Hearing of Janez POTOCNIK
(science and research)

The EU's research and development policy came under close scrutiny from MEPs in the hearing of Janez Potočnik - the Commissioner-designate from Slovenia. MEPs from the Industry, Research and Energy Committee grilled Mr Potočnik on the role of SMEs, simplification of paperwork when accessing EU funding, reaching the 3% of GDP target for research spending and doubling the EU's budget for research.

In his introductory speech, the Commissioner-designate stressed that "science must become the key factor for the economic development of Europe". He presented his strategic goals which are to rebuild confidence in the Lisbon Strategy, to restructure budgets "so as to give stronger impetus to development", and to raise the popular esteem given to scientific activities. Moreover, Mr Potočnik said that he wished to stimulate activities that aim to "overcome the so-called European paradox - a large amount of quality research being reflected in little innovation".

Concerning the proposal for a budget of €30 billion for the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), Mr Potočnik said that "a doubling of science and research funds would represent an important common message that we are serious about this". He also emphasised that "the objective to reach 3% of GDP at the EU level for science and research by 2010 is widely accepted". Regarding implementation, Mr Potočnik said that "simplification, rationalisation, co-ordination and co-operation will be important objectives of my endeavours, for all, small and big, local or global, and in all areas".

Mr Potočnik also touched on how to better use the research potential of the private sector, stating that it was important to integrate small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into the research field, whom he characterised as "important instigators of economic development and growth".

**Improve the conditions for SMEs and smaller research teams**

MEPs wanted to know which steps Mr Potočnik planned to take to improve the conditions for SMEs active in research. Paul RÜBIG (EPP-ED, AT) stressed the fact that, at the moment, SMEs faced major obstacles such as complicated rules on accessing EU funds for research projects. Once again Mr Potočnik underlined that SMEs are important to "economic growth because they are able to adapt relatively fast to market conditions". He stated that there are two major elements that need to be considered: "possible taxation incentives and simplification". Mr Potočnik also stressed that steps have to be taken - not only at the EU level but also at the national and regional levels since "SMEs are the heart of the regional development".

**Simplifying the application process**

Several MEPs grilled the Commissioner-designate on the question of simplifying the way money is allocated for research projects. Mr Potočnik responded "smaller countries and smaller research teams, by definition, would benefit proportionately more from simplification. I agree with the recommendations in the Marimon report which suggest a two-step approach to applications, the first step requiring less paperwork." He also pointed out that Slovenia was fifth out of the twenty-five Member States in terms of take-up of funds per capita from the Sixth Framework programme.

Britta THOMSEN (PES, DK) questioned Mr Potočnik on the priorities for the forthcoming FP7. "Time is short and we will begin our work in November, nevertheless, a wider consultation of
stakeholders will be necessary than on previous occasions," the Commissioner-designate replied.

Lena EK (ALDE, SE) wanted to know how Mr Potočnik would ensure simplification - especially in the application-process for SMEs. In his response, Mr Potočnik emphasised that simplification is not as easy as it sounds, because a balance has to be struck between reducing researchers paperwork and ensuring that money is spent in a proper way.

Reino PAASILINNA (PES, FI) wanted to know what Mr Potočnik would do to ensure that new technology such as nano-technology is further developed and which steps he would take to reverse the "brain-drain" from Europe. In reply to these questions Mr Potočnik emphasised that technological platforms are important for research and innovation and he stressed that the Commission wants to encourage "instruments allowing smaller companies and groups to participate". On the question of how to prevent the "brain-drain", the Commissioner-designate emphasised that the key issue is "how to establish a balance between those researchers coming to Europe and those leaving Europe". In the same spirit he stressed that the core task is to ensure that "science is well recognised in society".

Replying to a question posed by Paul RÜBIG on how to ensure a minimum doubling of the budget for FP7, Mr Potočnik answered "doubling the amount of money for FP7 will not be easy". He underlined that a restructuring of the budget is crucial - both at the EU level and at the national level. At the same time, Mr Potočnik stressed that "new initiatives required a doubling of the budget" and that "additional money is essential".

**Stem-cell research**

Pia Elda LOCATELLI (PES, IT) raised the delicate question of EU spending on stem-cell research and recalled that the blocking minority in the Council had prevented spending in this field. The Commissioner-designate did not rule out this type of research as a matter of principle. However, he added that he would have to take on board the cultural sensitivities of the Member States. He wanted this issue to be subject to co-decision and take Parliament's views on board before the Commission's proposal was made.

**Basic versus applied research**

In answering a question from Jorgo CHATZIMARKAKIS (ALDE, DE) on how much money should be spent on basic as opposed to applied research, Mr Potočnik said "this division is outdated, we should talk of science driven research and industry-driven research. Basic research has less predictable results but can be equally useful in the long-term:"

**3% target of GDP to be spent on research**

Nikolaos VAKALIS (EPP-ED, EL) argued that the 3% target, so often cited, was too narrow and would be difficult to achieve for some Member States. In response, Mr Potočnik stated "if we want to achieve the Lisbon goals, then the 3% target should be a priority. There is a correlation between increased public spending on research and increased spending by the private sector". He also pointed out that only Sweden and Finland spent over 4% of their GDP on research and development.

**EU added value**

Turning to European added value, the Commissioner-designate, in response to Erikkka MANN (PES, DE) pointed out that there were many complex questions in the field of research: for example, smaller or bigger projects, basic or applied research, national or European funding? "There is clear added European value in projects such as ITER, space policy, GMO research,
and research to fight disease. I am ready to fight for increased funding so that the Lisbon goals can be achieved.”

**International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER)**

Turning to ITER, David HAMMERSTEIN MINTZ (Greens/EFA, ES) expressed his concerns that too much money was being spent on this project. According to him, the project could not guarantee an improvement in the lives of European citizens. He also stressed that the environmental consequences were unknown. In reply to the question, Mr Potočnik defended ITER and underlined that “clearly defined criteria had been set as a basis for spending the money” and stressed that the European Parliament - via the co-decision procedure - has been closely involved in the ITER programme. Moreover, Mr Potočnik stressed the fact that the EU at the moment is 50% import dependent for energy, whereas in 2030 it will be 70% import dependent. Mr Potočnik emphasised that “energy-growth is needed”.

**Political affiliation**

Questioned by Romana JORDAN CIZELJ (EPP-ED, SL) about a recent newspaper interview where the Commissioner-designate stated that he associated himself with the ALDE group, Mr Potočnik replied “openness and tolerance are values that I support, but I am not a member of any political party.”

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Committee on Industry, Research and Energy
Chairman: Giles Bryan CHICHESTER (EPP-ED, UK)

Press enquiries:
Richard Freedman - tel. +32 (0)2 284 1448 - e-mail: indu-press@europarl.eu.int
Kristine Munk - tel. +32 (0)2 284 2530 - e-mail: kmunk@europarl.eu.int
Tanja Rudolf - tel +32 (0) 2 284 31053 - e-mail trudolf@europarl.eu.int