EUROPEAN AUTOMOTIVE
RESEARCH PARTNERS ASSOCIATION

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EARPA's feedback - Call for Evidence on Horizon Europe European Partnerships (Joint Undertakings)

European Automotive Research Partners Association (EARPA) Response to the Call for Evidence - Horizon Europe: European Partnerships to be implemented as Joint Undertakings Ref: Ares(2026)6115964 June 2026

About EARPA

Founded in 2002, EARPA is the association of automotive R&D organisations. It brings together the most prominent independent R&D providers in the automotive sector throughout Europe. At present its membership numbers 60, ranging from large and small commercial organisations to national institutes and universities. EARPA is committed to contributing to the European Research Area and to advancing EU Research and Innovation activities, with a strong focus on the road transport sector and automotive industry.

General Position

EARPA welcomes the Commission's initiative to undertake a strategic revision of the institutionalised partnership landscape. We share the assessment that changed geopolitical conditions and new EU strategic priorities require Joint Undertakings (JUs) to become more efficient, effective, and impactful. However, we urge the Commission to ensure that any reform **preserves and strengthens the unique value of collaborative pre-competitive research -** the foundation upon which European Partnerships have delivered innovation, industrial competitiveness, and societal benefit over successive Framework Programmes.

Response to the identified problem areas

1. Strategic alignment - yes, but safeguard the dual mission of Pillar 2. EARPA supports aligning partnerships with evolving EU strategic priorities. At the same time, we caution against framing alignment solely in terms of industrial competitiveness. Pillar 2 of Horizon Europe addresses **both industrial competitiveness and societal challenges**, ideally combined within the research performed. Any restructuring of JUs must preserve this dual mission. We also note that the fragmentation challenge extends well beyond the EU Framework Programme: the limited harmonisation of 27 national research programmes with each other and with Horizon Europe remains one of the major bottlenecks for Europe's R&I ecosystem, and benchmarking the EU against more centralised systems such as the US or China risks setting unrealistic expectations.

2. Supporting technology uptake - bridge the mid-TRL gap before leaping to deployment. EARPA agrees that stronger links between JUs and deployment programmes are needed, and we support the integration of the European

Competitiveness Fund (ECF) to accelerate market uptake. However, pre-competitive research at TRL 4–6 - the "mid-TRL gap" - is a **precondition** for effective deployment at higher TRLs. One of the key strengths of Pillar 2 lies in its specific ability to address this gap, pooling resources from universities, research centres, and companies to bring fundamental research towards industrial application. Shifting JU funding too heavily toward high-TRL activities without securing this bridge would undermine the future innovation pipeline it is meant to accelerate. The proposed Automotive Partnership illustrates the right approach: exploiting the whole innovation value chain from applied research to industrialisation, open to disruptive technologies, while establishing "flagship initiatives" that go beyond pre-competitive collaboration to roll out innovation to European society. This approach perfectly matches the Commission's specific objectives of increasing scientific and technological capabilities to scale and target coordinated efforts at EU strategic priorities to finally deliver and deploy innovative solutions and technologies.

3. Private co-funding - create the right conditions, not just the right targets. Meaningful private leverage requires governance models that give industry genuine co-ownership of programme priorities. EARPA advocates for an **autonomous and accountable single governing body** empowered to define programme priorities, budget distribution, and implementation instruments - with representation from the private sector, the research community, and public authorities. When industry trusts the strategic relevance and agility of a partnership, financial co-funding will follow automatically, at least in the form of in-kind contributions.

The added value of direct cash contributions is not immediately apparent. They primarily constitute financial transfers without any discernible gain in innovation or efficiency compared to existing in-kind contributions. There is a risk that a shift from in-kind to cash contributions could reduce actual collaboration and diminish the instruments' effective funding impact. Functionally, cash contributions resemble established forms such as contract research, which companies can already use flexibly and in a targeted manner today. The additional value added within the framework of EU programs is therefore not obvious.

