

ise: Initiative for Science in Europe

30 June 2005

c.c. Members of the Competitiveness Council, Members of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) of the European Parliament

Dear Sir or Madam,

Investing in frontier research is investing in Europe's future.

Europe has made great strides towards agreeing on a genuine new mechanism to fund frontier research – the European Research Council (ERC). This is a cornerstone for achieving the ambitions of the European Council (Lisbon agenda) to increase substantially Europe's innovativeness and competitiveness. The aim is to boost fundamental research as a means to be a winner in a world wide knowledge-based economy.

What has been collectively achieved over the past three years by a coalition of many organizations of scientists in Europe, research councils and politicians is impressive and commendable. The Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE) was established last year to unify over 50 European organizations representing all scientific disciplines in their support of the ERC, and a manifesto stating the position of the scientific community was published in Science on August 6, 2004 (www.initiative-science-europe.org). The time has now come for the European Competitiveness Council, the European Parliament, and the European Commission to see to it that the ERC clears the last remaining hurdles and receives a strong budget commitment and a statute guaranteeing its independence.

The ERC will strengthen Europe's science base by challenging the best and most original European scientists to develop ideas for breakthroughs at the frontiers of science, without the limitations existing in national funding systems or the target-oriented Framework Programmes. Science, taking its starting point in curiosity to understand something no one else understood so far, has always been a fertile soil and a necessary condition for long-term economic growth, employment and for improving the quality of life of our citizens. Europe has suffered from creating a contradiction between funding the science base and financing targeted research, and left the first to national prerogatives. We need both frontier research and targeted research, as there is no application without a discovery. A Euro spent on frontier research will trigger multiple Euros spent by industry. Important efforts elsewhere testify to this conviction with very significant increases in funding in the life sciences and nanosciences in the USA and in the Asian countries. Together with the creation of new funding organizations in the latter countries based on the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) this will lead to a huge increase in basic science.

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Because the ERC will set new standards for the promotion of frontier research, it will also create considerable momentum and inspiration for national research councils by challenging them to work with each other and with the ERC to create the best conditions for Europe's science. Moreover, by providing a funding source that is freely, and under the same conditions accessible to scientists from across Europe, it creates a strong incentive for universities and research organizations to establish a stimulating working environment for promising young scientists and for large groups of the best and brightest. It is the best possible boost to the European university system.

To achieve all this, the ERC has to dispose of a budget that is commensurate with the socio-economic expectations. It should quickly become of the order of the budget of the larger national research councils, i.e. between 1.5 and 2 Billion € per year, otherwise its impact would not be felt. The annual budgets in the USA of NIH (28 Billion \$) and NSF (5 Billion \$) illustrate what it takes to make a continent-wide impact. Finally, for the ERC to be effective it must be totally independent. Within an overall framework of public accountability its governing body, consisting of high-level and respected scientists, must be free to determine policy, including which areas to support, which funding instruments to use, or which categories of scientists to focus on. Any appearance of dependence by subjugating it to a higher bureaucratic decision body is counter-productive and hence unacceptable.

The European Council has re-committed itself to keep Europe on the track of strengthening its economy through investing more in knowledge and being more effective in reaping the benefits created by this knowledge. The member states must realize that they cannot therefore be penny-wise and pound-foolish, and curtail national research budgets as the ERC's rises. We must all work together. Reducing budgets or placing inappropriate restrictions on the scope of national councils is definitely not the way forward.

The Competitiveness Council, which during its Cardiff meeting will receive and discuss the recommendations of the Identification Committee for the ERC governing body (chaired by Lord Patten), has the historic opportunity and obligation to create an ERC that is fully independent and that has a budget commensurate with its promise for Europe's economic and social future. This essential investment must be protected.

This appeal, launched by the Initiative for Science in Europe (ISE), is endorsed in a personal capacity by the Presidents, Chairs, and Directors General of 44 European organizations in all scientific disciplines, representing several hundred thousands of researchers across Europe.

Academia Europaea, ALL European Academies (ALLEA), Association of European Geological Societies (AEGS), European Acoustics Association (EAA), European Association for Animal Production (EAAP), European Association of Archaeologists (EAA), European Association for Chemical and Molecular Sciences (EuCheMS), European Association of Experimental Social Psychology (EAESP), European Astronomical Society (EAS), European Biophysical Societies Association (EBSA), European Calcified Tissue Society (ECTS), European Cell Death Organization (ECDO), European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR), European Federation of Biotechnology (EFB), European Federation of Immunological Societies (EFIS), European Federation of Organisations in Medical Physics (EFOMP), European Fusion Development Agreement (EFDA JET), European Geosciences Union (EGU), European Group on Atomic Systems (EGAS), European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF), European Life Scientists Organization (ELSO), European Materials Research Society (E-MRS), European Mathematical Society (EMS), European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO), European Network of Immunology Institute (ENII), European Network of Marine Research Stations (MARS), European Neutron Scattering Association (ENSA), European Optical Society (EOS), European Physical Society (EPS), European Plant Science Organization (EPSO), European Science Foundation (ESF), EuroScience, European Society of Gene Therapy (ESGT), European Society of Human Genetics (ESHG), European Society for Neurochemistry (ESN), European Society for Soil Conservation (ESSC), European University Association (EUA), Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS), Federation of European Microbiological Societies (FEMS), Federation of European Neuroscience Societies (FENS), Group of European Nobel Laureates, International Association for Dental Research - Pan-European Federation, Marie Curie Fellowship Association (MCFA).