

On the current impact of politics on European Research Programmes

Since a couple of years, major efforts are under way to increase the impact of the European Research Programmes on policy, notably in the context of the continuing economic crisis (see also ThinkPIECES 4/2014).

Far less visible, but probably equally important, is the trend for an increased impact of politics on European Research Programmes. The following personal reflections raise some concerns about a possible “conservative bias” generated by this trend – and offer some very first ideas on how to address the issue.

Intro

While the growing expectations regarding the policy impact of European Research have been a subject of broad public attention and a wide media coverage (notably in the context of launching Horizon 2020), the growing impact of politics on European Research is so far rather a topic for specialists and insiders. The following reflections are an attempt to identify some of the main developments – and to present some personal views on their impact.

The multiplication of advisory structures and the consensus culture

Over recent years, the European Commission tried hard to use the funding from European research projects also as a tool for leveraging additional money from the Member States. In the end, this approach led to an ever growing number of “bodies” by which the Member States try to influence the overall direction of the funding streams. The number of high-level groups, steering boards, programme committees and expert panels has probably never been higher than today, and any attempt to get a clear picture on the underlying governance structures could be best described as “heroic”.

The point here, however, is not the inflationary growth of these political lobbying structures, but rather the detrimental role they might play on the overall policy design. The permanent search for unanimity or at least “broad agreement” among the 28 Member States does not favour a particularly courageous, ground breaking and innovative programme design. Instead, following the classical “What is in for me?” logic, the support in such bodies seems easier to achieve by suggesting more of the same and by following the established paths.

The growing importance of the industrial policy paradigm

The recent “merger” of European research and innovation policies had also major consequences with regard to the impact of politics on the design of European Research Programmes. While in research policy the classical scientific peer review is still the backbone of any selection and funding process, things seem to be less clear cut in innovation policy, where there is a widespread belief that active interventions from the state could generate broad benefits. Part of this “industrial policy” logic is a close cooperation with the main actors in a given field and an attempt to improve the competitive situation of European firms.

The current “Joint Technology Initiatives” and Public Private Partnerships” illustrate how far one has moved away from the former ideal of European research programmes as a “level playing field” for all actors. Instead, as a result of the political bargaining process to ascertain a financial contribution from industry, many JTIs and PPPs provide for ring-fenced budgets for certain groups of actors – and at least at first glance the overall governance structures for the programme implementation does not necessarily correspond to the established “gold standards” in research policy, in the sense of a strict division of tasks between the various actors involved.

It is left to the judgement of future analysts whether the lobbying process for the identification of these JTIs and PPPs has led to the selection of the most promising areas in terms of jobs and growth for Europe. Yet again, political science would suggest that the process is systematically biased towards the already existing industries – for the simple reason that future or even emerging new industries are not as well organised as established ones ... Here again one could identify a “conservative” impact of politics on the European Research programmes.

The desire for short term impact

The latest dimension of political impact on European Research programmes is the claim that in times of crisis priority should be given to research projects with a clear application potential. While it is certainly helpful to use tools like the “Technology Readiness Levels” to clarify the nature of a proposed activity, it might be a rather unfortunate temptation to focus the funding mainly on projects which are supposedly “close to the market”.

Of course projects with concrete application potential offer a good chance for real impact on jobs and growth in the years to come, but more often than not these projects implement incremental improvements for existing approaches. For a sustained growth, Europe needs to invest in truly innovative approaches, and it might not be sufficient to limit the support for this kind of research just to excellent individual scientists receiving a grant from the European Research Council.

Collaborative projects are needed to establish new scientific approaches through building new disciplines, training new generations of researchers, and creating the necessary connectivity and critical mass. Unfortunately, less and less of this might happen through European Research Programmes, as the exclusive focus on short term results represents yet again a “conservative impact” of the political context on European research.

Some possible remedies

The “take home message” from this paper is a very critical view on the current impact of politics on European Research Programmes.

This is by no means a claim for keeping policy completely out of the governance of European research – this would be counterproductive, naïve, and dangerous. Instead, the real issue is to make sure that the political impact is organized in a better way, so that instead of hampering true innovation, political influence could actually become a true promoter of new approaches.

There are no simple solutions to complex issues, but the following ideas might be useful as a starting point for a critical review:

- Less is more – there are too many bodies supposedly influential on Horizon 2020, and their real responsibilities are not sufficiently clear. The European Commission might have followed a “*divide et impera*” approach for a long while, but may-be the sheer complexity of the advisory system makes it now unmanageable.
- Transparency – the views and in a sense the “lobbying” regarding the Horizon 2020 activities should be made publicly available in a structured format. This would notably allow identifying who was at the origin of certain research priorities and call topics.
- Governance rules – potential conflicts of interest should be identified and properly been dealt with. A very good system is already in place at the micro level – for individual proposal evaluators and project officers. But even more important might be an extra effort at the macro level – the definition and lobbying of programme priorities.
- Fresh blood – the inner circle of experts on European Research policy is surprisingly stable since many years, and neither the EU enlargements nor the addition of the innovation dimension have led to fundamentally new ways of thinking.
- Member States – it could be particularly helpful if Member States would enter into a serious self-critical reflection on how to play a more constructive and pro-active role in the policy shaping process.

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