

V4 Academies Forum 2008 Budapest

Short minutes

The programme of the 2008 V4 Forum took place at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, on 21/22 April, according to the Agenda in Annex 1 with participants from the V4 Academies according to Annex 2.

President Vizi welcomed the participants. Two officials from the V4 Academies could not attend the meeting: Stefan Luby, President of SAS due to his accident in Turkey and Attila Meskó, General Secretary of HAS due to his illness.

President Vizi emphasized that the V4 academies have to support one another in an international level and stressed the importance of the role of joint ventures and common activities. FP7 is a unique occasion for successful applications although it is not easy to get funding. Therefore we have to convince our scientists to have more joint applications, in order that they might be more successful.

President Vizi also emphasized that these kinds of meetings always provide a possibility to set up new arrangements and solutions, and issue really significant messages.

The participants all agreed on the proposed programme and agenda. The present document gives a short description of the major contributions, edited according to the topics discussed.

The Ideas Programme and the European Research Council

Presentations by:

Professor N. Kroó (Vice President, HAS) 21st April

Professor M. Kleiber (President, PAS) 22nd April

The V4 Forum is proud to have two members (and the only members from New Member States) in the ERC, both of them have given their opinions on this important issue.

For practical reasons the topic was divided into two sections, one on 21st April, and one on 22nd April, however, the presentations were harmonised and complemented each other. Both sessions were followed by a vivid discussion.

Vice-President Kroó emphasized the importance of the “Ideas” (frontier research) programme in FP7 and gave a presentation on the history, from the very first ideas to the recent developments of the European Research Council (ERC). By presenting the background scene, he emphasized the European

tradition in excellence, the need for new talents, and the role of ERC in revitalizing the concept of the ERA.

The fact that the ERC came into being and is part of the Framework Programme is in itself a very significant result. The operation of the Council started officially in February 2007 but unofficially it was already working in 2006. Vice-President Kroó said that he was optimistic about the future, as ERC is constantly improving its working methods, learning from the lessons of the successive rounds of calls for proposals.

However, the fact that it is part of the Framework programme also implies that it has to work following the heavy bureaucratic rules of Brussels and would need more independence to increase efficiency.

He explained the organisation and the role of the interdisciplinary panels, and pointed out that the best performers so far are from the founding member states and only 5% of the grantees are from the new member states. In contrast to the heavy oversubscription for the grants for young scientists the number of applications in the senior field is surprisingly low.

He reminded that ERC may create a new, special type of brain-drain: when the research grants are spent abroad. On the other hand he pointed out that the ERC offers grants for researchers from all over the world as long as the research is carried out and the money is spent in Europe. This would hopefully act as a reversed brain-drain.

He encouraged the scientific communities of the participating academies to continue to exchange ideas and make joint efforts to participate in further improvements of the practical mechanisms of the JRC.

A short discussion followed on the European priorities, whether they really exist, and what the function of prioritising is.

Professor Kroó assessed that science policy in Europe is not strong enough. He also argued for increased synergy between research policy and the use of structural funds.

President Vizi pointed out that the greatest weakness in the EU is that we are very bad at putting basic sciences into practice. We should concentrate more on frontier research programmes and improve on the lack of infrastructure.

President Paces pointed out that people are discouraged by the low success rate of the applications in the EU Framework Programmes, especially in calls of the ERC, and that this message does not improve the image of ERC.

The discussion followed on the differences between senior and junior applications, and the assessment of the investigators based on scientific performance and on publication activities. The assessment of the new idea of the investigator during the evaluation, especially its novelty and its weighting remains an open question. The conclusion was that it will be very difficult to get rid of old habits.

Several participants complained about the unjustified amount of bureaucracy researchers have to deal with, especially in Brussels, and they all agreed that it has to be reduced. President Kroó mentioned that Commissioner Potocnik is a strong supporter of this issue and might also help the ERC to become more independent.

President Kleiber continued the elaboration on ERC with highlighting the novel features and some critical aspects.

By the time of the presentation the evaluation of the proposals has developed to an established system, which was briefly presented. Only the best proposals from the best investigators had a chance to be selected. Many of the topics fall beyond classical academic classifications. The structure of the evaluation panels is innovative, it is not discipline-oriented, but rather problem-oriented. The panel structure of ERC was sent to many Pan-European organisations for revision. This kind of approach was well-received even among universities, and on a long term might even have effect on their curricula. However, panels have very different internal rules and procedures, which may evoke serious problems in practice. Initially, the Council decided to grant full autonomy to the panels, which ended up with putting in question the coherence of the procedures. The question is whether they should limit the autonomy of panels or should they leave the autonomy of top scientists participating in the panels. Another question is whether they want to spend money on having overseas panelists massively in order to increase objectivity.

