

STRATEGIC CLUSTER

ANNUAL WORK PLAN 2025

CLUSTER DESCRIPTION AND KEY PRIORITIES

ERRIN's **Strategic Cluster** combines the activities of the **Policy Working Group**, **Science & Education for Society Working Group** and **Smart Specialisation Working Group**, aligning their efforts to address key EU priorities and strengthen the R&I capacities of the regional innovation ecosystems of the ERRIN members. Operating as a Cluster enables the Working Groups to deliver more impactful messages with a collective voice, enhancing their influence on key EU strategies and initiatives. The cross-sectoral perspective further fosters innovative, holistic approaches to complex challenges while enhancing collaboration.

The Strategic Cluster will also follow up on competitiveness as a priority of the new European Commission and work on defining **ERRIN's work stream tackling innovation and competitiveness** building on the work of the Innovation and Investment Working Group.

The Cluster actively monitors and engages with major EU priorities and strategies, including the **Horizon Europe Programme and the upcoming Framework Programme (FP10)**, the development of the **Multannual Financial Framework post-2027** with a focus on the future R&I and cohesion policies and funding and their place-based dimension, as well as developments regarding interregional – or ecosystem – collaboration instruments. Additionally, the ERRIN secretariat works on the [S3 Community of Practice](#) that supports members and provides opportunities to build their regional R&I capacities through smart specialisation. More details about each Working Group and the project can be found at the end of this file.

CLUSTER CALENDAR

Date	Topic	Responsible
28 January	Exchange with MEPs: Connected regional innovation ecosystems – key for Europe's competitiveness	Policy/ Management Board
11 February	ERRIN Strategic Cluster kick-off meeting: Towards European competitiveness and resilience	Cluster activity (led by Policy)
12 March	Internal meeting – State of play of FP10 and the MFF post-2027	Policy
13 March	Peer-learning event on the future of S3	S3
2 April	Towards a Union of Skills: what can regions expect?	SEFS
10 April	Regional Innovation Valleys: lessons learned and next calls (information session incl. matchmaking)	S3 / Policy
19 May	Workshop on the use of cohesion funds by research institutions – challenges and opportunities for the future (organised in collaboration with YERUN)	SEFS/S3
3 June	Exchange on ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 and ERRIN commitments	Policy / SEFS

September	Internal meeting – State of play and Commission proposals for FP10 and MFF post-2027	Policy
2 October	How can fourth generation universities take up a transformative role for delivering innovation and impact for regions?	SEFS
October	European Innovation Act	Policy
November	Early career researchers – Capacity Building Workshop Horizon Europe for newcomers	SEFS
November	First insights from Innovation for Place-based Transformation EU Preparatory Action	Policy / S3, other thematic clusters

ACTIVITIES

[Exchange with MEPs: Connected regional innovation ecosystems – key for Europe’s competitiveness](#)

28 January | 15:00–17:00

Policy WG

In-person meeting

The critical role of research and innovation ecosystems has been recently highlighted by the Draghi and Heitor reports. Neither of the reports, however, addresses the importance of regions and their role as facilitators of those ecosystems and the collaboration that they foster across Europe as a key component of Europe’s competitiveness. Innovation is deeply rooted in places – their needs and potential, including human capital. Collaboration among those ecosystems enables European regions to leverage their combined strengths, tap into each other’s capacities and collaborate along value chains. Well-connected and less fragmented European innovation ecosystem is essential for enhancing the competitiveness of Europe – its resilience and strategic autonomy.

Research and innovation ecosystems embedded into regions and cities are drivers of Europe’s economic development, as well as Europe’s connection to citizens, ensuring they remain at the heart of the European project. Ensuring that Europe’s investments are strategic and sufficiently targeted, requires understanding of the key role that regions and their ecosystems play in innovation and competitiveness. At the same time, draft proposals for radical simplification of Europe’s long-term budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), raise questions on how Europe can maintain its links with regions as engines of EU’s competitiveness.

The objective of this roundtable is to discuss the role that collaboration between regions and their ecosystems plays in Europe’s competitiveness, and how this role can be strengthened in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

[ERRIN Strategic Cluster kick-off meeting: Towards European competitiveness and resilience](#)

11 February | 10:00–12:00

Led by Policy WG – Cluster activity

Responsible co-leaders: Marie Vaugeois and Siri Raahede Bentzen

In-person meeting

This ERRIN Strategic Cluster kick-off meeting will serve to launch the activities of the Policy, Smart Specialisation and Science & Education Working Groups in 2025. It will provide an opportunity for all ERRIN members to explore Commission's initiatives on competitiveness as well as ERRIN's strategic activities planned for this year, including a dedicated workstream tackling competitiveness.

