

PRE SESSION

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Speech:

Dr. Angela Merkel, President of the European Council and Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany

Translation

Professor Kleiner,
President Kafatos,
Secretary-General Winnacker,
my colleague Annette Schavan,
Commissioner Potočník,
Ms Niebler,
Fellow parliamentarians,
and most particularly all participants in this two-day symposium to launch the European Research Council,

I am delighted to join you here today for what is certainly a milestone in the history of European research policy. For with the European Research Council – the ERC or however it will be known in the other languages of the European Union – a kind of "champions league" will be created – so I hope at any rate – which promises to bring new focus and new brilliance to the already excellent research going on in the EU member states. By transcending the boundaries of national research and establishing cross-border networks of excellence throughout the EU, we are generating something of an entirely new quality. We're doing this because we realize that research and new technologies drive economic growth, are indeed the key factor in enabling us to boost economic performance in Europe, maintain and enhance our prosperity and be globally competitive.

The Lisbon Agenda's basic goal, namely, to make Europe a continent of ideas, innovation, creativity and competitiveness – number one, in other words – is something we won't perhaps achieve fully by 2010. But for us to have this goal is to my mind crucial. For we

know, too, that anyone who sets himself no goals, has no idea who he is or what he wants in life can hardly be surprised if he in fact achieves nothing at all.

How can Europe become such a continent of ideas and innovations? European research policy has three core principles: excellence, internationality and freedom of research. This above all is what will guide the European Research Council in its work. Its main task will be to refocus basic research and make the development of young talent, greater support for young researchers a special priority.

I won't deny that we're rather proud that the European Research Council's operational launch – its actual founding was a while ago – falls during the German EU Council Presidency. Of course some would have preferred it to be launched earlier. However, now we feel a certain pride that it is happening during our Presidency. Given the time the preparations took, some of you might have reflected that Rome, too, wasn't built in a day. One reason we're not a little pleased that today's launch is taking place during our Presidency is that, as a result of our own experience with research policy and research organization, we feel we have also been able to contribute a good deal to the founding of the European Research Council.

So now there are high expectations on all sides. For the Council has two outstanding features, which in the context of European research promotion we have not seen quite in this particular form ever before. Firstly, the Council is independent. And secondly, it is committed to excellence and nothing else. Well, I have two ears and my hearing is still fairly good. And the message I'm getting from you is that it's precisely these two features that are causing you concern. You're wondering whether we'll succeed in preserving these two features intact – independence and a commitment to excellence.

When I say these two features are something new, that does not mean of course – to start on a positive note – that European research policy to date has had nothing to do with excellence or has not been concerned with projects that have been developed by researchers themselves. As we all know, however, a great many factors must come together before excellence coupled with a good idea ends up as a project eligible for support. This state of affairs has certainly helped integrate the various countries engaged in research. But as always when additional external factors come into play, this may on occasion put the most important factor at risk. That is why we – we in Germany in any case – will watch closely to

ensure that excellence and independence remain the European Research Council's guiding credo.

I hope and trust of course that Commissioner Potočník, who can well remember times when excellence and independence counted for not very much, will watch over these principles and act as a kind of guardian angel, so to speak, for the European Research Council. His job as Commissioner, after all, is a rather longer-term responsibility than any Council Presidency.

So as I see it, excellence and independence are absolutely fundamental. As far as independence is concerned, I would simply point out that here in Germany our experience with the German Research Foundation has been very positive and we have more or less learned to accept – something politicians find it pretty hard to do, I admit – that decisions about what constitutes excellence are best left up to the experts. Since we're not confined to our purely national turf but can tap into a whole European network of excellence, in every research field there are bound to be sufficient independent researchers capable of giving an independent expert opinion. That is why we have established a Scientific Council composed of 22 top-flight scientists. The idea is that this body should be able to take decisions independently of any political or administrative entities, decisions not only on specific projects but also policy and personnel decisions, since obviously these are interconnected.