ERC places no constraint on the number of people or institutions in a project but statistics show that 8000 out of 9000 applications belong to one single institution. He confirmed that ERC has significantly contributed to raising the profile of frontier research, which is absolutely essential to increase competitiveness. Researchers are welcome from all over the world if they decide to carry out their project in the EU.

One of his observations was that ERC should have a much larger budget, this must be negotiated within the budget of FP7 at EU level. At present it is 15% of FP7 budget, the question is, whether they should aspire to have more or let it stay as it is now. This is a very sensitive issue. The other observation was that the Executive Agency was not created in time to deal with all the technical problems.

However, the major problem is the general disappointment with the low success rate. For our region the low success rate is particularly painful.

He pointed out an interesting secondary effect of the creation of ERC, namely that the EU Commission often asks for the opinion of the ERC on matters less closely related to frontier research funding, because of the easy availability of the highly qualified think tank. According to its terms of reference the ERC

should concentrate on finding the best solutions and offer fair and objective judgement of funding frontier science, but on a longer run it might even have a larger role.

A very positive example is that some countries decided to fund with national money the projects that got high evaluation scoring by ERC but did not finally get the funding. The participants agreed that each country should consider this practice because ERC projects are evaluated thoroughly in a very sophisticated way.

In the following discussion President Paces said that scientists have mixed feelings about ERC because of the low success rates. The right message to send out would be that the success rate is going up, the amount of money is increasing, because once the success rate goes below 20% the message is counterproductive. President Kleiber agreed that ERC is sending out two disturbing messages: there are too many applicants, but at the same time the success rate is too low.

In an accompanying presentation Attila Zsigmond from HAS presented the initiative to encourage young researchers of HAS within the Starting Independent Research Grant scheme. Out of the 180 submitted proposals, 67 were from HAS, of which 6 were invited for the second stage. A total of 33.5 Million Forints of prime was granted, with amounts corresponding to about 2000 and 4000 euros (Stage 1 and 2 resp.) which can be used for further scientific work or for participation at scientific conferences.

World Science Forum 2007- 2009

E. S. Vizi - HAS

Encouraged by the success of the World Conference on Science organized by UNESCO and ICSU in Budapest, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences initiated a series of events “World Science Forum” taking place biannually in Budapest. President Vizi gave an overview of the previous fora (themes, lecturers and attendants) and gave details on the 2007 Forum. The principal theme of WSF 2007 was Investing in Knowledge: Investing in the Future.

Over 400 scientists, decision makers and politicians participated at the Forum, from over 60 countries. The forum is on the way to become “the Davos of science”, it is for science leaders, what the World Economic Forum is for the world’s industry leaders. The participation of the Croatian, Greek and Austrian as well as the Hungarian presidents of state was a reflection of the fact of their commitment to protecting the environment (“Green presidents”) and they anonymously called for an eco-friendly economic growth.

The Forum had a massive media coverage including a CNN broadcast (two times a 1-minute report about the conference).

President Vizi finally announced the Fourth World Science Forum, and invited the leaders of the V4 Academies for participation. The forum will again be organised by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in partnership with UNESCO and ICSU, and will be held in Budapest on 5-7 November 2009. The forthcoming Forum - focusing on "Knowledge and Future" - will not only mark the tenth anniversary of the first World Conference on Science, but will also look forward and give us a strategic vision of the future of science in the global society of the 21st century. The Steering Committee consists of renowned personalities of the international science and representatives of the organisers. The structure and the main elements of the programme will be similar to the previous events: plenary and thematic sessions. A "Looking forward" session will make efforts to look into the future of science and its relation to the society. An important event is the meeting of global fora where the representatives of the most important international scientific organisations and fora can exchange their views. Several satellite events will be held in conjunction with the World Science Forum, among others a global conference on intellectual property rights, the ministerial meeting of the G77+China Group and the meeting of the Israeli-Palestine Science Organization (IPSO). A novelty to the previous fora that the governing boards of the institutes of technology of three important regions – the European Institute of Technology and Innovation, the Consortium on Science, Technology and Innovation for the South (COSTIS) and the International Science, Technology and Innovation Centre (ISTIC) – will hold a joint meeting connected to the Forum.

