Fjord Qudra on Modernising the Funding of European R&D.

European R&D stands at a delicate turning point. While public funding has done a great deal of good—supporting pioneering research and helping generations of innovators—it's no secret that the process can be slow, and the odds of securing that support are often discouraging. A project might sit in limbo for nine months or more before a decision comes through, leaving teams scrambling for plan B. In that window, technology, or the world, doesn't stand still. Breakthroughs in artificial intelligence roar forward, shifting the landscape faster than a lengthy review committee can fathom. By the time funding for one project is approved, another lab halfway across the globe might already be working on the next iteration of the technology. It's not that public funds lack vision or value. The problem is timing. In a world dominated by accelerating AI scientific discoveries, slow responses can mean lost momentum, missed opportunities, and a restless research community itching to move faster.

That restlessness carries with it a massive upside: it forces us to consider new ways to collaborate, experiment, and commercialise. In this climate, we have a chance to imagine a completely fresh environment for European R&D. Rather than trimming at the edges of existing frameworks, we can think big: a synergy of private capital, universities, small-to-medium enterprises, established corporations, and every other stakeholder who believes in the power of invention. With AI as the keystone, this environment could break through bottlenecks that have hamstrung Europe's competitiveness for years. And that's the vision that should seize our imagination: speeding up innovation, transforming raw research into commercial products in a fraction of the time, and forging a new cycle of creativity that keeps pace with the rest of the world.

Right now, we stand in a global sprint where other contenders—like the United States, China and the UAE are accelerating away. They've found ways to attract or re-purpose vast pools of capital and funnel it into bold experiments without getting slowed down by labyrinthine processes. Their velocity is undeniable. Europe's challenge, then, is deciding whether to keep shuffling forward with the old approach—where application forms multiply, committees gather, months slip by, and the final approval might be lukewarm—or to take a leap of faith. The truth is, we're at a juncture where we either transform our system or risk being overtaken in fields we once led.

But let's be clear: this isn't about tearing down public funding. That's critical. It has nurtured breakthroughs in energy, healthcare, and environmental science that shaped entire industries. The question is whether those methods, so effective in earlier decades, can adapt to the breakneck tempo of modern AI-driven research. Today's R&D demands a reflexive system that can pivot swiftly—one that responds in real time to new discoveries, invests with confidence in promising ventures, and eliminates as many bureaucratic barriers as possible. We don't need to demonize public grants to see that, right now, they're simply too slow for the pace of 21st-century innovation.

We propose that the conversation should be about complementing and accelerating those funds, whether through private channels, collaborative investment models, or new digital platforms that connect resources and expertise across Europe. Anyone who has wrestled with the complexities of public applications knows the time and money spent on specialised

consultants to help navigate all the complexity. Imagine channeling that effort instead into the actual research—into testing prototypes, gathering data, refining ideas. For smaller startups or lesser-known universities, every euro saved on red tape and consultancy can be poured into real development. And that's how you start to see big leaps forward, especially in regions that haven't benefited from the lion's share of funding in the past.

Key to this transformation is AI itself, harnessed by teams of scientists, innovators and practitioners on a continental scale. And artificial intelligence can do more than just speed up lab discoveries; it can streamline the entire R&D pipeline. Matching algorithms can connect promising researchers with relevant investors, corporate partners, and even mentors. Instead of sending out proposals to any institution that might listen, labs and startups could rely on intelligent systems that scout for the best fits. And once a project is underway, And agents can track real-time progress, ensuring that any necessary course corrections happen swiftly—no months-long gap before the next official review. This removes an enormous layer of uncertainty and friction, letting innovators focus on the science rather than the bureaucracy.

Part of the solution also lies in rethinking how results are measured. In many existing programs, success often hinges on meeting specific milestones laid out in a rigid grant proposal, often over a year ago. Miss a box, or need to pivot, and you might risk the next tranche of funding, or incur the wrath of a delayed payment. But real innovation is fluid. A discovery in the lab might suggest an entirely different commercial path than the one you predicted a year ago. By building structures that reward agility, we encourage teams to adapt quickly. That might mean letting AI comb through research data, identify a new direction, and swiftly reassign resources to chase a more promising outcome. Fast feedback loops, real-time analytics driven by agents, and a culture of adaptive management can replace or augment the slow, linear progress of older funding systems.

Cut to early 2025, as of the time of writing. We are talking tipping points—when AI truly becomes ubiquitous across scientific fields—and Europe need to be on board this train as it powers out of the station. Meaning funding. Meaning removing friction and red tape and traditional assumptions. Already, we're seeing the power of generative models that can propose new molecules, outline patent strategies, and even generate entire business models from scratch. Meanwhile, agentic software can handle a slew of administrative tasks, reducing the overhead that used to bog down teams. All of this means that waiting nine months for an approval letter feels more than just archaic—it feels like ignoring the breakneck velocity at which the future is arriving. If Europe waits too long to adopt new methods, it may find its top researchers and promising startups drifting abroad to places where funding cycles run on near-instant feedback.

Let's also be honest about the distribution of Europe's existing public funds. A considerable percentage tends to cluster to the north and west, eaving smaller nations to navigate more crowded channels. That doesn't just stifle innovation in eastern Europe,, it also deprives the entire continent of the creative sparks that can come from fresh perspectives. A more unified, agile approach to R&D would help spread opportunities across the map, creating the possibility for cross-pollination among different fields, cultures, and geographic regions. Diversity in research is often the secret sauce for big leaps forward—unexpected

collaborations create unexpected results, which can become the next wave of scientific and commercial breakthroughs.