If you feel concerned in any way about the direction things are going, my advice to you is to voice those concerns very clearly, so things do not continue in the wrong direction. I can assure you that in such cases – and I say this also and in particular on behalf of my colleague Annette Schavan – we will be happy to discuss the whole matter very frankly. That is, after all, in our own best interest.

Research requires freedom. That we know full well. Basic research especially can only go anywhere if it is free from pressure to produce results that will have immediate applications. In times when the process of justifying what you have been doing is being moved ever closer to the start of the project proper and your best course is to have already completed the project before you've even indicated what you're intending to do – in such times you clearly need also the support and good will of the public at large. The results of basic research are, after all, often quite unexpected.

That's why it's also very important that you don't let the politicians force you into too many discussions about research priorities. Now that I'm no longer a scientist, I always say jokingly, people like me find out about the latest trends in research from the science supplements of our national newspapers. However, by the time they've reached the supplements, people actually engaged in basic research may well be getting excited about different things entirely. That's why we should beware of thinking that if we only read the papers diligently, we'll have a pretty good idea of where the latest research is heading.

In other words, having the right policies, the right environment in place can, as we know, help to produce excellence. But these policies must not place restrictions on researchers or curb the spirit of inquiry, that spirit that urges you to explore untrodden paths. We must learn to live with the fact that you need freedom to push back the frontiers of knowledge. We must learn to live with the fact that we won't actually know when you develop or discover something. And yet of course – I won't deny it – we do hope that from time to time you will come up with new developments and discoveries that we, too, will find fascinating and thrilling.

I come to my second point. We need young research talent in Europe. And we need a research landscape of greater breadth. The fact is – and it's most regrettable, as we agreed when we recently discussed this in Cabinet with the minister responsible for research – that at the moment we simply don't have the number of scientists and engineers we would need to spend the envisaged 3% of GDP on R & D. This is not just the case in Germany – something we find pretty odd, as we tend to think of our country as a place where many good new ideas see the light of day – for right across Europe a total of 700,000 researchers are currently lacking. So it is vital that more young people should opt for careers in R & D.

Your Starting Grants Programme is an important step, I believe, towards developing new and effective ways to promote young talent. If young people are given the chance to work on the same level as established investigators, to publish and recruit their own research staff – in other words, if we show we have confidence in them even before they have fully proved themselves, that should surely do much to make careers in European research once again attractive. For everything you're doing in this direction I wish you good luck and all possible success.

What is crucial is to give our researchers here in Europe the motivation they need. What is important, too, is to encourage those who have left Europe to consider coming back. And another important thing – which I greatly welcome also from the point of view of the EU's openness to the world – is to bring first-rate researchers from other parts of the world to Europe in the hope that, after spending a few years here, they'll say: "Europe has an exhilarating climate of innovation, creativity, inquiry, here there's everything we need for the research we want to do". That of course would do a power of good to Europe's reputation in the world.

So I would appeal also to all those in positions of responsibility in the universities and research institutes to take up this challenge and do whatever you can to offer an attractive base to researchers eligible for ERC funding. For clearly the ERC itself cannot create a research-friendly environment – all it can do is provide the necessary funding and resources.

As far as outcomes are concerned, basic research is, as I said earlier, by its nature unpredictable. That is why decisions on what research to support should be taken by experts on the basis of criteria which they consider appropriate and relevant, not any laid down by politicians. Basic research must have the space it needs – that is crucial, however much we also need a focus on applications. As of course I hardly need point out in present company – for that would be preaching to the converted – many inventions we are all familiar with today, X-rays, penicillin, a host of other examples, were discovered more or less by coincidence, as an accidental byproduct or as the product of some research with a quite different intention. That's why protecting the freedom so fundamental to basic research is so important.

We expect that those working on ERC-supported research will be eager to test their own limits, have a real passion for their research and of course prove their mettle in competition with other applicants. That goes without saying. So I hope, Professor Winnacker, you will have rather too many applicants than too few. And I wish you a firm hand when it comes to separating the wheat from the chaff. For if once again it's just a case of three countries getting together in order to do something or other, the Seventh Research Framework Programme offers plenty of alternative possibilities for realizing the project. With you, the only thing that counts is excellence. I can well imagine you'll find yourself involved in fact in a

good many discussions in connection with the Framework Programme. I would encourage also the European Parliament to keep a close eye on developments, for long-standing beneficiaries of previous research programmes are not entitled to any kind of privileged access to these new resources on grounds of personal connections or past services.

