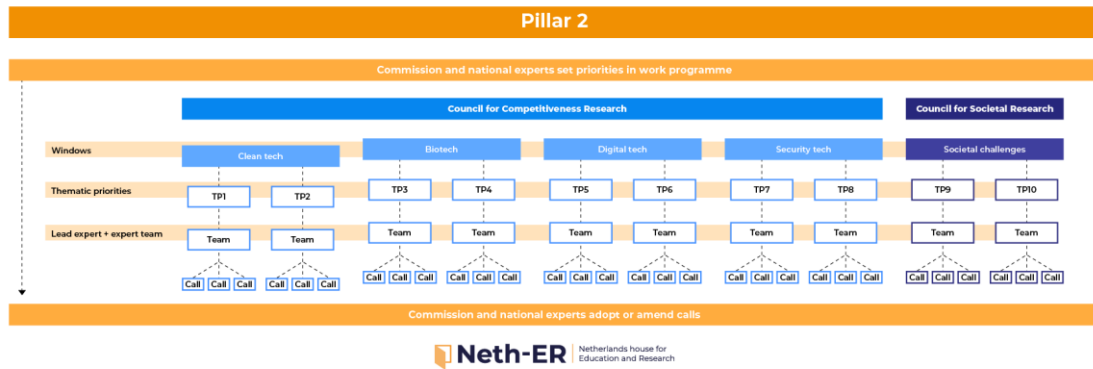
If the Commission approves the call text, it must convene a programme committee meeting within ten days. National experts on the committee must submit their opinions on the call text within five days of the meeting. (Technical note: this is an accelerated advisory procedure.)

Alternatively, the Commission may amend the call text, but only if it is out of scope, illegal, or significantly overlaps with another call.

The amended call text will be sent to the programme committee in the same manner as is customary today—but not under the ECF proposal—meaning that national experts can line-edit the text and then vote. (Technical note: this is the standard examination procedure.)

The Commission should also inform Parliament and the Council about these changes.

Once the call text is approved, it is published online so researchers can submit proposals.



*Schematic overview of pillar 2 based on the draft report.*

## Five questions that the draft left open

The draft report raises several questions. While some are clearly about implementation, others should be addressed in the legislative process. I will highlight five that stood out to me.

First, the draft is notably restrained—dare I say demure?—in its approach to establishing the Councils. Their organisational status is not specified, nor is it stated whether they should be supported by dedicated implementation structures, as is the case for the ERC and EIC executive agencies. The draft also remains circumspect about the profiles of Council members or the criteria for their appointment, especially compared with the detailed descriptions of the ERC Scientific Council and the EIC Board.

What stands out most is that the Councils lack a universal strategic and procedural mandate. Since they are expected to advise on work programmes, expert selection, and call texts, I would expect them to begin by establishing a common vision and operating procedures.

Second, the draft leaves several procedural details unclear. For instance, it does not specify the level of detail in the work programmes. Are the current 32 priorities in the second Horizon Europe strategic plan the kind of priorities we should be expecting? Similarly, the timeline for approving calls is not defined. The Commission might choose to schedule calls for committee discussion and publication at regular intervals throughout the year or handle each call as it is submitted.

Third, the system will affect member states, yet the draft report doesn't dwell on their role—possibly because they prefer Parliament not to instruct them. Specifically, dividing work programmes and call texts necessitates a dual setup of national expert groups and programme committees, which are legally distinct. The draft does not specify which panel will coordinate with the ECF committees, nor whether member states ought to nominate the same experts for both panels.

Fourth, reactions from Parliament and the community were clearly concerned about conflicts of interest, and rightly so. Appointing experts to oversee programming introduces worries that the ERC's open competition, for instance, does not face.

This issue needs to be addressed, and the draft rightly tasks the Councils with developing codes of conduct. The legal text could further emphasise this point by stating that members of the Councils—and the EIC Board, for that matter—"shall act in their personal capacity, independent of extraneous interests," as is already the case for the ERC. Obviously, the independent evaluation process provides another safeguard.

