



Commissioner Janez POTOČNIK

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Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

Minister, Prof Kafatos, Prof Quintanilha, members of the Scientific Council,

It is a pleasure to be here today, at this first official function of the Portuguese presidency. And it is appropriate that such an occasion is devoted to the subject of research. I would like to thank Minister Gago for putting it high on Presidency's agenda and for his long standing commitment in the development of European policies in this domain.

European policies are by definition collective policies; they reflect shared objectives, shared concerns and shared ambitions on the part of all the countries in the EU. Research is an area where it should be particularly obvious that there is no difference between "European interest" and "national interest".

I would like to put the emphasis today on our ambitions and to the continuing vitality of European research policy, both of which can be illustrated by the ERC.

In the first place, the ERC underscores the central focus on excellence in European research.

I previously described the ERC as the “flagship” of the 7th framework programme. It is at the leading edge of a range of important initiatives to adapt European research policies to the challenges of the future. And like these other new initiatives, it draws its strength from well-established principles and the achievements of the past.

The over-riding logic of the whole Research Framework Programme is to fund excellent projects on the basis of quality. This core philosophy is carried over to the ERC, where the commitment to excellence is paramount, with no requirements about partnerships and no pre-allocation of budget according to themes. With its “investigator-driven” approach, the ERC puts the focus exclusively on the excellence of the individual researcher and the excellence of his or her proposal.

Second, the ERC symbolises our commitment to modernising Europe's research institutions

From the seeds of an idea to an entity making its presence felt on the European stage, the ERC has grown very quickly. This is largely thanks to the efforts of dedicated individuals from across the spectrum of scientific and political actors.

We are already seeing the success of ERC. By the time the 7th Framework Programme came into being at the beginning of this year, a strategy was already in place and a first call for proposals published. More than 9000 proposals had been received by the 25 April deadline for the first Starting Grants, leaving no-one in any doubt about the appeal of the ERC to Europe's research community. The reaction, which surpassed our own expectations, suggests that we have really hit the nail on the head - the ERC corresponds to an urgent need within Europe's research community.

The ERC's Scientific Council must be credited for the quality and timeliness of the work they have been doing since their first meeting in October 2005, laying the groundwork for a smooth start to operations.

I also want to acknowledge the commitment of the evaluation panels and the so-called "dedicated implementation structure" of the ERC – at present constituted by my own services in the Commission, and in the near future to be established in the form of an Executive Agency.

For my part, I can assure you that the Commission's commitment to the ERC is unwavering. The start-up of a new organisation is never easy. In the case of the ERC, the backbreaking work of managing an unprecedented number of proposals must be done in parallel with the recruitment and training of staff. And all of this by an organisation that, with its independent scientific governance and autonomous implementation via an Executive Agency, brings some significant changes to the traditional methods of management.

Like perhaps one of Portugal's most famous sons, Ferdinand Magellan, we are navigating through uncharted waters!

In spite of that, together with the Scientific Council, we have managed to create the basis for an organisation that responds to both the scientific and operational needs. And we will continue with this work, doing all that is needed to have a fully-fledged ERC operating as soon as possible.

Ladies and Gentlemen, **the ERC and the other new instruments in the 7th framework programme have given a new impetus to European research policy. But this does not mean we can rest on our laurels.**

Quite the contrary.

2006 was about getting the right Framework Programme for Europe. 2007 is about looking beyond the Framework Programme, to the European Research Area. We put forward a Green paper for consultation on this issue in April of this year, setting out a range of important challenges we need to address.

The Commission welcomes fresh thinking, and I have specifically invited a contribution to the debate from the ERC's scientific Council.

This of course does not mean that I've taken my eye off the framework Programme. While research policy is wider than the framework programme, the latter remains the central component of our strategy and a powerful motor for the broader objectives of the European Research Area.

Equally important, the debate on the European Research Area forces us to re-examine the contribution of the framework programme to achieving these broader objectives, and to consider how we can best use the resources at our disposal.

We have a pretty narrow window of opportunity to get this right, and I don't want to miss it. If you'll allow me, I'd like to set out some of the key principles as I see them.

First, we need to address the underlying structural problems faced by Europe's research community.

One of the objectives of the Framework Programme has been to overcome the fragmentation of European research by bringing together scientists across the continent who are working on the same or inter-linked issues.

The ERC has a structural rationale which is however substantially different. It arises from Europe's relatively poor performance in research at the frontiers of science. The concern is not related to quantity – Europe is the world's number one producer of scientific papers. But we trail behind the United States in our ability to produce the best - and this also means the most influential – research.

We must improve. This is a need, not a desire. Our society, our economy, is changing. We cannot compete as a knowledge economy without being at the very forefront of knowledge creation.

The Green Paper states very clearly that the problem is a structural one, particularly as regards the Europe's university system. There is a need for structural reform of our universities. Many of them are good, but few are really outstanding. We need far more concentration and specialisation.

I know that the Scientific Council is very aware of this issue and has taken it to heart in designing the ERC's strategy, in particular as regards the support for young and up-and-coming researchers.