There are a great many fields in which new insights, new ideas are needed. If I focus on just two such fields – and this I want to make clear right at the start – my intention is not in any way to suggest what we think you should be doing. I'll come in a moment to the subject of the European Institute of Technology, where we are perhaps entitled to a somewhat greater say. I do see, however, immense challenges ahead for us. Let me take, simply as examples, energy research and climate research.

I cite these two issues because they're going to be a major focus of our Council meeting next week and because I believe we certainly cannot be indifferent to the massive changes taking place in the global environment. The sustainability of energy supplies – sustainable both in ecological terms and in terms of supply security – is another issue that of course we as representatives of the industrialized countries or countries committed to building an industrial and knowledge-based society are greatly concerned about.

We need greater energy efficiency. We need CO₂-free technologies or technologies that are non-CO₂-emitting. We need to develop renewable energies and we need an efficiency revolution across the board. That means we as Europeans have here a vast field to work on. And if we toil away and make that field fertile, over the coming decades we will also be able to export technologies and innovations to other parts of the world.

Europe emits 15% of the world's total CO₂ emissions. So we politicians are often asked why this gets us so worried. Why is this such an important issue in Europe? My answer is simply that there are two aspects here that are both crucial. The first is that there's no way we'll ever convince the emerging economies to help halt climate change if we don't set a good example ourselves. The second is that those who develop today the technologies of the future will also be the leading exporters and top profit-makers in tomorrow's world. That's why it's so important that we Europeans lead by example. We are of course well aware that without a global consensus on the need for action on climate change, we Europeans cannot by

ourselves do very much about it. So as I see it, the task ahead for Europe's political leaders is to position our continent to become a trailblazer in this field.

On one point let me be very clear. In America we are now seeing a quite new awareness of how important this issue is. And once the Americans decide something is important and they're going to do something about it, we Europeans had better act fast if we don't want to be left far behind. This all means, I think, that in future there's going to be much more competition in this field. However, it is right and necessary that we lobby also, so to speak, for international agreements on these matters.

In order to boost research – and here I'm talking not just about energy and climate research, but all research related to advanced, cutting-edge technologies, we in Germany are now steering a new course, which I see as highly promising. Our Research Minister has succeeded in developing in cooperation with all Federal Government ministries involved in research

– and that is a great many – a joint strategy. The way she went about this here in Germany – and for Europe I think something similar would also work – was to look at our 17 ministerial strategies and ask where we stand now. What do we need to do, if we're not already in the world top league, to get there? Where are we ahead? What can government do to improve and strengthen research in these sectors, help it break new ground? What new tools could we develop to achieve better linkage between government promotion of research, industrial research and research funded by industry?

Germany has always been very good – in our view anyway – in developing new ideas and often also in patenting them, but we have shown time and again that we are not so good when it comes to marketing them. It still rankles that it was a Berliner, Konrad Zuse who built the first computer, but today's big names in the industry are all building computers a very long way away from here. And it rankles at least as much that while the MP3 players were developed in one of the Max Planck institutes, real mass production is happening elsewhere. That is why, where our own research policy in Germany is concerned – and I'm not talking now about anything to do with the ERC – we are of course keen to devise instruments that will help translate promising new ideas into marketable products, for that will generate new jobs with a long-term future.

Here in Germany small and medium-sized enterprises – SMEs – play a prominent role in the country's economic life. That's why I believe our so-called research premium – special support for SMEs that commission research from research institutions, notably universities and universities of applied sciences – is likely to be a very useful addition to our national research policy instruments.