All V4 Academies accepted the invitation to the forthcoming forum in 2009.

The Non-university Contribution to ERA
The Association of Non-university Institutions
The future role of academies in ESF

ASCR – Vaclav Paces

President Paces started his presentation by asking whether it was a good idea to create a European association of non-university research institutions. While the universities have a good representation, a stronger voice is needed for non-university research institutions in the European Research Area (ERA). On the basis of his preparatory negotiations, he suggested that two well recognized research organizations: the European Science Foundation (ESF) and All European Academies (ALEEA) should join forces to work out a common newly defined role. Presently the two organizations think of cooperating more closely because they both feel that their roles are not very well defined and should be reformulated under the ERA. While both organisations reinvent themselves,

they could have a new portfolio of representing non-university research organisations in ERA.

He indicated that the heads of both organisations are going to Prague for further discussions. The V4 academies will be informed about the outcome.

Also, during the EU presidency of the Czech Republic (first half of 2009) there will be a conference on the role of non-university research in ERA in April.

Invitations will be sent to all academy presidents and V4 academies are invited to come with own ideas on how their voice can be strengthened on a European level.

President Vizi raised another question: how the national academies will survive in a unified Europe.

A brief discussion followed on the different types of academies and membership in the V4 countries.

V4 Academy Forum – as an initiator of regional activation of social sciences“

SAS – Dusan Kovac

Dusan Kovac pointed out the traditional isolation of research in the field of social sciences and emphasized the importance of networking and regional cooperation. This could also boost stronger participation in the EU programmes. It is especially important to mobilize young scientists. A networking of teams could be initiated by organizing conferences for young scientists.

On behalf of SAS it was proposed to take the initiative and organize a meeting in Bratislava for the V4 academies for the preparation of launching cooperative actions. The preparatory meeting could select possible topics which should preferably be of interdisciplinary nature. The organisational committees should prepare proposals and discussions should take place on this issue.

A short discussion followed on the coordination of activities of social sciences in the V4 academies. They agreed that what they can do is to initiate and organise more multilateral conferences. The topic also occurred that it is always difficult to decide how to evaluate social sciences and humanities correctly. The process of ESF evaluations for social science and humanities proposals was cited as example and as best practice. Also, the ERIH (European Reference Index for the Humanities) initiative from ESF may have some positive impacts on the standards of evaluation, though the scientific quality of the classified journals is not properly taken in consideration.

The common history monograph

A common monograph on the history of the V4 countries has been on the agenda of the V4 meetings since a considerable time. It was decided earlier that the monograph would take the form of separate volumes written by expert of each country, edited according to unified editorial principles. Jan Palous and President Paces urged to discuss the question of publication. Dusan Kovac confirmed that three countries have already finished their part but Hungary has not provided its part. On behalf of the Hungarian experts Attila Pók (Institute of History) gave some explanations and rose some concerns. E.g. the history of Hungary cannot be written without cooperation with Rumanian and Croatian colleagues. Instead of writing four parallel histories he suggested to form various international teams that work on the basic issues in each period. The members of the teams could approach the issues from various perspectives. Another question is whether we want to write about the history of the present V4 states or the history of nations.

Jan Palous suggested to publish the texts that are ready of the 3 countries and leave the volume concerning Hungary out, which was finally accepted.

Professor Marosi asked about the initiative of a historiography of science in the V4 countries after the Second World War. The participants agreed that it should not be pushed too much.

Young scientist award 2008

Vice-President Marosi congratulated the young scientists for the very interesting works proposed. He stated that the criterion of excellence is present in all of them together with a high number of questions raised on contemporary society. They also bear a unique stamp of the problems of the tradition in the V4 countries after the collapse of the Communist rule. They are all characterised by a search for ethic and moral questions and conceive the existential questions of society. They all show a very strong interdisciplinary approach.

During the session the three young scientists gave a brief presentation of their work and received the award diplomas from Professor Marosi. Maciej Maria Gorny from Poland was not able to attend the session due to the change of his flight . However, reference was made to his work by his Czech colleague, since a part of their work was made in the frame of a common project.

In the order of the presentations:

Lubica Herzanova (Slovak Republic)
Old age and ageing in autobiographies (comparison - Bratislava and Vienna at the end of the 20th century)

Michal Kopecek (Czech Republic)
"History of Modern Political and Social Thought in East Central
Europe. A Research Agenda"

András Fejérdy (Hungary)
"Anticommunist Christian Unity Front"
Communist Church Policy and the Second Vatican Council

The participants discussed the thematic topic for next year's young scientist award: Csaba Pléh proposed neuroscience because it is a booming field in all of the V4 countries.