When we consider global competition, it's evident that many countries see R&D as their golden ticket to future leadership. China, for instance, channels massive resources into AI, leveraging both public and private engines to rocket ahead. The U.S., historically, has successfully combined venture capital and private enterprise to power its startups, complemented by large-scale grants for foundational research and a risk averse culture that learns and improves from failure, instead of financially shaming the next attempt by the entrepreneur or team.. The Middle East has shown a willingness to invest billions in building entire research cities and forging cutting-edge labs. Against that backdrop, Europe can't afford to remain on the old fence. The continent has world-class universities, a rich tradition of scientific excellence, and a cultural tapestry that encourages both imagination and rigor. All it needs is a structural funding upgrade, combining public and venture, and harnessing corporate investment that aligns that talent with speed and efficiency.

Moreover, we must nurture a culture of entrepreneurship that spans across university campuses. Some of the most transformative companies in history began as humble spinouts led by a couple of graduate students and a professor with a big idea. In many European countries, that journey is still weighed down by bureaucracy and risk aversion. It's not enough to file a patent; you need mentors who understand market demands, investors who believe in early-stage ventures, and a ready workforce skilled in both the research and the business sides of innovation. AI can streamline many of these processes—imagine automated patent drafting, real-time competitor analysis, or dynamic business modeling—but only if we have an overarching system that welcomes rapid adaptation.

One of the most exciting prospects is how these modernised frameworks might level the playing field for smaller institutions and underrepresented regions. When public funding no longer stands as the sole gatekeeper, creative ideas from any corner of the continent can catch the attention of global investors. And once those ideas secure backing, the ripple effects multiply—local economies surge and entire communities can see the tangible benefits of bold research. This in turn powers a cycle of confidence, where more talented individuals decide to stay and build, rather than chase greener pastures elsewhere. Everyone wins when innovation is distributed more evenly and capital deconstrained: large corporations get fresh partnerships, universities elevate their status, startups unlock new frontiers, and Europe bolsters its collective standing.

Eventually, these successes can inspire Europe to reimagine what "public funding" even means. Perhaps it evolves into a more flexible, outcome-focused instrument that complements private capital rather than competing with it. Public funds could serve as a guarantee or insurance mechanism for high-risk, high-reward endeavors, encouraging venture capitalists to back projects they'd otherwise deem too uncertain. In this way, we build bridges between the stability of traditional public grants and the dynamism of private investment, ensuring that both can play to their strengths without impeding progress.

Still, the clock is ticking. AI, in all its forms—machine learning, robotics, data analytics, and beyond—has no interest in slowing down. If Europe dithers, other players will set the pace, define the standards, and capture the lion's share of both talent and market opportunities.

We risk becoming spectators, applauding foreign breakthroughs instead of championing our own. That's not the story Europe wants to write. We're known for our scientific curiosity, for the revolutionary spirit that sparked waves of cultural and industrial transformation in the past. To honor that tradition, we must adapt to the present challenge.

So here's the crux of it all: We need to embrace a fundamentally fresh approach to powering R&D to commercial success, one that isn't shackled by slow cycles or low odds. We can imagine an era—sooner rather than later—where a researcher's main task is the pursuit of discovery, not the navigation of endless forms in the hunt for funding. Where the path from lab bench to market is streamlined through AI-driven systems that connect ideas with investors, mentors, and corporate partners. Where Eastern European labs can stand on equal footing with wealthier Western institutions elsewhere, benefiting from a more balanced distribution of resources. Where the time from concept to commercialization shrinks dramatically, helping Europe stand tall in the global race.

None of this will happen overnight, and it won't happen without facing complexities head-on. But if we truly want to keep up with the U.S., China, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia—and indeed, to surpass them in fields we excel at—then incremental tweaks to the old model won't cut it. Real transformation requires imagination, the boldness to experiment, and the grit to move past what's comfortable. It means forging alliances we've never considered, building networks that cross traditional boundaries, and learning to trust in new forms of evaluation that keep us honest and accountable.

The world of AI-infused R&D is both thrilling and unforgiving. It rewards those who act decisively and punishes those who cling too long to the status quo. Europe sits on a bedrock of scientific brilliance that can unleash a new wave of prosperity if we give it the right conditions. When you combine that brilliance with the organisational might of agile funding, the synergy can be explosive. We're talking about breakthroughs that don't just change scientific journals but reshape entire industries—pharmaceuticals, energy, space, transportation, robotics, AI and beyond.

That vision should ignite a spark in every investor, researcher, academic, entrepreneur, and policymaker who cares about Europe's future. The potential is enormous, but so is the risk of missed opportunity. The question we have to answer—and answer soon—is: Will we empower our innovators to move at AI speed, or remain trapped in a complex and inefficient public funding system that can't keep up without the aid of expensive consultancy? If we choose the former, we might see a renaissance of European R&D that not only meets global standards but sets them. If we choose the latter, we'll keep reading about the breakthroughs happening elsewhere, wondering why our best and brightest felt compelled to leave.

In the end, this is about more than money and grants. It's about forging a new identity for European innovation—one that embraces fresh partnerships, invests boldly, leverages AI for speed, and unshackles researchers to reach beyond what once seemed possible. The momentum of AI is unstoppable, and it beckons us to transform or be left behind. Let's answer that call with a system that matches the spirit of discovery, removing the unnecessary hurdles so the future can come rushing in. If we do, we'll see a Europe ready to claim its place at the forefront of global R&D. If we don't, we risk becoming an echo of the

past, while others define the next chapter of scientific and commercial achievement. The choice is ours—let’s make it the right one.