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Of course science has always sought to be international, but it has not always embodied this. Just consider the small percentage of foreigners who hold teaching positions at our universities. If ETH Zurich boasts a 60 percent share of non-Swiss among its professors and, at the same time, scores so well in international rankings, one would conclude that the two parameters are somehow related. We import red wine from France and Italy – why don’t we also take advantage of the intellectual potential of these and other countries? Incidentally, the Max Planck Society has long been leading the way. Citizens of countries other than Germany make up 40 percent of its Directors – and not only at its new institutes in eastern Germany, although it is especially noticeable there. How could international visibility be better demonstrated?

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Limited autonomy

The European Research Council (ERC) grew out of the idea that, ultimately, innovations result only when a project’s scientific quality is to be considered. The Commission has declared not only that it does not want to have any influence on the work of the ERC, but also that it wants to act as the guardian of this autonomy. Some might ask: Is this not akin to the fox guarding the henhouse?

Well, so far, the Commission and – leading the way – Janez Potocnik, who is the Commissioner responsible for research, have spoken out in this regard. The Commission has succeeded not only in establishing the Scientific Council, but also in staffing it with 22 outstanding scientists. The number 22 is important here, as another figure, 25, would have suggested that each member country would be entitled to a vote. But it has been set up as an agency to implement the strategy defined by the Scientific Council.

A chance for Germany

The European Research Council (ERC) grew out of the German Research Foundation and the Max Planck Society, which historically were limited in what they can do even though, to a certain extent, they are virtually recognized principles. Keeping the target group too small can cause such insights to be missed. The three-percent goal – that is, the intention to increase the share of research and development spending in GDP to this figure – was set years ago by the European Union, and the current objective is to reach 1.9 percent, lags far behind this goal. In Germany, we make a relatively good showing with 2.5 percent. But there are reasons to expect that we will reach the goal in the near future. An increase from 2.5 to 3 percent requires a sustained increase in the budget for research and development over the coming years, of which the business sector alone, if the current breakdown of two-thirds/one-third were retained, would have to bear an additional seven billion euros through 2010.

I can hardly imagine that this will be attainable, as the growth rates are currently below 1 percent of the annual budget rather than close to 6 percent. In any case, the German federal government is sending a strong signal for research with the additional six billion euros it promises. This agency has 300 million euros at its disposal in the first year, so 2007, 600 million euros in the second year, and 900 million in the third year. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve a stable balance of slightly more than 1 billion euros per year. A key factor in selecting the above instruments was the question of the added value a European instrument could create. Not only is the ERC limited in the amount of its funding. An organization that has only about 1 billion euros annually at its disposal must ask itself what effect and visibility it can possibly achieve compared with the 20 billion euros of the national funding organizations. An ERC must also not miss its big chance to promote projects that, based on a proper understanding of the principle of subsidiarity, are not or cannot be supported at the national level or by the national funding organizations.

A chance for Germany

“More of the same” – that would be truly unfortunate. In promoting early independence, the ERC is addressing one of Europe’s real weaknesses that has long put us at a disadvantage compared with, say, the US. The situation is similar when it comes to funding the continent’s top scientists that normally don’t receive sufficient funding in Europe. Exceptions such as the Max Planck Society only prove the rule.

The European Research Council is to be established along the lines of the German Research Foundation. In other words, an independently managed scientific organization that includes all fields and in which there is to be no regional counterbalancing. Solely a project’s scientific quality is to be considered. The Commission has declared not only that it does not want to have any influence on the work of the ERC, but also that it wants to act as the guardian of this autonomy. Some might ask: Is this not akin to the fox guarding the henhouse?

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This agency will likewise include the office of a secretary general who will represent the Scientific Council and thus the community of European scientists in the agency’s day-to-day work. This is important because this agency is to be an Executive Agency, meaning that it will be part of the Commission. The creation of this structure has been in progress since early October, in close contact with the Scientific Council. Despite the best intentions of everyone involved, it still won’t be easy for the agency to set its mechanisms apart, wherever necessary, from those of the Commission and to achieve a unique identity as the ERC.

Incidentally, an evaluation is planned for 2010 to determine whether the agency’s work does, indeed, achieve the necessary and expected level of autonomy. When preparations were underway to establish the ERC, it was hotly debated whether a different, less Commission-bound solution should have been sought right from the outset. In the end, this idea was abandoned because it would have delayed the launch of the ERC.

