European Research Council
Scientific Council
103rd plenary meeting
19-20 February 2026, Brussels, BE

MINUTES

Scientific Council members present on site (in alphabetical order): Conny Aerts, Harriet Bulkeley, Michel Campillo, Emmanuelle Charpentier, Tom Henzinger, Liselotte Højgaard, Dirk Inzé, Leszek Kaczmarek, Maarit Karppinen, Kateřina Králová, Maria Leptin (President of the ERC), Sylvie Lorente, Susana Narotzky, Luke O'Neill, Björn Ottersten, Torsten Persson, Tomaž Prosen, Karin Roelofs, Giovanni Sartor, Nicola Spaldin, András Stipsicz and Eleftheria Zeggini.

Assistants of the ERC Vice-Presidents present on site (in alphabetical order): Monica Åberg Yngwe, Elisabeth Corcelle Termeau, and Patrick Finkelstein

ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA) staff present on site (in alphabetical order): Niki Atzoulatou, Mila Bas Sanchez, Rafael Carrasco-Jimenez, Pascale Cid, Colm Carrol, Philippe Cupers, Madeleine Drielsma, Josefina Enfedaque, Vanessa Fivet, Gwennael Joliff-Botrel, Carlos Hernandez-Ferreiro, Raluca Ionescu, Alban Kellerbauer, Jhansi Kota, David Krasa, Veronica Martinez Ocana, Katja Meinke, Laurence Moreau, Mike Mugabushaka, Lino Paula, Martin Penny, Pablo Perez-Illana, Miguel Pesquera, Andrea Polyak, Laura Pontiggia, Dace Rambaka, Giuliano Scalzi, Sejla Sedic, Severina Shopova, Jana Sifta, Sabine Simmross, Wieland Staessens, Elena Toma, Ben Turner, Philippe Vijghen, Line Volkers, Nikolaos Vosnakis, Angela Wittelsberger

Chair of the meeting: Maria Leptin, President of the ERC

Rapporteur: Severina Shopova, ERC Executive Agency

Thursday 19 February 2026

1. Welcome, Plans and Goals of the 103rd Plenary Meeting

Maria Leptin welcomed everyone to the meeting and outlined key discussion points for the plenary. The new members of the Scientific Council (ScC) Michel Campillo, Emmanuelle Charpentier, Kateřina Králová, Susana Narotzky, Karin Roelofs and Eleftheria Zeggini, introduced themselves.

2. Adoption of the Agenda of the 103rd Plenary Meeting

The Scientific Council adopted the Draft Agenda of the meeting.

3. Adoption of the Minutes of the 102nd Plenary Meeting

The ScC was informed that the Draft Minutes of the previous plenary meeting, sent to the ScC in advance of the meeting, would be finalised after any additional written comments. ScC members were invited to submit comments before the plenary.

4. Action Points of the 102nd Plenary Meeting and Board meeting of 16 January

A.1 read out all open action points, as well as the action points closed since the last plenary meeting. The ScC requested that for future Board and plenary meetings, action points should be provided in written form ahead of the meeting instead of being presented orally at the meeting.

5. Update on Recent Meetings and Activities

Liselotte Højgaard reported from recent activities in her capacity as Vice-President and chair of the Gender and Diversity Working Group, including meetings with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Research, and several speaking and chairing roles at scientific and policy events. These included the ERC Scientific Seminar on "Who wins?: Addressing Polarisations in 'Anti-Gender' Times" by Dr K. Browne, the AFDESRI meeting in Paris, and the One Health ERC Conference in Brussels. She also highlighted discussions at a high-level meeting organised by the University of Copenhagen (https://vl.dk/en/about-the-groups/) with policy and business leaders, noting strong interest in the DARPA model and the need to further promote the value of ERC and frontier research.

Maria Leptin referred to Enrico Letta and his report on competitiveness that proposed the addition of a "fifth freedom", freedom of knowledge across the EU as a way to embed research and innovation drivers at the core of the Single Market. He advocates to include the fifth freedom in the future legislation on the ERA (European Research Area) Act.