The overall objective is to give an outline of European Commission's plans to ensure Europe's competitiveness, such as the Competitiveness Compass, and to examine them from a regional viewpoint. Following presentations from Commission speakers, Working Group leaders will present their annual work plans for 2025, giving members the opportunity to discuss the planned activities and get engaged.

Internal meeting – state of play of FP10 and the MFF post-2027

12 March | 14:00-16:00

Policy WG

In-person meeting

This meeting will be an internal discussion between members, focusing on the ongoing member and ERRIN work and developments around the next Framework Programme for R&I (FP10) and MFF post-2027, as well as activities related to the new competitiveness workstream.

Peer-learning event on the future of S3

13 March | 10:00-12:00

S3 WG

Responsible co-leaders: Francesca D'Angelo

In-person meeting

In the context of the ongoing discussions on the future of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) post-2027 and DG REGIO survey on the future of S3 running from January-February 2025, this event will serve to enable exchanges between members on what could be the best approach to Smart Specialisation Strategies moving forward, to ensure their effectiveness. The event is also an opportunity to reflect how smart specialisation fits to the discussions in the frame of the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027 and the foreseen national plans.

Towards a Union of Skills: what can regions expect?

2 April | 10:00–12:00

SEFS WG

Responsible co-leaders: Berwyn Davies and Joakim P. Berg

In-person meeting at Wales House

After concluding the Year of Skills in April 2024, the European Commission announced the Union of Skills as one of the new initiatives for its first 100 days. This initiative aims to address Europe's needs for a radical change in ambition and action for all skill levels and for all types of training and education.

With the announced Union of Skills, the EU will step up and reorient skills funding in the EU budget to ensure that it is better aligned with labour markets and more focused on sectors crucial for the twin transition.

This meeting will inform the membership about the key aspects of the Union of Skills, which will focus on (1) embedding lifelong learning in education and careers and supporting teachers' training and career prospects; (2) improving basic skills and a strategic plan for STEM education, and the launch of proposals for a (3) European strategy for vocational education and training and for (4) the transferability of skills. Additionally, the event aims to provide insights into the regional dimension in this initiative and the reorientation for the skills funding that is envisaged. The meeting will provide a dialogue with the European Commission, in which members can bring their regional needs to discussion (among which the learnings from the regional skills ecosystems case studies ERRIN conducted in the CHARTER project).

Regional Innovation Valleys: lessons learned and next calls (information session incl. matchmaking)

10 April | 10:00–12:00

S3 WG and Policy WG

Responsible co-leaders: Mirva Männikkö and James Sharples

In-person meeting

This meeting will focus on the upcoming call for proposals 'Implementing co-funded action plans for connected regional innovation valleys' (HORIZON-EIE-2025-02-CONNECT-02), featuring a discussion around key elements of the call and a matchmaking activity. The call refers to one of the key initiatives under the Flagship 3 of the New European Innovation Agenda and should be open from 14 May to 15 October 2025.

Members will also benefit from feedback from Regional Innovation Valleys projects selected under the first Horizon Europe RIV call that ran in 2023, as well as inputs from the European Commission.

Workshop on the use of cohesion funds by research institutions – challenges and opportunities for the future (organised in collaboration with [YERUN](#))

19 May | 13:30-16.00

SEFS WG and S3 WG

Responsible co-leaders: Joakim P. Berg and Mirva Männikkö

In-person

This joint SEFS/S3 Working Group meeting, organised with the support of the Young European Research Universities Network (YERUN), aims to gain a better understanding of the added value of cohesion funding for research institutions, more specifically how they can contribute or accelerate the development of regional innovation ecosystems. The meeting will be organised as an informative and interactive meeting with three objectives. First, to inform the ERRIN and YERUN membership about evidence already collected about the use of the cohesion funds. Second, to contrast the figures with

regional practices from across Europe giving the universities and regions an opportunity to pitch regional practices, highlighting success and challenges faced. And finally, to open the dialogue between regions and universities, for better understanding of the added value and the challenges research institutions face in using cohesion funds. The event aims to provide some practical recommendations on how the future cohesion policy could better respond to the needs of the R&I sector and how stakeholder engagement could be improved in the development of national programmes.

