

Strasbourg, 16 May 2014

New European Parliament not to sit back on Science, Technology and Innovation¹

European decision making is unique in that it fixes the EU budget for seven years in quite some detail. Horizon 2020, the EU programme for Research and Innovation for 2014-2020, details the allocation over the various subcategories, from the European Research Council to eight societal Grand Challenges (and many specific topics within each of these) and specifies a range of measures to stimulate innovation. An official review of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 in 2016 will have limited impact: member states will not accept reductions in the money they have been promised, so the Commission's stipulation to pay special attention to Horizon 2020 in the review will be to no avail. And while the Council of Ministers will continue trying to reduce actual annual expenditure as much as possible in a kowtow to austerity beliefs and angry or absent voters, this will have limited consequences for STI, too.

Budget stability for several years is welcome not least in for research and innovation with their longer-term nature. But the European Parliament should do well to bear in mind that the challenges Europe will face in science, technology and innovation require more than monitoring how the EU budget is spent. Neither can they be put on hold for the next seven years. The European Parliament does not have the right of initiative – the Commission leads– but like the European Council it can raise issues, discuss directions and request the Commission to take initiatives.

Europe must start acting decisively on the societal Grand Challenges, together with global partners. Europe, too, has to continue working on its institutions in the field of research and innovation. The complex arrangements for Joint Programming, Joint Technology Initiatives, the European Institute for Innovation and Technology with governmental responsibilities intermingled with responsibilities of universities, companies or funding agencies, the ambiguous status of the European Research Council which on the one hand is called independent, but on the other an agency reporting to Brussels, the lack of institutionalization of genuine independent scientific advice, are examples of issues that cannot be left at rest. Europe needs to develop genuine science diplomacy as science, technology and innovation have to be part of the overall recalibration of its relations with the US, China, India, Russia, Brazil or Africa in the light of an unfolding new geopolitical reality. It is of singular importance that Europe trains sufficient persons in all fields of science and employs them in research and innovation but also beyond those areas. Its universities, companies, research institutes and its policies must also be appealing to attract highly talented students, researchers or entrepreneurs. Several aspects need high-level political action.

The economic crisis has hit severely the scientific communities in Southern European Countries and hampers building up those in Central and Eastern and South Eastern European Countries. More countries are affected. Losing one or more generations of scientists – grants are abolished,

¹ See also View from the Top, Research Europe, 8 May 2014

permanent jobs become delusory, low appreciation for science and its longer-term nature, lack of concerted efforts of industry and policy - is of major concern for Europe as a whole. Scientists will emigrate; some will find temporary jobs elsewhere in Europe, but then replace other researchers. More needs to be done to maintain a strong science base throughout Europe. The European Parliament should challenge the Commission to include in the Structural Funds a dedicated possibility for 'survival' mechanisms, to consider 'add-ons' with a similar objective in the larger Grand Challenges programmes in Horizon 2020, and perhaps, most of all, to strongly focus on investments in Research and Innovation in the recommendations the European Commission is to provide every year on the draft budgets of the Member States.

Increasing job insecurity is another concern affecting almost all countries. Ever more permanent positions are replaced by temporary ones, and it is very difficult to find a regular position after two postdoc stints. Mobility is healthy, so is competition; but forced mobility and perpetual competition without perspectives for a larger group of researchers and university teachers will ultimately be damaging for the system of higher education and research, and negatively impact innovation. Just as institutions begin to understand that the extreme emphasis on numbers of publications does not lead to better science, a better balance between permanent or indefinite period jobs (with performance evaluations) and temporary jobs is needed.

Do our universities manage to be leading in attracting the young generation towards training and careers in science, technology and innovation which respond to the new societal challenges of the 21st century, is a closely related concern. Training as many PhD students as possible, and relying ever more on postdocs may not be way to establishing new multidisciplinary curricula and research programmes that produce the people, the knowledge and the innovations our societies need. They rather lock in universities to continue what they have been doing the past decades.

These challenges transgress the traditional realms of European, national or regional responsibilities as defined by subsidiarity principles and resulting in a deadlock between the member states (or even their regions) and the European Commission. The European Parliament seek new ground and start hearings with national (and even regional parliaments) to create awareness, ideas and momentum to move ahead.

Finally, the European Parliament could make much better use of its own STOA Panel whose members come from all the standing committees to work on Science and Technology Options Assessments. Interesting reports with sometimes highly relevant policy options have been produced over many years, but their impact should increase. Impact will not be new research, but should rather be felt in the 'science for policy' than the 'policy for science' domain. The new STOA Panel should look for explicit links between legislation at hand or upcoming and outcomes of past studies or studies to be started. It is not enough to disseminate reports and options, or to organize workshops. STOA members should come to STOA with the concrete legislation at hand or upcoming in their committees. The reports need to be scrutinized for concrete proposals or amendments to legislation. That requires scientific expertise. STOA has now a small programme to twin a few Parliamentarians with a scientist. EuroScience would be very keen to set up a larger-scale



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programme similar to the Fellowship programme the American Association for the Advancement of Science runs for the US Congress. Where are the European sponsors? We would love to be in touch with them.

EuroScience is ready to engage with the European Parliament to see how the scientific community can help in working towards such a broader European commitment.

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