The founding of the European Research Council coincides with the start of the Seventh Research Framework Programme. With funds of over 50 billion euro, this is a truly gigantic research programme, probably the biggest in the world. That alone is no guarantee of quality, of course. But the Programme does enable us to provide the material basis so essential for European research. The European Research Council's share of this funding amounts to some 6.7 billion euro. And this money has to be spent in accordance with the criteria I outlined earlier on. But this certainly doesn't mean that within this Seventh Framework Programme you should be some kind of enclave just minding your own business. You shouldn't hesitate to forge ties with others outside your own domain. The aim must be to create a dense fabric of ties and contacts. For what's the point of having an isolated enclave of independence and excellence and everything else carrying on just as before – business as usual? I for one would much prefer to see the founding of the European Research Council having a positive and stimulating effect on the whole spectrum of European research and the way it interacts with the Seventh Framework Programme.

That leads me also to express my appreciation and thanks to the European Research Council for the time and trouble it took, even before it was properly constituted, to consider in depth another new European idea, namely, the proposed European Institute of Technology. This was not an idea everyone took to immediately and indeed the European Research Council itself was extremely sceptical. Even when it did consider the proposal, it still felt certain misgivings along the lines of "once we agree to discuss it, won't we already have got our hands a little dirty, won't we already be involved in one way or another ?" I am nonetheless most grateful that you did submit an opinion on the proposal. You will certainly not be held responsible in the slightest if things fail to work perhaps quite as you intended, for we are struggling valiantly – Commissioner Potočník, please pass on my greetings in this connection to Commission President Barroso – to ensure that the European Institute of Technology is not just a good idea on paper but also gets an operational structure that will work.

What is crucial – and it is important, I feel, to get this across to everyone here today – is to create a network. There's no point in founding a new institution and then simply hoping that one day – by some miraculous process – it will become a place of awe-inspiring learning and scholarship. The only way we can promote world-class excellence that is recognized as such is by making the most of the excellence that already exists in research institutions across Europe – through cross-fertilization and concentration of particular research areas also in the field of technological advances. However, all this can happen only through a bottom-up process. For that reason – and here all members of the German Government see eye to eye – we may on occasion be rather uncomfortable partners in Europe, not because we want to put a spanner in the works but because we want to see success.

If we are honest with one another, also in Germany there have certainly been cases – as there have been in Europe as well – where something was founded with great good will, yet later turned out to be so rigid that it not only required constant evaluation and benchmarking but also utterly lacked the dynamism required to generate genuine excellence.

If we have on the one side the European Research Council and on the other side a living, dynamic network-type system in which really exciting technological advances are taking place, this could be a most productive and mutually reinforcing combination. But if instead our approach is "let's see who hasn't been given any new agency in a while, who needs a site where something or other could be founded", everything will collapse like a house of cards. The expectations that have been raised would be sorely disappointed. And Europe's standing in the world, I may add, is not so fantastic that we can afford another 20 failed constructions before we finally agree on the right one.

So I can only encourage all friends of the European Research Council – and judging by the present company there appear to be a good many – not to stand on the sidelines but to join the ongoing debate on European research. Anyone new to this debate in Europe may find it pretty arcane. But if they take the time and trouble to familiarize themselves with the issues at the outset, things do become clear. The trouble is that by the end of that initial stage people may have become so acclimatized, so to speak, that they automatically think only in terms of the European institutions and nothing else.

That's why it is important, Mr President and Mr Secretary-General, that you keep your distance and get on with your job as you think best. In due course we'll ask how you're getting on. We now have the new institution of the Trio Presidency. After the German EU Presidency the Portuguese and then the Slovenes will take over. At the end of this Trio Presidency, in around a year, let's say, we'll ask you how you're faring and what developments there have been to date. If Mr Potočnik agrees, all this – in consultation with the Slovenian Presidency – could be the subject not of a commissioned report but of a special symposium, at which all the issues could be put on the table and discussed freely and frankly.

As President of the European Council – and I am speaking, I believe, on behalf of many or indeed all Member States – I would like to wish you every possible success. It is not important for you yourselves that you spend your time productively, that you give researchers the chance to pursue their calling, it is important for the European Union, for its vitality and dynamism and reputation in the world. That's why I wish you every success, good luck, stamina and steady nerves – and also a fair share of fun.