Exchange on ERA Policy Agenda 2025–2027 and ERRIN commitments

3 June | 10:00–12:00

Policy WG and SEFS WG

Responsible co-leaders: Zoé Buyle-Bodin

In-person meeting

This event will serve as a follow-up of the ‘ERA Policy Agenda 2025-2027 – A look ahead’ Policy Working Group meeting held in November 2024, following the official approval of the ERA Policy Agenda to be launched in the ERA Forum meeting in May 2025. During the meeting we will also explore specific policy actions that ERRIN will commit to contributing during the period. Finally, we will have a sneak peek into the upcoming ERA Act.

Internal meeting – State of play FP10 and the MFF post-2027

September | Exact date and time TBC

Policy WG

In-person meeting

This meeting will be an internal discussion between members following the publication of the Commission’s legislative proposals for the next EU funding period and plan related follow up activities collectively.

How can fourth generation universities take up a transformative role for delivering innovation and impact for regions?

2 October | 10:00-12:00

SEFS WG

Responsible co-leaders: Delia Mitcan, Berwyn Davies

In-person meeting

Many theoretical frameworks have been developed to measure the regional innovation impact of universities, aiming at analysing the socioeconomic impact that universities in Europe have on their hometowns, metropolitan areas and regions. Several new concepts have emerged over the last decade, subsequently being replaced by others, like civic universities or ERA Hubs. In recent years, the concept of “4th generation universities” has gained traction within research and (higher) education policy circles. Lately, however, closer attention is being paid to its implications for regional innovation policy, given the unique and multi-faceted roles that universities play within their local ecosystems, at



the interface between industry, governments and society at large. At the same time, governments, industries and other stakeholders are increasingly calling upon universities to showcase their societal contributions. These organisations face tangible challenges that necessitate the appropriate talent and knowledge to generate solutions.

In this SEFS Working Group meeting, the concept of fourth generation universities will be presented, along with some regional cases that are implementing it.

European Innovation Act

October | Exact date and time TBC

Policy WG

Responsible co-leaders: TBC

In-person meeting

The European Innovation Act is expected to be proposed by the Commission in the last quarter of 2025 and aims to simplify and streamline EU regulatory framework, facilitate access to venture capital and support the testing of new solutions and technologies. It will promote the access of innovative companies to European research and technology infrastructures, intellectual assets generated by publicly funded R&I in view of increasing patenting, and regulatory sandboxes allowing innovators to develop and test new ideas. This meeting will explore the role of regional dimension in this context, as well as explore how the Innovation Act links with the EU Start-Up and Scale-Up Strategy.

Early career researchers – Capacity Building Workshop Horizon Europe for newcomers

November | Exact date and time TBC

SEFS WG

Responsible co-leaders: Joakim P. Berg, Berwyn Davies, Delia Mitcan with support of other WG-leaders

In-person

This second edition of the Horizon Europe Proposal Workshop focusses on capacity building for newcomers to the programme interested in applying for Horizon Europe's Pillar 2. During a hands-on and interactive workshop participants will learn about proposal preparation for collaborative research calls in Horizon Europe. A Horizon Europe evaluator will share practical insights, do's and don'ts from an evaluators' perspective, and some successful applicants will share their experience. Participants will also learn about ERRIN's Project Development Tool for targeted partner searches and consortium building within the wide ERRIN network of R&I stakeholders coming from 120 regions in 22 European countries. The workshop targets scientists, research managers, public administrators and other stakeholders involved in regional innovation ecosystems. There will be an additional session on the ERA Action on Early Career Researchers to highlight the opportunities available to ECRs and for this information to be cascaded to colleagues of those who attend the event. The SEFS Working Group will be in contact with UAS4Europe to examine whether we collaborate again.

First insights from Innovation for Place-based Transformation EU Preparatory Action

November | Exact date and time TBC

Policy WG and S3 WG

Responsible co-leaders: Francesca D'Angelo and Mirva Männikkö

In-person/online meeting TBC

In October 2024, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre launched a new [EU Preparatory Action on Innovation for Place-Based Transformation](#) – an initiative supported by the European Parliament and designed to help territories maximise their innovation potential. As part of the Action, selected territories will engage in awareness-raising, capacity-building and experimentation activities. This event will aim to share the first experiences, lessons learned and practices between the network members.

