

Projet de discours de M. Arnold Migus ERC-PFUE 7 octobre 2008 Collège de France

Madame la Ministre, Mister Commissioner, Honourable Members of the European Parliament, Mister President of the European Research Council, Members of the Scientific Council, dear laureates, ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to welcome all of you on behalf of CNRS and the other member organisations of the ERC National Contact Point for France, namely CEA, INSERM, INRA, INRIA and the Conference of Presidents of French universities, all of whom contributed to the preparation of this special event, with the support of the ERC Scientific Council, the European Commission and the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

Before starting, I would like to present to you the apologies of Catherine Bréchnignac, President of CNRS, and member of the Identification Committee that got the ERC off the ground back in 2005. She was initially scheduled to make this speech and present to you, in addition to the viewpoint of the host institutions, her own personal insight on the role of the ERC in promoting the best science in Europe. She deeply regrets that she is unable to participate, as she had to travel abroad. She has transmitted to me a few of the messages she would have liked to express, and I will do my best to convey them to you as she would have done it.

The ERC became a reality only two years ago but is already considered by the scientific community as the flagship of the 7th Framework Programme. The reason lies in two things we have witnessed that clearly tell us that the ERC is a success.

The first one is the visionary strategy of the Scientific Council, which is to empower the individual researchers, who are the source of novelty, and through them plant the seeds of excellence throughout Europe.

And the second one is the swift action of the Commission services that were able to present to the scientific community a seamless submission and evaluation process of high quality, having resolved in a very short time all the starting problems of this new instrument.

Today, in this conference, we will try to draw some lessons from the experience of the first call for Starting Grants and share this experience with the scientific community, the policy makers and the general public. For this, we are going to listen to the key players of the first ERC call, and first of all, the laureates of the "Starting Grant" call.

And then, we will have a round table on evaluation, bringing together members of the evaluation panels as well as heads of national research funding organisations, from EU Member States, from Associated States and from third countries. I am sure that the outcome of the round table discussion will bring interesting proposals to firmly position the ERC in the European Research Area.

I would like now to go briefly back in the history of the ERC and share with you some thoughts on the involvement of the European research organizations, among which, of course, is CNRS and EUROHORCs, the association that brings together the heads of Research Funding and Research Performing Organisations in Europe.

In the year 2000, it was not clear at all whether a European research agency providing competitive funding for basic research could become a reality and let me particularly stress how much we owe to Philippe Busquin, at that time Commissioner for Research, for introducing his vision of the European Research Area and, later on, together with Achileas

Mitsos, Director General of Research, for their decision to support the creation of ERC and to ensure its scientific independence.

In 2003 an expert group chaired by Federico Mayor, former director of UNESCO, was commissioned to work on the concept of the ERC. Gérard Mégie, CNRS president at that time, was one of the six high-level experts of the ERC Expert Group in charge of the broad consultation on the purpose and scope of a European Research Council (ERC) and of exploring options for its possible creation.

The expert group drew up what are now the core principles of ERC and gave as its main conclusion *[quote]*

"Until now European added value has been defined as the collaboration of research teams in different countries. ... Competition in order to achieve real excellence in research should become an essential part of a new, forward-looking definition of European added value."

[unquote]

It is worth underlining that, as early as 2003, this expert group identified the task of developing *[quote]* "Mechanisms for improved collaboration between national research funding organizations" *[unquote]*, a task which certainly sounds quite familiar to Commissioner Potocnik since Joint Programming is a now a key policy being promoted by the Commission.

In 2004 and 2005, EUROHORCs put into practice the values they were defending for the ERC by launching two initiatives:

- first, the European Young Investigator Award scheme, supporting outstanding young researchers from all over the world, to work in Europe. This Award became the reference after which the Starting Grant scheme was modelled.

- second, the Money Follows Researcher initiative, allowing researchers to take with them their grants when they move from one country to another. The terms of the Money Follows Researcher agreement are now included in the ERC rules for "portability of the grant".

The strong commitment of the major European research institutions to these schemes convinced policy makers of the value of establishing a European fund for individual researchers on the basis of excellence.

In 2004 one of the first decisions of the new Commissioner Potocnik was to press ahead with establishing the scientific governance of the ERC.

In January 2005, the Commission created a committee chaired by Lord Chris Patten to identify suitable members for a Scientific Council. The other members of this Identification Committee were Dr. Catherine Bréchnac, who is now President of CNRS, Prof. Jüri Engelbrecht, Prof. Guido Martinotti, and Prof. Erwin Neher.