I consider it to be another key task of the secretary general’s office to ensure that the funding instruments are effective in supporting the scientific community. This involves organizing a peer review process that truly deserves the name, and that follows international recognized rules. At present it does not appear that this will pose difficulties – on the contrary, I am under the impression that Brussels is making every effort to accommodate our needs. Thus, especially on this point, I am counting on the support of the national research and research funding organizations.

The Scientific Council has since taken up its work, chaired by Fotis Kafatos, former Director-General of the EMBL, assisted by two Vice-Chairs, Helga Nowotny and Daniel Estève, and has already developed concepts for two funding instruments. The first is a program for 200 to 250 junior research groups. These ERC Starting Grants are awarded for five years and are subject to a two-step selection process. The first step requires applicants to submit a brief outline of their project, and the second step then votes more detailed applications from the candidates who pass the first selection round.

Bureaucracy is to be kept to the minimum possible in the process. Old prejudices against EU bureaucracy shouldn’t arise at all, since the ERC awards grants, not contracts. Incidentally, applications are open to anyone with the appropriate qualifications, regardless of age, nationality or current place of residence – as long as they want to work in Europe and as long as they completed their doctoral studies no more than eight years ago. The program is also extremely open and could contribute to attracting non-Europeans to Europe, as well, or at least European graduates who are doing their post-doctoral studies abroad. We shall see.

The second funding instrument is to be a program for already established scientists, but it will not be published until 2008. Detailed information is currently being compiled. Incidentally, the ERC has 300 million euros at its disposal in the first year, so 2007, 600 million euros in the second year, and 900 million in the third year. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve a stable balance of slightly more than 1 billion euros per year. A key factor in selecting the above instruments was the question of the added value a European instrument could create. Not only is the ERC limited in the amount of its funding. An organization that has only about 1 billion euros annually at its disposal must ask itself what effect and visibility it can possibly achieve compared with the 20 billion euros of the national funding organizations. An ERC must also not miss its big chance to promote projects that, based on a proper understanding of the principle of subsidiarity, are not or cannot be supported at the national level or by the national funding organizations.

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Will the ERC alter the research and research funding landscape in Germany and Europe as a whole? This question currently occupies the thoughts of many. I think it will, and in a very fundamental way. At first glance, the European Research Council will initially expand only the positions available for young, independent researchers. Since we already have numerous such offers here, like the German Research Foundation’s Emmy Noether Pro-
Commitment pays off

It has not gone unnoticed that the Max Planck Society was particularly successful in this regard. In the first selection round, some 20 Max Planck institutes participated as cooperation partners in the 17 excellence clusters. The research landscape. It will not be losing its USPs very soon, such as the opportunity to react quickly to new fields of work, or the long-term nature of its funding. And amidst all of this, let us not forget that our universities, including those that won in the excellence competition, are and continue to be largely underfinanced. It will take a few more rounds of this competition until at least a handful of our institutions of higher learning are on such sound financial footing that they can attain the associated international visibility among the world-class institutions.

The national funding organizations, too, are weighing these types of considerations. What will happen to them if the ERC is successful, which, on the other hand, they all hope it is? Long before it was established, there was a very weighty argument against the ERC: the fear that the amount of money for research would remain constant overall and that, in the end, the money for the ERC would merely be taken away from the others – that is, from the national funding organizations.

In France, however, this concern over what is known as attribution was essentially accepted and turned into a kind of forward strategy. First, a new, national funding organization was established (the Agence Nationale de la Recherche) to better prepare French researchers for the European competition.

Personally, I, too, think that politics would do well to not stop the – barely started – competition for funding. Monopolies, also in research funding, always constitute a disadvantage, while competition is always a good draw. England and the US frequently show us how it’s done – countries in which private foundations compete with public research.

Far more has been set in motion in the European research system than I have mentioned here. In Germany, for example, the concept of a National Academy of Sciences is gaining ground precisely because people are asking for the independent opinion of scholars again. Austria is currently establishing a new research organization, a kind of graduate school, the Institute for Science and Technology – Austria.

How did Andrei Sakharov once put it: “The future may be wonderful, or it may not be at all. It depends on all of us.” In any case, old Europe is currently proving how young it is, in particular, of course, through founding the ERC. Now it needs to fill the new young institution with life.