

THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL by Alexander Tenenbaum

In this article I will explain why Italy has strong reservations about the creation of a European Research Council devoted only to basic research. We see a risk of dispersing valuable European resources in an initiative that -as it is being proposed- would not yield a European added value, but rather increase differences among member states. A reduced and better focused version of this idea would make more sense.

The European Commission proposal for the 7th Framework Program (FP) will probably include the creation of a European Research Council, devoted only to basic research. The Italian Government has expressed through the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research serious reservations about this initiative. As the ERC seems to be quite popular within the European scientific community, including the Italian one, I deem it appropriate and timely to explain here the Italian position.

It was at a conference in Dublin, in February 2004, that the proposal of an ERC first surfaced officially in the presence of the EC Commissary for Research Busquin and Director General of Research Mitzòs. The proponents were almost all members of the European scientific community. Their initiative was an act of justified impatience with the lengthy and cumbersome procedures of the 6th FP, and a statement of distrust of the Commission's capability to improve this situation. As a matter of fact, the aim of the proposal was to create an entity as far removed and independent from the Commission as possible (provided the latter supplied the necessary financial means).

Dr. Mitzòs was quite clever in feeling the mood, and acted quickly and ably to restore the capacity of the Commission on the initiative. In order to win the approval of the audience for this unexpected twist, he had to show the willingness of his Directorate to go to any length required by the situation. The scientists wanted: a body submitted to their sole authority; a choice of the projects based on the sole criterion of excellence; light and rapid accounting rules; and the possibility to fund also national research teams. All this was accepted by Dr. Mitzòs, who did not raise any doubts about the implementability of these criteria (but he surely knew better).

However, the following months have shown that things were not as simple as they looked in Dublin, and the Italian position on this matter highlights the problems that in

our view undermine the idea of the ERC. Let me recall the main points raised by us (for more details please refer to section 5. "Basic research" of the first Italian position paper on the 7th FP, published on www.miur.it). Let us first remember that 95% of the European money spent on research goes to the national programs, while only 5% is spent through the Commission. A high percentage of that 95% is devoted to basic research, especially in the case of Italy (therefore, the claim that the Italian Government would oppose basic research is sheer nonsense). Moreover, one should not forget that the FPs are meant to improve the competitiveness of the European Union. I will come back to this point later in this article.

The criterion of excellence to choose among the projects that would be submitted to the ERC is almost obvious, provided a previous partition of the available funds is made among the various disciplinary areas. I would challenge anyone to make a choice between an excellent project in high energy physics and an excellent project, let us say, in archaeology. Therefore, we stressed the need of a governing body that would allocate the eventual financial resources among different disciplines. This choice would by necessity be a political one, and apparently this remark generated a strong opposition among the supporters of a "scientists only" ERC. I understand that the proposal of the ERC, that is now being mulled over in Brussels, actually envisages a kind of body representing the European governments.

The simplification of the EC rules and procedures required for allocating research funds is surely overdue, but it is hard to see why it should apply only to basic research. Thus, while we fully agree with this request, we don't think that it justifies the creation of a new organizational structure within the Commission, that is, more bureaucracy. Simplification is a must for the whole 7th FP, not only for a part of it. Moreover, we deem it wrong – referring to the improvement of the