

Scientific networks as strategic actors in EU science diplomacy

Policy context

Science diplomacy has become an increasingly important component of the European geopolitical toolbox over the past few years. Building on both the 2025 expert report “A European framework for science diplomacy” and the call for evidence, the upcoming Council Recommendation represents a key opportunity for the European Union (EU) to stand for multilateralism in the face of geopolitical upheaval through a comprehensive, inclusive movement of science diplomacy.

The EU must navigate significant challenges, including rising tensions and uncertainty, which are leading to the re-evaluation of historical alliances, as well as the politicisation of science, the spread of post-truth narratives, and anti-science rhetoric. The situation is further complicated by the growing number of actors engaged in science diplomacy, each with different interests and time horizons.

In this context, the [2nd European Science Diplomacy Conference](#), organised on 17–18 December 2025 by the Danish Presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission, in cooperation with Danish actors, was particularly timely. Aimed at reflecting on Europe’s role as a global science and technology leader, the conference also highlighted the importance of non-state actors.

As part of this major conference, the side event “[From research to relation: international scientific networks, the quiet diplomats](#),” explored how international scientific networks and long-standing research collaborations underpin trust-building and contribute to science diplomacy and global decision-making. Organised by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Association, the Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA), The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities, and Université Côte d’Azur, the session aimed to present concrete case studies illustrating these contributions and to engage with the audience.

Key insights

Against this backdrop, the session offered several insights into how scientific networks operate as informal yet influential actors in science diplomacy.

Autonomous responsible actors

Scientific networks of researchers and research-performing organisations act as autonomous, responsible actors, building long-term partnerships and equitable frameworks for international cooperation. Through sustained academic collaboration, they generate trust, shape norms, and contribute to international relations in ways that are complementary to, but not fully dependent on, formal diplomatic channels. This raises important reflections on their role in science diplomacy and their capacity to align with diplomatic efforts while preserving scientific autonomy.

Enabling interdisciplinary and value-based cooperation

During the session attended by over 100 participants, an online interactive poll revealed that half of the audience described the fragmentation of actors and interests as one of the main challenges for science today. International scientific networks create spaces where regions, sectors, disciplines, and stakeholders that usually operate in silos can better connect and work together. By fostering interdisciplinary, value-based collaboration, these networks help establish a shared language between science and policy across different parts of the world. This complements and can reinforce the growing awareness and capacity of actors to manage security risks responsibly, while preserving openness and academic freedom.

Helping to make invisible activities visible

While numerous initiatives already contribute to science diplomacy, they often remain fragmented and insufficiently visible, particularly in widening countries and underrepresented regions of Europe. Scientific networks play a key role in making the so-called invisible visible by scaling up, highlighting and connecting day-to-day scientific diplomacy by our network participants.

Securing safe spaces while facilitating EU internationalisation

International scientific networks ensure effective cross-border collaboration. By identifying excellent, trusted partners, they help build the talent pools and ecosystems necessary to advance research and innovation. They also provide secure environments, such as collaborative platforms, which help consolidate knowledge and support the EU's foreign and security agendas. This dimension was highlighted by responses to the online poll, in which half of the audience identified personal connections and trust as the most important factor in linking the scientific and diplomatic world.

Helping to translate complex evidence into policy-relevant insights

As global challenges become increasingly systemic and complex, networks must act proactively rather than reactively. By pooling expertise and working on a multilateral basis, they can inform political agendas and support policymakers with timely, accessible, and concrete evidence. Using a common language developed through collaboration that resonates with

decision-makers is particularly important for maintaining a global space for addressing common challenges that no single country or region could manage alone, including through international partnerships of mutual benefit under the EU Global Gateway strategy.

Policy recommendations

Drawing on the insights from the session, the following points should be considered in the upcoming Council Recommendation on science diplomacy:

- **Create enabling conditions for sustained science–policy engagement** by allowing researchers, universities, and scientific networks to interact regularly and, over the long term, align with diplomats and policymakers through mutual learning and respect for distinct roles. This should include a more proactive and supportive role for EU delegations and Member State embassies in engaging with researchers.
- **Institutionalise spaces for dialogue and knowledge exchange** by establishing regular platforms and forums for scientists and decision-makers to share insights, identify common interests, and contribute scientific expertise, thereby strengthening the EU's strategic role on the global stage.
- **Provide targeted and consistent EU-level support to research networks by** ensuring stable resources and political engagement for research and science diplomacy activities, including the 10 Framework Programme on Research and Innovation (FP10), Horizon Europe and the Global Europe instrument, and integrating evidence-based policy briefs to support the work of diplomats.
- **Facilitate access and representation within EU policymaking processes by** creating clearly identified points of contact within EU institutions and providing opportunities for researchers and international network representatives to contribute to evidence gathering and policy development for diplomatic relations and international partnerships, ensuring inclusive participation and enhanced impact.

These recommendations highlight the need to move from an ad hoc engagement towards a more structured, inclusive, and sustained integration of scientific networks into EU science diplomacy.

About the organisations endorsing the statement

The European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) Association is a funding organisation that supports the creation of research networks, known as COST Actions. These networks provide an open space for collaboration among scientists across Europe (and beyond), thereby driving research advancements and innovation.

The Marie Curie Alumni Association (MCAA) is an international non-profit association of researchers who have benefited from the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA). The MCAA is a global community with over 24,000 members from more than 150 countries and focuses on fostering career development, facilitating networking, and contributing to shaping science policy.

The Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities (The Guild) comprises 23 of Europe's most distinguished research-intensive universities in 17 countries. It is dedicated to enhancing the voice of academic institutions, their researchers and students. Since 2019, The Guild and the African Research Universities Alliance have partnered to confront their common challenges.

The U7+ Alliance of World Universities is a coalition of university presidents aimed at defining concrete actions universities can take to collectively address global challenges in coordination with government leaders in G7 countries and beyond.