

Conversation with the Director of Slovenia's Public Research Agency, Dr Franci Demšar

The Quality of our Science will be Even More Visible



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Programme evaluation, on the basis of which the programmes that will receive budget funding in subsequent years are defined, will undoubtedly be one of the most important decisions for the research sphere in Slovenia during this year. Expectations are so much the greater because certain important changes are promised. This was also the reason for our conversation with the director of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS), Dr Franci Demšar.

Before you became the director of the ARRS you were involved in its founding. Now, owing to the complications surrounding the creation of Slovenia's independent higher education agency, which has won recognition at the European level, the question of how independent an agency founded under our legislation can be is once again a topical issue – Dr Peter Jambrek claims that it depends on the government. What is your opinion?

First I would draw attention to the reason why changes of government do not usually cause dramatic upheavals in western European countries. This is mainly due to the independent institutions that, where the democratic system functions well, enable a swift and painless change of government without this threatening the effectiveness of the functioning of the State. For Slovenia, however, independent agencies and funds are still a relative novelty and a particular effort is needed for them to be established. In the case of the ARRS, I can say that this effort has been successful, and that a degree of independence very comparable to that of kindred European agencies has been established. I believe that

this will remain the case. This does not however mean that it was easy for us to achieve this.

You yourself are one proof of the independence of the ARRS, since as its director you have already "survived" several ministers and several governments. When the agency was founded, Dr Gaber was still minister...

That's true, but that was only a few months before the change of government. Otherwise, "survived" is not the right word. I have never understood it like that. The work of the agency should not depend on who the minister is.

To what extent is the agency actually "attached" to the government or the relevant ministry?

As provided by law and the founding charter, the point of the ARRS's work is that it should work in the way that is best for the country and in accordance with its strategic documents. And of course in accordance with the policy of the relevant area of government. The transparency of our work is therefore very important, and I believe that we have managed to establish this.

So in no case does the government or the ministry influence your expert decisions?

No, there is and can be no such influence. Concrete decisions are taken by the agency alone, although the government does of course have an influence on strategy, or rather it provides a framework for our work.

A financial framework above all?

Naturally a financial framework, but not only that. Each of our calls for proposals refers not only to the Regulations but to two other documents as well. The first document is the strategic orientations of the ministry. These explain in a transparent manner what the ministry wishes to achieve with a given call for proposals. For example, the priorities such as telecommunications, information technology, new materials or the revitalisation of specific research fields. In the last call for proposals, for example, the ministry insisted that at least one project must be awarded to academies of art. The second document is the evaluation methodology, which is the exclusive responsibility of the specialist bodies of the agency, i.e. of the scientific councils of individual disciplines, which coordinate all the details, and the scientific council of the ARRS, which actually adopts this methodology.

Among researchers I have heard the comment that in Slovenia, too, the distribution of money for research ought to be entrusted to more than one body, not merely to one agency, which consequently has a kind of monopoly.

I have always been – and will continue to be – in favour of the development of other institutions of this type. Above all, I believe that our technology agency needs significant development and that it should obtain more funds. But this is the job of the government, which in the past has been a little behind in this sphere.

As a result of the way in which the technology agency has been bounced back and forth among ministerial departments, the sphere that this agency should be looking after is undoubtedly the most deprived. But have you at least partially made up for this deficit?

Franci Demšar is 48 years old and holds a PhD in physics. He was born in Žire and educated at Bežigrad gimnazija and Ljubljana University, where he took his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics and in 1987, at the age of just 27, his doctorate. He completed the majority of his doctoral research in the USA, where he spent a total of two years. The subject of his doctorate and his subsequent research was magnetic resonance. His first job was as a physics teacher at primary and secondary schools. He then obtained young researcher status at the Jožef Stefan Institute (IJS) – obtaining a special commendation as the first IJS young researcher to earn a PhD – where he remained until his entry into politics in the mid-1990s. His first political appointment was as state secretary at what was then the Ministry of Science and Technology. He later served as defence minister and as ambassador in Moscow to Russia, five other Central Asian countries and Belarus. In 2004 he became the first director of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS), a post he still holds today.



Photo: Primož Sark

Director of the Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS), Dr Franci Demšar

It is true that for the time being the ARRS is performing some activities that the technology agency could also perform. For example we fund projects that are on the borderline of development projects, where an important element in the decision on their funding is how much the business enterprise sector contributes for their implementation. If the technology agency were to assume its role in full, some of these projects would be transferred there, which we at the ARRS would be happy to support.

The previous call for proposals for programme funding, which is of key importance for the work of research institutions, was adopted immediately before the creation of your agency. This means that you are now facing this process for the first time, and we may assume that this is also the biggest challenge the ARRS has faced to date. Have you been preparing for this for a long time?

