

**DREAMS AND REALITY:  
AN ANNUS MIRABILIS FOR EUROPEAN BASIC SCIENCE?  
by Helga Nowotny**

*Whether the proposed ERC will become a reality still hinges on a number of factors. The most incalculable, but most important, are the financial perspectives. They must contain a substantial increase of the EU research budget. If not, an ERC will remain a dream. The scientific community must wake up to this reality and convince those who decide about it, including the Members of the European Parliament.*

Perhaps the scientific community has been too naïve from the very beginning. It assumed –wrongly– that its enthusiasm for basic research was widely shared also among policy-makers and that the rationale for its pursuit self-evident. It took too much for granted that the financial conditions stipulated unanimously during the discussion leading towards an ERC (European Research Council), that ‘new’ money was the *conditio sine qua non*, would be met. The hope for a doubling of the EU research budget for FP7 was translated as miraculously having been achieved already.

The wishful thinking met a rude awakening when the Council of Competitiveness at its 25-26 November meeting failed to reach consensus on an ERC as a future basic research funding mechanism. While two countries did not support an ERC, others voiced reservations showing that misunderstandings still need to be dispelled and further clarification added. Meanwhile, the new Commissioner, Mr. Potocnik, has decided to move forward with the Commission’s preparation of its proposal for FP7. It foresees a clear positioning of an ERC in this larger context. April 6 has been set as a tight deadline for a new Communication to be published in time for the meeting of the Competitiveness Council. But the big question and the fight for a substantial increase of the Commission’s research budget is still ahead and its outcome uncertain. All good intentions will only carry fruit if the financial perspectives allow their realization.

In the meantime other welcome developments are under way. A small nomination committee has been appointed whose task will be to identify the members of a future Governing Council of an ERC. Its members have not only a high scientific standing, but are also eminently credible in serving the public good. They have been asked

to help deliver an ERC. Its Charter will be written by the future members of the Governing Council. They will have to agree upon a range of important issues, like governance structure, mode of operation, funding schemes, evaluation procedures, advisory bodies, etc.

This procedure has the advantage of involving the scientific community from the very beginning. It steers clear from organized interests and puts the responsibility on devising the future modes of operation on those individuals who will make up the Governing Council. Of course, rules of political and financial accountability will have to be applied. In order to meet the requirements of accountability, an Executive Agency will function as the operative arm of an ERC. Thus, an ERC will be granted the necessary autonomy, while having an Executive Agency at its administrative disposal.

Have we entered an other ‘*annus mirabilis*’, akin to the one whose commemoration of the burst of Einstein’s scientific creativity we are celebrating this year? It would be nice to believe that we are entering a new and productive phase of European science, spearheaded by the rich potential of European basic research. It would be nice to believe that open competition at European level will transcend what can be achieved at national level, setting new European standards of excellence and letting creative talents flourish wherever they are found. It would be wonderful to include also the social sciences and humanities in the definition of scientific excellence achieved through genuine competition and thereby invigorate the old European ideal of science being part of a wider, truly European culture.

*But* – and this is a very sobering *but* – we are not there as yet. Even if Ministers in charge of

research and innovation can be convinced that the future innovative capabilities of Europe are dependent in complex ways upon knowledge produced through basic research at European level today, this perspective is not necessarily shared by Ministers of finance. Which arguments will persuade them? Robert Solow, the economist and Nobelist, once remarked: "No amount of (apparent) statistical evidence will make a statement invulnerable to common sense". There also comes a moment, when arguments matter less than the political will, infused or not by 'common sense'. The

scientific community, both at the collective level and as individuals, must raise its voice at this critical moment. It must make itself heard and understood as speaking not for itself, but for its future vision of European science and the wider benefits of a knowledge for growth pact. The *annus mirabilis* for European basic research will not arrive as a gift of history. It needs hard work, societal engagement and political astuteness on the part of all of us in the crucial period ahead. Einstein would have approved and led the way.

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