And I am convinced that the ERC will make a major contribution to the reform of our universities, by identifying the very best research leaders and encouraging greater attention to flexibility and the development of research careers on the part of host institutions. Above all, it will contribute to generating real competition between universities for research talent across national borders.

Another structural requirement is improving the coherence of the so-called knowledge triangle – the need to bring together education, research and innovation more effectively.

This idea is behind the Commission's proposals for the European Institute of Technology, which will represent a model and an experimental environment for the

translation of knowledge into innovation. I should like to thank the Scientific Council for their advice, which helped to enrich and refine the Commission's proposals.

My second key principle is the need to bring all appropriate resources to bear on the development of Europe's research capacity

The new framework programme has a budget of about €54 billion over 7 years. This represents a significant increase in real terms compared to the last programme. The ERC, with an average annual budget of more than 1 billion euros per year - about 15% of the total- represents a good proportion, but by no means all, of this increase. Spending has risen or will rise for all parts of the framework programme.

I would nevertheless argue that the EU is still not taking sufficient steps to face up to the challenges posed by our competitors, present and future.

We need to rethink how we use sources of funding. The ERC will make the most of Europe's research capacities, and promote the best research talents we have and we can attract. But there remains the problem of building excellence across the continent, where capabilities are very uneven.

It is important to address this issue. But not with the Framework Programme, where no-one is served by allocating geographically. The Framework Programme, as I've already said, is about excellence.

But we do have an instrument to address this need for capacity-building - The structural funds, one-third of the EU's budget earmarked for helping the less developed Member States. And that development can, indeed should, be based on knowledge. I appreciate that Member States have many competing priorities. But research must be put more squarely on the map of structural priorities, if the less well-off regions are to catch up rather than slip further behind their peers.

In line with the recently-published Guidelines produced by the CREST advisory group, I advocate a more coherent use of these financial instruments so that they support science and research. This issue will be the subject of a Communication to be adopted by the Commission in a matter of weeks.

The next point is that the framework programme should be seen as a coherent whole, with different elements designed for different purposes. We should make sure we use the best instrument for the purpose.

We still have some things to do regarding the ERC, including the creation of the executive agency. The purpose, of course, is to establish a funding mechanism precisely attuned to the objective of supporting first class frontier research.

Equally, there are legislative and organisational novelties in other parts of the framework programme which we are pursuing with great commitment.

I could mention the follow up work to the ESFRI roadmap for research infrastructures; the Joint Technology Initiatives which create public/private partnerships to boost research in certain very specific industrial areas; and the creation of another Executive Agency for broader framework programme implementation.

Like the ERC, each of these initiatives shows how innovations in research funding require attention not only to the “what” but also the “how”. We are committed not only to new objectives but also new means of management, requiring innovations in legal structures, governance methods and administrative procedures. This way our programme will achieve what we want it to achieve, bearing in mind that we are spending this money on behalf of the European tax-payer, who needs to know that we are spending it wisely.

With more money for the framework programme, we must focus our funding more precisely on reaching our objectives. We need to have a range of funding structures that are managed in closer association with the scientific community than in the past.

This will add up to a better-functioning research system.

My final point is the need to make sure that we are coherent in our objectives, while at the same time respecting the autonomy of different actors.

The ERC is not the only frontier research funding agency in Europe, even if it has perhaps the broadest scope. It must work in tandem with the other parts of the framework programme and other actors, at national and regional level, who, after all, are the source of the overwhelming majority of research funds.

I certainly don't need to remind this audience that the ERC has been established as an autonomous organisation, which is responsible for developing its strategy independently. There is no question of the Commission, or anyone else, imposing strategy on the ERC. Likewise with individual national agencies.

So heavy-handed co-ordination cannot be the answer. On the other hand it is vital that our strategic objectives are aligned, otherwise we risk wasting resources.

The Commission will play its part, by organising the political debate on the European Research Area, and by taking the initiatives which flow from this. CREST, mentioned earlier, also has an important role. But you will also observe that the framework programme does itself include mechanisms designed to bring together the institutional actors as well as the researchers, precisely for this purpose. I am thinking for example of actions such as ERAnet, the Technology Platforms, research infrastructures roadmap and the Joint Technology Initiatives.

The common objective behind these initiatives is to "join up" Europe in ways that are more effective than in the past, but which also recognise the plurality and overlap of different institutions. This plurality is not just inevitable: it is a necessary part of a dynamic research system.

And the ERC will provide a focus for improving the coherence of Europe's frontier research. By creating an international benchmark, an exchange for best practice and by prompting joint action, for example in improving and rationalising international peer review mechanisms.

The ERC is the "new kid on the block". Maybe it arrived in a shiny new car and is being invited to all the best parties – the German Chancellor came to its christening after all! But it will need to establish its position amongst long established peers: the national

research funding agencies for example. The adjustments will not necessarily be easy, but I am sure we will see enduring friendships.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the ERC comes under FP7's Ideas programme. And that is what this is all about: ideas, new ideas, ideas without any restrictions. An ideas factory. What it produces may help determine research trends, the future development of our industries and even, I dare to hope, Nobel Prizes.

Now it is the turn of researchers to deliver: to deliver the best ideas, to deliver excellent research and to deliver results that will improve our lives.