Maria Leptin informed the ScC that the Final Panel Chairs Meeting for 2026 would be cancelled. The format is no longer effective in the online setting, and the feedback could not be handled efficiently.

András Stipsicz mentioned the launch of an ERC mentoring programme by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in January, buildin on the widening best practices developed by the Widening WG.

Torsten Persson had observed the SyG step 1 meeting and noted the impressive work of the panel and that several mitigation measures had been successfully implemented. He also reported on a meeting with Stockholm University leadership and the Vice Provost of Harvard University, who was

visiting European universities to explore strategic partnerships. The representatives of Harvard University expressed interest in potential involvement in the Synergy Grants scheme. Recently a collaboration agreement between Harvard University and the University of Heidelberg was established, supported by Germany.

Dirk Inzé reported on a European University Association (EUA) meeting where the importance of the ERC was widely recognised. Discussions stressed the role of doctoral education for European society.

6. 10th EU framework programme (FP) for research and innovation (R&I)

Maria Leptin introduced the topic with a short overview of the main events for the ERC in the FP10 discussion, including the statement of the ERC ScC on the next FP for R&I from January 2024 and the proposed legislative texts from July 2025. The Agency presented a timetable of the next steps in the negotiations. Discussions in the European Council and the European Parliament (EP) will run in parallel but are interlinked. The Council (research ministers of EU Member States) has a clear view on the legal text but not yet a formal position, which the Cypriot Presidency plans to adopt by May. The EP will vote in October on their position. Trilateral negotiations between European Council, European Commission and European Parliament will start in autumn. Finance ministers and heads of state and government will negotiate the budget in a different track, including quarterly Council meetings.

The focus is now on the EP, where Christian Ehler has been nominated as rapporteur for FP10 and the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF). His report will be tabled in March and will serve as the basis for the EP. Maria Leptin will participate at a hearing at the EP as expert the following week. The main decisions of the Council are hoped for before the end of 2026. The stances of the Member States vary depending on other priorities. Maria Leptin will visit key countries over the next months to convey the position of the ERC Scientific Council.

7. Strategic areas: mitigation measures

During several focused online meetings in previous weeks, the ScC had discussed various proposed mitigation measures, including tightened resubmission restrictions and a reinforced remote evaluation with additional reviewers. The ScC continued its discussions at plenary.

8. Research security

The Agency presented the economic security restrictions introduced in the Work Programmes 2025 and 2026 (restrictions related to communication networks and critical technologies, and restrictions applicable to Synergy Grants), which will continue to apply. Another restriction, which already applies to the main Work Programme of Horizon Europe 2026–2027, will also apply to ERC Synergy Grants.

9. Discussion on mirror life

David Relman (Stanford) and James Smith (Mirror Biology Dialogues Fund – MBDF) gave a public talk on “The risks of mirror life”, followed by a question and answer session. Mirror life refers to the

creation of synthetic, self-replicating organisms composed entirely of mirror biomolecules, which are constructed with reversed chirality compared to naturally occurring forms. Although constructing mirror biomolecules could have beneficial applications and poses limited risks, the development of mirror life is considered dangerous. An international working group has warned that mirror life could significantly threaten humans, animals, plants, and the environment, offering few benefits, and has advised against creating such organisms.

10. ERC Work Programme part I

The Agency presented the current status of the drafting of the Work Programme 2027. The ScC discussed open points and took decisions regarding Work Programme 2027.

11. Operational issues reporting

The Agency presented the outcome of the PoC 2025 call.

12. Ethics

The Agency gave an overview of the ethics process, a legal obligation delegated to the ERCEA, which proceeds in three steps (pre-screening, screening and assessment). Previously grantees reported low satisfaction with the ethics process. In Horizon Europe, there was a shift from compliance-based to trust-based processes and a refocusing on serious and complex ethics issues. An ethics task force of the ScC has been working with the Agency since 2024 and identified the need to implement improvements at all steps, with a reinforcement of the trust-based approach. Several improvements at all stages, combined with communication actions, have been implemented, both before 2024 and since 2024 in collaboration with the ScC task force.