OPPORTUNITIES AND OUTPUTS FROM ERRIN PROJECTS

- 18 February (13:00–16:30) at the ERRIN Office; [NetZeroCities](#) Mutual Learning Event on the role of researchers in the cities Mission organised by the Politechnical University of Milan. Opportunity for SEFS WG leaders to attend
- June 2025: Final conference of the [S3 Community of Practice](#)

OTHER ISSUES/TOPICS TO BE MONITORED:

- **Polish EU Council Presidency**
- [EU Innovation Journey'25](#) conference on 12–13 May
- [Expert Seminar on the Future of Cohesion and Territorial Approaches in the Evolving European Union. In Search of a New Paradigm!](#) on 27–28 February
- Tighten contacts with European Commission DG BUDGET, DG GROW and DG SEC-GEN related to Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and competitiveness
- **Explore allies to support for place-based R&I ecosystems**
- Follow up with EIT on the role of place-based innovation ecosystems
- Monitor the ERA Hubs projects: COOPERATE and ERA_FABRIC – final conference on 5 June
- Further assess and provide recommendations to interregional collaboration instruments for innovation (I3 Instrument, Thematic S3 Partnerships, Regional Innovation Valleys, Innovation for Place-based Transformation, INTERREG)
- Mobilise industry stakeholders in regional innovation ecosystems – different approaches and mutual learning
- **Other interesting topics**
- EIC and funding synergies – support the EC/DG R&I workshop on funding synergies
- I3 Support Facility (including the Annual I3 Forum)
- Follow up the European University Alliances, in particular the community of practice
- The Harnessing Europe's Talent initiative in the context of the EU Skills Union: how to retain talent and skills in regions facing a development trap

MORE INFORMATION: LEADERS AND PROJECTS

Policy Working Group



The **Policy Working Group** works closely with the Management Board and the leaders of the other Working Groups to position ERRIN on cross-cutting policy issues. The Working Group follows closely the overall research and innovation policy, in particular the Horizon Europe framework programme, from an overarching perspective and ensuring coordination of horizontal programme aspects. The Working Group also focuses on the preparations to the next European framework programme for R&I (FP10), implementation of the European Research Area (ERA) as the renewed policy framework and agenda for research and innovation, as well as the New European Innovation Agenda, especially strengthening ecosystems and the “Regional Innovation Valleys” initiative.

LEADERS

- Zoé Buyle-Bodin, Region Normandie, zoe.buylebodin@normandie.fr
- Helene-Olesja Betuch, Representation of Saxony-Anhalt to the EU, Helene-Olesja.Betuch@lv-bruessel.stk.sachsen-anhalt.de
- Maria Bilbao de Azpiazu, Basque Country EU Office, m-bilbaoazpiazu@euskadi.eus
- James Sharples, Scotland Europa, James.Sharples@scotent.co.uk

Science & Education for Society Working Group



The **Science & Education for Society Working Group** addresses topics related to the concept of place-based universities and engagement with society, industry and citizens while also working on the role of education (both VET and Higher Education) in the Research and Innovation Smart Specialisation Strategies (RIS3) as well as education and skills for research and innovation. The Working Group facilitates information sharing, knowledge development, and aims to strengthen existing and build new relationships with the EU institutions. Facilitating project development is also part of the Working Group’s scope. For this purpose, the Working Group assesses the interest of the membership and supports in the most efficient way the members in building consortia, primarily with the ERRIN online tool for project development.

LEADERS

- Joakim P. Berg, Oslo Region European Office, joakim@osloregion.org
- Berwyn Davies, Welsh Higher Education Brussels – Welsh Government, berwyn.davies@uniswales.ac.uk
- Delia Mitcan, Technical University Eindhoven/Brainport - e.d.mitcan@tue.nl

Smart Specialisation Working Group



The **Smart Specialisation Working Group** aims to monitor and contribute to key policy developments related to smart specialisation strategies (S3) by enhancing dialogue with relevant EU institutions and stakeholders. The goal is to strengthen the regional perspective in the wider smart specialisation agenda and facilitate interregional cooperation. The Working Group actively engages in the debate around shaping the cohesion policy post-2027 and the future of S3. It also follows different interregional collaboration instruments for innovation, their state of play and upcoming opportunities.

LEADERS

- Raluca Abaseaca, North-East Romania Regional Development Agency, raluca.abaseaca@adnorddest.ro
- Francesca D'Angelo, Tuscany Region, francesca.dangelo@regione.toscana.it
- Joanna Kubiak, Wielkopolska Region, joanna.kubiak@wielkopolska.eu
- Mirva Männikkö, West Finland European Office, mirva.mannikko@westfinland.be

PROJECTS

- S3 Community of Practice ([S3 CoP](#))





Competitiveness work stream

Competitiveness has been set as one of the top priorities of the new European Commission, also with regard to the planning of the next Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027. Following these developments, the cluster will work on defining ERRIN's **work stream tackling innovation and competitiveness**, building on the previous work of the Innovation and Investment Working Group.