More specifically, the European automotive industry is under extreme economic pressure at the moment, resulting in mass layoffs and massive cuts in R&I budgets. In this situation, commitments for direct cash contributions over several years will be extremely difficult to make for many companies, factually excluding those entities whose competitiveness shall be strengthened by a future Joint Undertaking.

4. Cross-fertilisation - adopt portfolio management with inclusive participation and accessibility to the programme. EARPA agrees that JUs tend to work in silos. However, this is also due to the fact that JUs operate within highly specialized environments, which is not necessarily a negative development. Nevertheless, a portfolio management approach within the JU landscape, could increase synergies between programs and support effective coordination with other partnerships, initiatives, and funding programmes at both European and national levels. Critically, cross-fertilisation must extend to **open and inclusive participation**: access to the programme should be broadened to SMEs, start-ups (e.g. ad-hoc integration into ongoing projects with additional funding), and the research community through flexible implementation schemes, reversing the relatively low openness that the Commission has rightly identified.

5. Simplification - consolidate where justified, but do not dilute sectoral expertise. EARPA supports simplifying the JU landscape to reduce fragmentation and overlap. In the automotive domain, for example, consolidating the automotive-relevant elements currently dispersed across multiple Partnerships (2Zero, CCAM, Batt4EU, Chips JU, Clean Hydrogen, AI Partnership, Advanced Materials, and Made in Europe) into a single dedicated Automotive Partnership would streamline governance, reduce administrative burden, and increase impact. However, care must be taken not to lose the specific expertise of the previously separate partnerships. Such consolidation must be guided by **agile, low-bureaucracy governance** and dynamic programming that can adapt to rapidly changing priorities - including a financial mechanism for fast interventions when unforeseen research needs arise within the thematic areas of the JUs.

The need to drastically accelerate processes and massively reduce administrative burdens in the set up and execution of Joint Undertakings is a point that EARPA considers of utmost importance for the success of a Joint Undertaking in the automotive sector. This implies in particular to any model involving the EU Member States as a third party. In a highly competitive international environment, in which Europe's competitors are moving a considerably higher speed, the EU cannot afford double approval procedures of projects on EU and national level nor double reporting obligations on both levels, nor can it afford any delay in the start of a Joint Undertaking that is considered instrumental for strengthening the competitiveness of this crucial sector of the EU industry.

Additionally, the proposal evaluation process must be strengthened. EARPA advocates for a more competitive and focused approach, ensuring that a reasonable number of proposals compete within defined topics. This would help avoid excessive competition, which risks diluting the quality and robustness of the evaluation process.

At the same time, safeguards should be introduced to prevent AI-assisted or insufficiently rigorous evaluations. In this regard, in-person project hearings should become an integral part of the evaluation process, providing an additional mechanism to assess the quality, credibility, and feasibility of proposals.

Key recommendations

- **Preserve and valorise collaborative pre-competitive research** as the essential engine of European industrial competitiveness.
- **Secure the mid-TRL pipeline** (TRL 4–6) before expanding high-TRL deployment funding within JUs.
- **Establish coherent sub-programmes within JUs** as clusters of R&I needs around a limited set of strategic directions ("flagship initiatives")
- **Simplify governance significantly** through empowered single governing bodies with full value-chain representation.
- **Drastically accelerate processes and massively reduce administrative burdens** in the set up and execution of Joint Undertakings
- **Broaden participation** to SMEs, start-ups, and research organisations via flexible access rules and appropriate funding mechanism.
- **Implement portfolio management** across JUs to enable cross-cutting initiatives and reduce siloed working.
- **Build synergies** with national programmes and EU deployment instruments (ECF, IPCEI, CEF).
- **Increase the FP10 budget** to at least (175) billion for 2028-2034, compensating cumulative inflation and matching the scale of Europe's competitiveness, security, and sustainability challenges.

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