

SCIENCE POLICY

Europe Mulls Plans to Boost Research in Poorer Regions

Europe's next elite research centers could be built in the poor regions in the south and east of the continent but managed by prestigious research institutions in, say, the United Kingdom, Germany, or Sweden. That's one of several ideas now under discussion in the European Parliament to bolster research and innovation in areas where they haven't thrived, in hopes of accelerating economic development.

The plans are vying for a place in Horizon 2020, an €80 billion, 7-year program set to begin in 2014 that is currently under dis-

to open new branches; together they would compete for funding. It would be a bit like a city hiring a foreign consultant to help with an Olympic bid—and that consultant would manage the games if the city wins.

The Max Planck Society, for instance, has already opened a series of research institutes outside Germany (*Science*, 23 April 2010, p. 414); in Reul's proposal, it might team up with the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, and apply for Horizon 2020 funding to establish a new research center there. (Max Planck President

still lags far behind; for example, they have done poorly in competing for money from the 4-year-old European Research Council, which is strictly merit-based.

One problem with Europe's current research partnerships is that the strongest partners sometimes just outsource their low-level work to southern and Eastern European institutes in exchange for co-authorship, says economist Dominique Foray of the Federal Institute for Technology in Lausanne, Switzerland—not a recipe for building excellence. Sometimes they even poach successful young scientists. As for the Structural Funds, the bulk isn't used for science but for other types of infrastructure, such as roads and buildings. Factors such as nepotism and the lack of opportunities for researchers' families hamper science and innovation in the convergence zones, as well.

In Reul's proposal, regions could compete for the new centers by offering more attractive conditions for international-caliber research. Proposals would be judged on their scientific potential, but other factors under regional control would count as well, such as tax breaks for spinoff industries, hiring practices, or the availability of English-language schools. Transparent and clean government would be selling points.

Reul and Grüss would also like to see regions increase their chances of winning if they promise to devote more of their Structural Funds to becoming more research-friendly. They're not the only ones: At a parliamentary hearing last week in Brussels, several other speakers proposed ideas for better synergy between Horizon 2020 and the much larger Structural Funds.

Reul hopes European regions will embrace his idea. "Even regions that do not win ... will most probably continue their efforts to establish the basis for innovation—and therefore profit in the end," he says.

Bulgarian physicist Nikolay Vitanov, who spent a dozen years in five Western European countries before returning home and taking a job at the University of Bulgaria in Sofia, says he would welcome a new, foreign-operated physics center in Sofia—at least if it was more similar to Max Planck institutes than to the local Soviet-era academies, which have proven resistant to change. "We've been waiting 20 years," he says. "I doubt the academy will reorganize."

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ussion in the European Union. Europe's science ministers adopted a draft of the plan last week, but the European Parliament must also approve it; on 18 June, the Parliament will discuss the proposals before submitting formal amendments at the end of the month.

Countries in Eastern and southern Europe want a bigger share of Horizon 2020 than they had in its predecessor, Framework Programme 7 (FP7), and they have the votes to claim it. E.U. officials want to impose conditions to ensure the money is well-spent. "Many countries say, 'Just give us the money, trust us, and leave us alone,'" says Robert-Jan Smits, director-general for research and innovation at the European Commission, the E.U. executive arm. "But we would like to deploy these funds in an efficient way that really is benefiting these countries but also Europe as a whole."

One proposal to do that comes from Herbert Reul, chair of Parliament's Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE). His idea is to encourage underdeveloped or "convergence" regions and cities to team up with excellent research institutes eager

Peter Grüss, a supporter of the teaming concept, recently briefed the European Parliament on how he might implement it.)

A proposal by another ITRE member, Maria da Graça Carvalho, wouldn't go quite that far. Rather than offering top institutes a chance to set up new branches in the convergence regions, it would fund pairs of rich and poor institutes to "twin," or collaborate on joint projects. Carvalho would also offer grants to top scientists who return to their home countries.

The Framework Programmes have tried hard to lift up lagging E.U. countries by promoting cross-border collaboration. In FP7, some €32 billion is reserved for projects such as the so-called Networks of Excellence, large research proposals for which researchers and companies have to partner across borders. Poor regions can also fund research and innovation from the so-called Structural Funds, a pot comprising about a third of the €142 billion E.U. annual budget used to narrow the economic gaps within Europe.

Despite those measures, scientific output in the countries in Europe's east and south