Of course. The result of our work is

now visible to everyone in the call for proposals published last Friday. Very detailed application forms are available on the internet and there is also a description of the methodology of the evaluation procedure. It is the scientific excellence and the relevance of these programmes that will be evaluated above all. The history of the programmes will be reviewed, how they have worked to date, what scientific advances the members of the programme groups have made, and what these programmes have contributed – and what they are expected to contribute – to the overall development of Slovenia. The questionnaires for the evaluators have been drawn up following the British model, with very descriptive evaluations. They will also evaluate what a given programme group intends to do – what scientific breakthrough it is planning and how it imagines it will incorporate itself into the economic or cultural development of Slovenia. The evaluators will receive a chart showing the work of the programme group over this five-year period: what they have published, how they have been cited, how much funding they have obtained from the business enterprise sector, how much from Europe, what have individuals from the group contributed to this. Outstanding publications will be particularly highlighted. An important new feature is that in the evaluation we will encourage the interconnection of institutes and universities in such a way that the programme groups of institutes whose members teach at universities will score higher, and similarly programme groups from these spheres at universities will also be stimulated. Since we wish the evaluation to be as objective as possible, last year we asked public research institutes (PRIs) to evaluate their own programme groups themselves, and we have received some very interesting and comprehensive documents. Self-assessment, which is also a very important technique in other countries, has been tackled by PRIs with the utmost seriousness and in very inventive ways. Some institutions, for example, have even involved some of the very distinguished experts from other countries with whom they collaborate. We believe that this will give a clear picture that will enable an objective evaluation.

What will your main intention be in classifying programme groups?

This process will send a message to the research sphere, and the main part of

this message will be that the evaluation of programmes is extremely important, and that those research groups that we believe will continue to be topical for at least ten years or more should share in these funds – as set out in the Regulations. The first programmes are celebrating their tenth anniversary at this moment, since two programme periods are already behind us. It should be stressed that programmes are not five-year projects. It is about having an instrument that provides researchers in a given sphere with long-term stability and, consequently, continuity of research in a given sphere.

But they are re-evaluated and re-verified each time?

Yes. This year the programmes will be evaluated again. Some will be cancelled and some will be re-admitted. But the bulk of them will of course be these programmes that are already in progress. The main result of the evaluation will not be so much more or so much less money, but the stability of the contract. Approximately a quarter of programmes will get a contract for six years, while roughly the same share will get a contract for five, four or three years. Up until now, all of them have had five-year contracts.

Why have you introduced these differences and what will happen to those programmes whose contracts are due to expire in a few years?

There are two reasons for this decision. The first is that a great deal of funds are involved in programme funding, and so it does not make sense to make decisions on the long-term distribution of these funds all at once. It is better to wait and see how things develop. On the other hand the quality evaluation of 300 programmes in one year represents an enormous organisational burden for the ARRS – quite apart from the fact that we also have other calls for proposals and calls for tenders. Now after a lapse of three years we are going to have annual evaluation and this will also enable greater flexibility if specific additional funds appear for

programme funding. As regards the expiry of contracts, these programmes will of course have every chance of having their contracts extended, but before that they will have to go through the application and evaluation programme again.



What will be the share of foreign experts in the evaluation?

We will present all the collected documents to foreign reviewers, and they will also be present at the public presentations held by all the programme groups. This will also be an opportunity to promote Slovenian science. There will be around 70 foreign evaluators.

When is the evaluation process expected to be complete?

We plan to start the presentations in the middle of the year, and the final decisions will be taken after the summer holidays.

Will the evaluation you have described be significantly more

expensive than the evaluation to date?

Because of the presence of foreign evaluators the evaluation will certainly be slightly more expensive, but this is unavoidable if we wish to be comparable with other European countries.

How comparable are we with others in terms of the quality of Slovenian science and also with regard to the money that science receives from the State?

With regard to money, it is well known that we are still lagging behind in terms of the percentage of GDP for research and science. With 1.5 % of investment in science we are still a long way from the target of 3% of GDP we have set ourselves in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy. And judging by the growth trend to date, we will not reach this target for many more years. We can also say that for the time being the business enterprise sector has more understanding than the State does with regard to investment in research. On the other hand, as regards the quality of our research, we can be quite pleased with ourselves. According to our analysis – and this is another of the agency's jobs – there has been an extraordinary jump in the quality, scientific production and relevance of Slovenian researchers over the past five years. In terms of growth in the number of publications and citations we are above the European average, and the situation is similar with regard to the growth in the number of patents and the obtaining of funds on the basis of contracts with the business enterprise sector. Here, too, we are well above the European average and are even among a small group of countries with the highest growth of this type in the world.

Are these growth results so good because we were so bad before? How do we score if we measure achievements and not merely growth?

It is true that we are still well below the European average, but at this pace of growth we will catch up quickly provided that the public funds earmarked for science also begin to grow significantly more quickly. I believe that after this year's evaluation of programmes and the presentations of the work of the programme groups, the quality of our science will be even more visible.