A crucial day for the future of European research will be 26 November 2004. The European Council of Ministers (ECM), representing the 25 member states of the European Union (EU), will discuss whether and how the EU will support basic research in the years to come. Ultimately, the question of whether to establish a European Research Council (ERC) will have to be answered, and it is the hope of ERC supporters that the ECM will endorse their plan this year.

In the Presidency Conclusions of the ECM meeting held in March 2004, the council “sees merit in enhanced support for basic research of the highest quality and the case for specific funding will be examined.” Despite this positive antecedent and support from 52 major European research organizations (see the open letter in Science, 6 August 2004, p. 776) and politicians, the result of the impending meeting is far from predictable, and some EU member states as well as parts of the European Commission continue to be reluctant.

There are reasons for this reluctance. The ERC is meant to be independent from institutions of the EU and national governments. To have a noticeable impact, its budget must be on the order of at least 1 to 2 billion euros annually. This sum means that almost one-fifth of the future EU research budget will no longer be under the direct control of the Commission and its dealings with national governments. There is also fear among national ministries that if competition among the very best European research groups is taken seriously, “their” national groups may not succeed. Any legal form for the ERC must ensure that no criteria other than scientific quality, based on peer-reviewed competition, have an impact on its decision-making. This includes the total exclusion of any “juste retour” considerations, which are not only purely unscientific but also inhibit fair competition and international competitiveness in basic research. Such guarantees for the decision-making process are an essential prerequisite for the ERC’s long-term success.

To resolve these issues, the ECM will have to decide on enhanced financial perspectives for European research funding and establish a constituting committee to draw up a charter for an ERC that proposes a governance structure that fits the objectives and prepares the necessary steps for its implementation. The committee should consist of a small number of eminent researchers and research managers (perhaps no more than 10 to 12 people). The members should have outstanding international reputations and several years of experience in research policy-making or research management, and should include Nobel laureates. They should be appointed in their personal capacity and refrain from representing their respective discipline or institution. It is essential that the committee be in a position to act as a guarantor for the operational autonomy of an ERC. This can only be achieved if its members pursue no individual interests and truly embody the European basic research community at its highest level, and thus wholeheartedly enjoy its trust and support. Their midwife role implies that the constituting committee will be dissolved as soon as the ERC is in full operation.

The window of opportunity for creating an ERC and moving toward a truly European research base has never been as wide open as it is now. And yet it is crucial that the necessary steps be taken right now to make sure that a newly established ERC can start its operations on time, at the beginning of the 7th Framework Programme. It is clear that if a negative decision on 26 November should prevail, this window might be closed for a long time.

Should the ECM decide to postpone its decision until 2005 or even to ignore the needs and demands of European researchers and research organizations, the consequences would be enormous. The European Research Area would not enter its next and crucial phase, in which the very best of basic research will provide the foundation for the innovations of tomorrow. A further loss of some of the best researchers could be inevitable. Europe cannot afford such negative consequences. The ECM has to act now.

Wilhelm Krull and Helga Nowotny

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Editor's Summary

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