13. Update on Agency activities and housing

The Director of the Agency reported that discussions have been held with the building owner and the Commission Office for Infrastructure and Logistics (OIB) regarding the potential rental and equipping of additional rooms for evaluation purposes.

14. Follow up from morning discussions and presentations

AI Guidelines

Nicola Spaldin presented a guidance document for ERC reviewers drafted by the AI task force. The ScC considered cultural differences in evaluation processes across disciplines and debated whether reviewers can be sure which AI systems (local or on university servers) do not share the submitted information with software providers for training. The guidance may need to be revisited as technology advances. The ScC stressed the importance of reviewers not delegating any reviewing tasks, especially not to AI, and reinforced the necessity for human evaluators to uphold quality. Before being published, the guidance document will undergo a legal check.

15. Closed session

The Scientific Council held a closed session.

Friday 20 February 2026

16. Update from the Standing Committees and Working Groups

The Chairs of the Standing Committees, Working Groups and Strategic areas reported on recent activities (see also the minutes of the meetings of CoIME, GDWG, on Carbon neutrality and on ERC for Institutes for details).

- ***Standing Committee on Panels (CoP)***

Maria Leptin reported on the decisions on ERC Plus 2026 taken at the CoP meeting on 4 February. The decisions referred to rules for panel composition, written input from panels, proposal assignments, and interview format. The decisions were endorsed by the ScC.

- ***Standing Committee PRIME***

Torsten Persson informed participants that since the last plenary meeting, informal meetings had been held with the experts who studied the impact of the French LabEx programme on innovation. PRIME will ask the experts to replicate their study for ERC grants, with necessary adaptations to the methodology.

Conny Aerts has agreed to join PRIME.

- ***Standing Committee CoIME***

The standing committee is collaborating with the AI Working Group on guidelines for the use of AI in evaluation (see Point 15). The Standing Committee will review its terms of reference and mandate. It will also look at what it can do proactively to anticipate new kinds of research misconduct that might come up in the future. The CoIME terms of reference will be revised and the web page will be updated.

- ***Working Group on Innovation***

Sylvie Lorente reminded participants that in 2018 the ERC was asked to join the Innovation Radar (IR) initiative, which the ScC declined due to lack of resources. Following a renewed request from DG RTD, the Working Group proposed to present all PoC projects in the IR database, but without using the methodology of DG GROW. The ScC approved this proposal. Joint activities with the European Innovation Council (EIC) might pick up again. There continues to be interest for joint actions, for instance, to co-advertise joint success stories.

- ***Working Group on Gender and Diversity***

Liselotte Højgaard reported that a group of Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellows recently addressed a letter to the GDWG, with the suggestion that the ERC adopt a flat-rate eligibility extension of six months for fathers. The Working Group decided to plan a quantitative and qualitative analysis and explore the issue in Europe, while recognising that any rule applied by the ERC could never take into account all legal situations in Europe. The GDWG also decided to contact The Young Academy of Europe (YAE) and All European Academies (ALLEA) for their insight. Liselotte Højgaard announced

that the ERC scoping workshop on gender and diversity will take place on 27 February. It will be moderated by Magdalena Skipper (Editor-In-Chief of Nature) and will feature prominent speakers with expertise on the topics.

Eleftheria Zeggini will join the GDWG.

- ***Open Science***

Nicola Spaldin updated the ScC on the open access publishing platform Open Research Europe (ORE), which is currently supported by the European Commission and only open for research funded by the Framework Programme. ORE is implemented by F1000 Research under a European Commission contract. In October 2026, the platform will shift to co-funding through a grant provided by the European Commission and 16 organisations from 11 countries. In the future, it will be operated by CERN and will be open to all researchers from participating countries.

- ***ERC Institutes Task Force***

Maria Leptin reported on discussions regarding policy proposals from various national research organisations (e.g., DFG in Germany and NCN in Poland), to set up an "ERC for Institutes" programme. The task force will work on a position paper to lay out how such a funding instrument would work best and what potential support from the ERC could look like). The Scientific Council agreed that to include "ERC for Institutes" in the ERC portfolio would be contingent on additional resources.