The Committee set as its guiding principle the establishment of an institution based on excellence and excluding all other considerations, such as geographical balance. It decided to limit the size of the ERC Scientific Council to around 20 people, including possibly members from outside Europe. Also, in a letter to Commissioner Potočnik, it expressed clearly its view on the role of the ERC as an independent institution, providing trust-based funding to the individuals it selects. It particularly insisted on the need for simplicity in the funding process, doing away with the cumbersome accounting controls of traditional contracts and leaving full control of the use of funds to the individual researcher.

The Committee solicited a broad consultation of the scientific community. In total, nearly 300 candidates were nominated by some 40 organisations and among these the Identification Committee selected 22 scientists to serve as the first Scientific Council of the ERC and presented the list to the Commission.

In its final report, the Identification Committee recognised that its independence in the selection of the members of the Scientific Council was a concrete demonstration of the Commission's commitment to the principle of autonomy of the ERC.

With the launching of the 7th Framework Programme, 2007 was a very busy year for all of us. The enthusiastic response of the scientific community to the first ERC Starting Grant call is proof that the ERC was filling a gap in the European research funding landscape. But as a consequence, the work-load for the staff of Directorate S was enormous and we should thank the Commission for implementing in due time the rules and strategy defined by the Scientific Council and for running properly all the evaluation process despite the high number of applicants.

This was the first year in the life of the ERC and we all learned a lot. It appeared clearly that some adjustments were needed and some of them were already made in the 2009 work programme.

I will give you some of my observations:

One of the central elements of the ERC is the peer evaluation process, a real challenge in the context of young researchers and frontier research. The high standards of evaluation by the panels prompted some countries, such as France, Italy, Switzerland, Spain and Sweden, to decide to fund those applicants that the ERC found excellent, but could not support financially because of its limited budget.

This was judged as the most appropriate way to enhance the impact of the ERC and to add value to the work carried out by all the high-level expert members of the panels.

In contrast, some panels were tempted to severely reduce the budget requested by the applicants, in the hope of being able to fund more projects within the limited budget available.

I do not think that this is the right way to concretize the vision of the ERC.

Indeed, the key elements of ERC's policy are independence and portability. One of the damaging effects of such budget cuts would be to reduce this independence and freedom of choice, and force the laureate to stay with a host institution that would be financially able to supplement the ERC grant.

Another point I would like to raise relates to the geographical origin of the grantees. One of ERC's major goals is contained in the three "Rs" introduced by Professor Kafatos, namely "Retain, Recruit and Repatriate". Although we need to collect more data over the years to make a statistically significant analysis, it seems that Repatriation of young or less young talents from outside Europe has not yet been achieved to the extent it was hoped, and still needs a special effort. Similarly, despite some mobility of researchers from one country to another, progress needs to be made to promote intra-European mobility.

Finally, I would like to present the viewpoint of host institutions in the overall ERC process:

The success of some host institutions, research organizations like CNRS or major universities, in presenting successfully young scientists to the Starting Grant scheme, is I believe a consequence of their long term strategy of promoting high standards of excellence.

For all these successful host institutions, competition at the European level confirms their high standards and motivates them to keep them up. At the same time it reinforces their attractiveness and their quality, by promoting internal competition.

Also, by empowering individual researchers, providing them with the means of their independence and giving them the freedom of choice through mobility, the ERC sends a very strong signal to the host institutions.

It reminds these institutions that in order to fulfil their primary mission in society, which is to be the hotbed of novelty and renewal, they have to be able to attract those rare individuals and convince them that the institution can provide the stimulation and the nurturing environment they need to be creative and productive.

It is the work of such exceptional scientists, the new avenues they open, the enthusiasm they generate around them, the leadership they exert, and the new scientific communities they create that give to the host institution its reputation, and not the other way around.

I would now like to close by sharing with you one more thought.

As pointed out by Commissioner Potočnik in Lisbon last year, Europe cannot compete as a knowledge economy without being at the very forefront of knowledge creation.

Knowledge creation is a bottom-up process and major advances are not predictable. It is essential, therefore, to keep the bottom-up approach of the ERC and its openness to all fields of science.

It was proposed that the ERC should develop thematic calls. I believe that this is not necessary and may even be counterproductive. If we look at the research projects of the 300 laureates or even of only the 10 laureates present here today, we clearly see that the major global challenges for our society, those that Joint Programming in the European Research Area intends to address, climate change, security in information and communication technologies, globalisation of the economy, ageing of the population, and many others, are addressed spontaneously and in very innovative ways by the young ERC laureates.

In conclusion, I would just like to say that by funding frontier research in every discipline, by supporting the next generation of scientific leaders in Europe and by giving them the means of their independence, the ERC has assumed a key role in building the European Research Area.

If it keeps as its only guiding principles (1) excellence and (2) trust of the individual researchers to manage their projects as they see best, the ERC will certainly succeed.

Thank you for your attention.