Finally, there is the question of work programmes as delegated acts. The director-general of DG RTD, Marc Lemaître, was quite clear in Parliament when he said that "the Commission considers this legally problematic under the Lisbon Treaties." I imagine this is obvious for old-style work programmes, whereas the picture could look different for new-style work programmes that are limited to priorities and budgets. Moreover, several existing and proposed MFF programmes include delegated acts, so FP10 would not be the first to do so. However, I am not a legal expert, so I will leave that assessment to the lawyers.

---

## **Improve, not sever the tight connection**

A word on the tight connection to the ECF, before we compare the draft report with the Commission proposal and conclude.

Ehler considers the tight connection essential. Deploying results is central to Draghi's challenge. However, he points out that the Commission's proposal does not explain how the new setup would improve the quality of science, research, and innovation it supports. Consequently, the draft report offers three recommendations to reinforce this link.

First, alignment between FP10 and ECF is key, so the committees overseeing the relevant policy windows get a legal duty to coordinate and meet regularly.

Second, ECF should have dedicated instruments for deploying Horizon Europe results, particularly those from pillar 2, that work similarly to the ERC Proof of Concept grant or the EIC Fast Track. This reflects the innovation-to-investment journey.

Third, joint undertakings should coordinate ECF and FP10 funding in key sectors. While their creation must follow the framework programme by law, their design should support industrial policy goals, particularly in knowledge sharing and the uptake of innovation. To support strategic decisions, the Union would be required to invest at least two billion euros in new joint undertakings. Go big, or go home.

All three suggestions rest on the principle outlined earlier: Horizon Europe should cast a wide net, while ECF should invest strategically and at scale.

---

## **Why the draft report and Commission proposal are not that different**

Despite the changes to pillar 2, I believe the draft report does not depart radically from what the Commission proposed.

Ehler's four main points—focus, agility, the link to the ECF, and the role of experts—should be viewed as elaborating on a Commission proposal that lacked detail, especially amid the rush in Spring 2025 to finalise proposals for FP10 and the ECF.

### **Focus**

Both the Commission and the rapporteur want Horizon Europe to focus on strategic priorities. The Commission proposed setting general priorities through a steering mechanism embedded in the annual budget procedure, guiding work programmes in a manner similar to current strategic planning. Meanwhile, the rapporteur offers limited details on how priorities are determined, thus allowing for coordination through the steering mechanism. By extension, FP10 priorities could align with the ECF, even though call writing is done by experts.

### **Agility**

Both the Commission and the rapporteur want FP10 to be more agile. The Commission aims to speed decisions by favouring the lighter advisory procedure over the slower examination procedure and by shortening the time to grant. Meanwhile, the rapporteur also seeks quicker decisions, relying on external experts for quality and relevance, and uses the advisory procedure for quick checks, reserving the examination procedure for amendments in special cases.

### **Link to the ECF**

Both the Commission and the rapporteur want FP10 to be closely linked to the ECF. The Commission makes FP10 subordinate to the ECF, incorporating collaborative R&I into ECF work programmes under ECF procedures. Meanwhile, the rapporteur agrees in principle, stressing the importance of the ECF link for deploying research results and meeting Draghi's challenge. However, he believes ECF shouldn't limit Horizon, and promising results should be fast-tracked into the ECF.

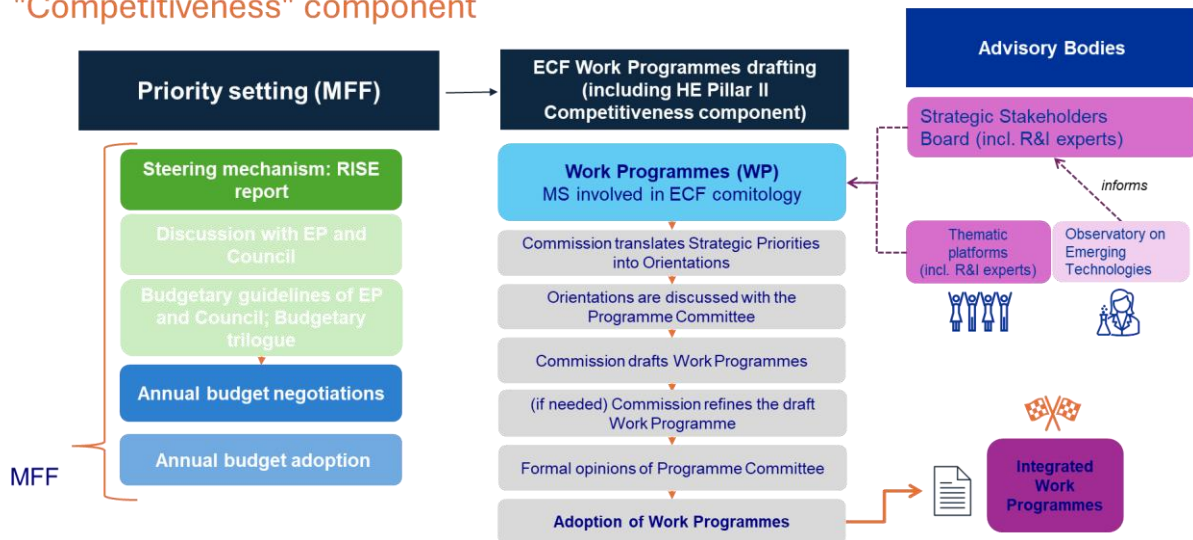
To be fair, senior Commission officials have repeatedly stressed that ECF priorities do not steer FP10. However, in the absence of a governance plan, assessing these