17. Widening European Participation

Leszek Kaczmarek gave an update on the white paper (position paper of the ScC) on Widening European Participation. The document discusses the possible reasons for the poor performance of researchers in Widening countries in ERC grant calls. It clarifies that the main factors behind low performance do not depend on the ERC and highlights existing best practices to improve the situation. Leszek Kaczmarek argued that, although the ERC is not in a position to solve these problems, it can use its soft power to influence academic culture, for instance, by using the Ambassadors for the ERC or by showcasing national success stories (e.g., from Czechia). The Scientific Council approved the white paper.

A.2 reported that there had been a good response to the last call for Ambassadors for the ERC, and that all EU Member States, except Malta, would now be covered.

18. Strategic group on Carbon Neutrality

Harriet Bulkeley presented data on the carbon footprint of selected ERC operations. The group proposes to encourage panel members to opt for economy or economy plus for travel times of eight hours or less, instead of business class. This would reduce total emissions by up to 17%. Several alternative incentives and an offsetting of the emissions were discussed but not seen as useful solutions. The ScC endorsed the proposal of the carbon neutrality group concerning the flight class recommendation. The ScC decided to publish guidance on sustainable research practices on its website, showcase best practices, and provide links to resources. The ScC discussed the carbon

footprint of the use of AI tools, which, however, is not a leading factor in AI emissions and is difficult for researchers to influence.

19. Update on communication activities

The Agency updated the ScC on recent communication activities. The communication strategy 2026–2027, which was approved at the last plenary meeting, has been sent to ScC members. Updates in the presentation included news coverage of the ERC, the ERC President and ScC members. The Public Engagement with Research Award (PERA) call attracted 110 submissions, up from 99 in 2024. A second call for expression of interest, for Ambassadors for the ERC resulted in 34 applications from new countries (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Bulgaria, Lithuania) and from Portugal and the Netherlands to replace Ambassadors who have stood down from the network. The ScC will meet with the network of Ambassadors on 23 April in the margins of the next plenary meeting. The planning of the 20th anniversary of the ERC in 2027 will include a Nobel prize dialogue in April, an event in the context of the Lithuanian Presidency and a decentralised series of events, as well as a range of other communication actions. A closing event will be organised in Brussels in September.

20. Grant management activities

The Agency presented the results of grant activities in 2025 and the forecast for 2026. In the context of the 2025 budget execution, 1469 grants were signed from the 2024 and 2025 Work Programmes, with a total budget of EUR 2881 million. During the same period, EUR 2634 million of payment credits were executed. As of 31 December 2025, there were 7584 grants running. The Agency organised a number of training and outreach events for host institutions and principal investigators in 2025 covering subjects related to budget management. Such events are again planned for 2026, in Brussels and abroad in Germany, Ireland and France.

21. Lump sum pilot: lessons and prospects

The Agency summarised the lessons learned from the lump sum pilot for AdG 2024. The granting cycle of these grants is still at the beginning, with projects starting in 2025 or 2026. The Agency provided additional outreach and information to applicants.

The ScC discussed the fact that some host institutions (especially universities) use grants to pay the salaries of permanent staff. The issue will again be discussed at a future ScC meeting. The ScC requested an overview of the background and the scope of the issue. The ScC also requested information on the cost savings for the ERCEA resulting from the lump sum costing model.

22. Follow up from morning discussions and presentations

No points were discussed under this agenda item.

23. Any other business

- ScC plenary meeting dates in 2027

The dates of the 2027 plenary dates have been agreed as follows: 16-18 February (Brussels, Belgium); 26-29 April (Brussels, Belgium), coinciding with the Nobel Dialogue on 27 April; 14-17 June (Vilnius, Lithuania), combined with a Lithuanian EU Presidency event; 13-15 October (location to be determined); 1-3 December (Brussels, Belgium).

-ScC Dublin/Belfast plenary meeting in June 2026

Luke O'Neill gave an update on the June plenary meeting in Dublin and Belfast. Maria Leptin invited suggestions for the locations of the 2027 plenary meetings. France, Austria and Greece would be possible options.