

Partners in Science

■ **Europe** – Heads of state in the European Union have vowed to ensure that, by 2010, Europe will be the most competitive economic and scientific region in the world. To achieve this aim, they propose to increase spending on education and research to an average of three percent of the gross domestic product. The EU now faces the question of how to fund basic research in the future. New concepts are called for. In the past, research was treated as an instrument of pure economic innovation and promoted according to regional policy criteria. Can Europe afford to continue to ignore successful research funding models? Requiring highly qualified scientists to justify projects on the basis of potential applications and enter into complex contracts is hardly the right way to proceed. And that is without taking account of the fact that basic research constitutes the foundation for innovation and thus prosperity. With a European Research Council (ERC) to provide a strong, science-led approach to research sponsorship in Europe, we are on the right track. It was for this reason that, early in March, the Max Planck Society convened a meeting in Berlin to exchange ideas. The result: an ERC must be geared strictly toward internationally proven standards of independent scientific funding. In other words, decisions on research projects should be based on quality alone, to the exclusion of any non-scientific criteria. An ERC should be independent of the European Commission, have a lean administration and be headed by scientists of the highest caliber. Moreover, it should support only teams or individuals that distinguish themselves through excellence and creativity. Topics should be selected and assessed solely by researchers of high repute who enjoy the confidence of their colleagues. Together with Europe's other major research organizations, I appeal to the Federal Government in Germany, to the governments of other European countries and to the European Commission to take the necessary steps as soon as possible to establish a European Research Council. The quality of research and Europe's ability to compete must be enhanced. No European coun-

try can survive alone in competition with the U.S. An ERC will play a decisive role in restoring Europe's competitiveness at an international level.

■ **Competition** – The federal and regional governments in Germany have now reached agreement on a joint concept to restore German research to a position of world leadership. Targeted funding is to be provided both for individual universities and colleges as well as for university and non-university research facilities. Moreover, much more emphasis is to be placed on promoting

junior scientists. I welcome this decision and support the specific funding of German universities, for there can be no doubt that the higher education sector must be freed from its present financial crisis. However, this must not happen at the expense of non-university research institutions. It is essential now to increase rather than merely redistribute the available funds! Only with high-performing universities and excellent non-university research institutions can research in Germany excel

in international competition and serve as the engine of prosperity. Without excellence, there can be no innovation.

■ **Israel** – The celebrations marking 40 years of cooperation between the Weizmann Institute and the Max Planck Society gave me particular pleasure. It was scientists who took the initial steps toward overcoming the effects of a huge tragedy that seemed likely to irrevocably separate the Israeli people from their German counterparts. The moves toward rapprochement came at a time when it was understandably difficult to establish contacts on a broader political level. Science, on the other hand, could dare to tread where others could not. One such step came in 1964 with the first Minerva Agreement. This cooperation has since developed into one of the integral components in the global endeavors of research to gain a better understanding of nature and bring about a positive change in human living conditions. It is something Israelis and Germans can be proud of.



Peter Gruss, President of the Max Planck Society