assurances is difficult, as they are neither explicit in the proposed legal text nor in Commission presentations such as the one below.

### Role of experts

Both the Commission and the rapporteur want to elevate the role of experts. The Commission proposed a strategic stakeholder board, thematic platforms, and an observatory on emerging technologies, none of which currently exist. Meanwhile, the rapporteur redesignates these as Councils and expert teams and submits them to political authority, believing that public authorities should set political priorities, not experts. The approval process safeguards the Commission's implementation and financial accountability.

### Programming for the ECF policy windows, including the HE Pillar II "Competitiveness" component



Slide taken from a public Commission presentation in March 2026.

### Conclusion

I have always maintained that there is consensus among the Commission, Parliament, member states, and stakeholders on the necessary changes to the FP. The draft report and Commission proposal bear that out.

Certainly, the draft report goes one or two steps beyond the Commission's ideas, but that is the role that Parliament and the Council must play. And while some of the changes are fundamental, like prioritising expert advice, equally fundamental principles are maintained, allowing the Commission and member states to retain full control over funding allocation.

Overall, therefore, the real change is compared with the current Horizon Europe, in that the proposal and draft report introduce focus, agility, a link to the ECF, and an elevated role for experts.

As the rapporteur noted, “Commissioner Zaharieva’s proposal opened the door to reform; this draft report sets out how to walk through it.”

Where does that leave us?

MEPs had until 9 April to submit amendments, and submit amendments they did. As a result, Parliament will now negotiate over the final text until at least the summer, with a vote expected in September or October.

Member states in the Council continue to debate the Commission's proposal and must keep the draft report in consideration moving forward. During their most recent meeting, research ministers expressed significant concerns about the proposal's lack of clarity and considered a counterproposal of their own. I had previously hoped for a Council position by 29 May, but that now appears increasingly unlikely.

Finally, the Commission is by no means oblivious to what’s happening. Lemaître, the director-general, acknowledged as much in Parliament, promising a detailed fiche on governance and the innovation-to-investment journey in the coming weeks to feed reflections. As I was given to understand, Commission services are running a mock programming exercise for FP10 and ECF this spring.

Governance has always been a delicate matter for any Framework programme, and it's understandable that these discussions take time. Nonetheless, given the stakes involved, I had hoped some of these debates would be settled before the proposals were put forward.

Ultimately, the success of any change to FP10 will be judged by its ability to persuade outside the R&I domain and truly double the budget to 220 billion euros, thus meeting Draghi’s existential challenge.

For that reason alone, I so wish they could.

---

**“Europe’s competitiveness—and its position in the race to a clean and digital economy—will depend on starting a new age of invention and ingenuity. This requires putting research and innovation, science and technology, at the heart of our economy.”**

► Von der Leyen in [‘Europe’s Choice: Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, 2024-2029’](#)

---

## **Post-script**

This article is the first of a two-part effort to systematically think through the implications for four groups of actors: researchers, research organisations, member states, and the Commission. Part two will explore these four groups.

Joep Roet works as Deputy Director at Neth-ER. Neth-ER is an association that brings together most publicly funded education & research organisations in the Netherlands and represents them in Brussels.