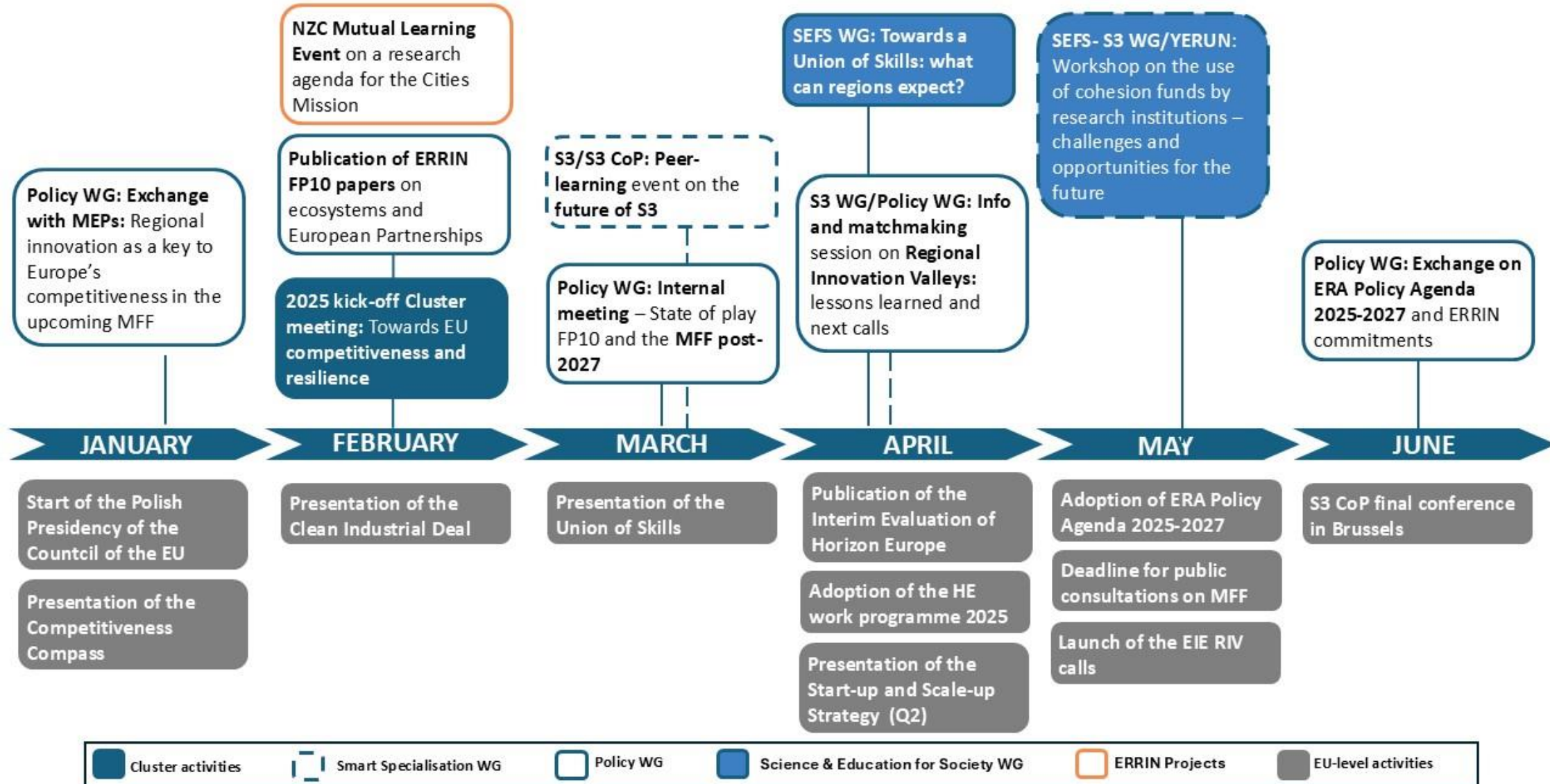
LEADERS

- Marie Vaugeois, Occitanie Europe, marie.vaugeois@occitanie-europe.eu
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- ERRIN [Management Board](#)

ERRIN CONTACTS

			
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STRATEGIC CLUSTER 2025 TIMELINE



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