After a short discussion the theme was changed to "Neuroscience and Related Behavioural Sciences".

Update on the European Institute of Technology

A. Nikodémus - Hungary, Ministry of Economics and Transport
PAS – M. Kleiber President

The participants of the forum introduced the applications of Wroclaw and Budapest for the location of EIT, presented the background and outlined the advantages of both locations.

President Kleiber stressed that wherever the EIT will be, the V4 countries will all try to collaborate because it will be to the advantage of everyone.

President Vizi pointed out that no direct financial benefit would come from the EIT but it would provide some benefits like access to hot information for local science.

The participants also agreed that the V4 countries have the same problem concerning the decreasing number of students. The researchers have identified this problem long ago but politicians chose not to talk about it. Now they have to.

Declaration

The participants unanimously agreed on the proposed text concerning the EIT.

The agreed text was circulated to the participating academies and finally accepted with slight modifications (Annex 3).

Central European Virtual Think Tank

PAS - Michal Kleiber, President

A discussion was initiated concerning the role of academies in relation to policy-making. Academies of sciences and humanities are solely committed to scientific excellence and independence, therefore they are predestined to take up an advisory role to their governments, parliaments and their societies on major science-based issues of significant societal importance. The discussion was aimed at finding out how much the participating academies are involved in such activities, what structures are currently in place in the four countries, and if common actions like setting up a “virtual institute” of the 4 participating academies could be taken up.

The participants agreed that there are many issues on which the academies could advise the national parliaments and they should communicate the already existing materials in a more effective way, and send them to the government. Jan Palous mentioned that the Royal Society in Great Britain initiated a pairing scheme: the members of Parliament formed pairs with scientists and they explained their problems to each other. It was a success therefore the scheme should be propagated to other parliaments in Europe.

President Vizi explained that in Hungary the Academy is an official advisor of the Parliament but it never actually gives advice. In case of very important or controversial questions HAS formulates an opinion of about 30 pages. In a public survey measuring the credibility of institutions in Hungary HAS came first, and the government was on the 16th place. It means that the average Hungarian citizen gives credit to the Academy, but of course HAS is very cautious about giving opinion.

President Paces pointed out that it is the duty of scientists is to inform the public and push the governments into a certain direction. He enumerated some issues on which all academies have to provide opinion to their governments like GMOs, nuclear energy, HIV, stem cell research etc. He referred to existing materials from European organisations like EASAC, EMBO etc. that are well suited for the purpose, and just need to reach the necessary audiences.

Fedor Ciampor pointed out that although everyone talks about “knowledge-based society”, governments never actually ask the academies for advice, and if advice is given voluntarily, it is hardly ever followed.

President Kleiber concluded that the least the V4 academies could do is to exchange opinions on the most important questions and inform each other about actions taken and their statements. Dusan Kovac asked for a more concrete proposal that could be discussed by correspondence before next year's meeting.

The Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities ASCR – Martin Steiner

Martin Steiner stressed that the initiative on the Central European Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities has established itself and is presently in a strong position. He presented a compilation of the Editor in chief of CEJS, Jacek Kornacki to the participants. The database is referring 212 scientific journals and has more than 8200 abstracts in the records. As an outreach, a Latvian Journal is also contributing, and negotiations have begun with Estonia and Ukraine. The Hungarian participation was criticized and further efforts were asked for. He also asked for support for the next year's editorial board meeting. Such meetings have proven to be useful, e.g. at the last meeting a unified abstract template was discussed.

The participants agreed that it would be utopistic to publish full scientific texts in English originally written in national languages but the national journals should at least have English summaries.

President Paces stressed the importance of local and regional scientific journals and books written in the local language. These publications should not be excluded from important lists.

President Vizi pointed out that English functions as a lingua franca and it is currently a hot issue at HAS. We should at least try to translate the summary of the most important scientific publications.

Closure of the meeting

President Vizi expressed his belief that the V4 academies will play an even more important role in the economy and sooner or later the role of academies will be recognised. He stressed the importance and advantages of further frequent information exchange. In view of the forthcoming academic elections he said good-bye to the participants in his capacity as president, and wished them further success in their work.

President Kleiber pointed out that the forthcoming meeting of the V4 academies will be organized in Poland, in the course of 2009 (spring), the timing and the location will be communicated later.

The participating delegations left Budapest in the afternoon.