

Speech by the Chair of the ITRE Committee,

Ms. Amalia Sartori,

**On the occasion of the 5th anniversary of the
European Research Council**

On 29 February 2012

in Brussels

Dear President Prof Nowotny,

Dear Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn,

Dear Minister Østergaard,

Dear ERC Grant Holders and Dear Guests:

When I was elected Chair of the ITRE Committee for the second half of the parliamentary term, I was well aware that research would take centre-stage during my term-of-office.

More specifically, we have just begun discussions on the 8th European Research Framework Programme - Horizon 2020 - which is the largest research scheme in the world. The ERC will be a key player in this programme.

That is why I am especially glad to have this unique opportunity to get to know the ERC in all its diversity so soon after taking up my new position. I therefore accepted the invitation to the 5th anniversary of its foundation with great pleasure.

And I must say: it was worth it. It does not happen very often in a politician's life to be preceded and succeeded by first-class lecturers, as is happening this evening. And it is certainly a once-off to have the previous speaker discuss robotics and the following one the evolution of stars. Anyway, I came to hear fascinating scientific lectures and to be as stimulated as I was by your last visit to the ITRE Committee. On that occasion, you, Prof. Nowotny and Dr. Metthey, were accompanied by a young neurobiologist, who was able to convincingly explain to ITRE members that their minds do not function much differently from those of the mice used in her experiments.

Despite this somewhat sobering message, her research managed to fascinate my colleagues and myself. We all agreed that the ERC would give us a chance to make a real investment into Europe's future.

I and my colleagues, including those in the entire Parliament, rather than only in the ITRE Committee, are aware that our talented scientists are Europe's most important resource. We

also know, however, that a sharp international competition is underway for those "brains". This was one of the reasons for the foundation of the ERC five years ago.

The ITRE Committee has recently requested a study on how attractive European research centres are by international standards. The study is still under preparation. However, it has already revealed one result that shocked me - that there are no comprehensive statistics on top scientists who have left or come to Europe for professional reasons (apart from some special studies on individual disciplines).

This is all the more shocking because we know very well, for example, how many eggs are laid by European hens and how many tonnes of olives are harvested in my home country, Italy. But it is precisely about our most valuable resource that we seem to know very little. We must change that quickly. We must place our political decisions in the field of research on a solid basis. This should be an integral part of a European Research Area that is fit for the future.

Nonetheless, the European Research Framework Programmes, and especially the ERC, provide us with some experiences that highlight the European research landscape. And what we can see gives us reason to worry. The various Member States are involved in the relevant programmes to an extremely diverse extent. Please do not misunderstand me: I do not perceive this as an issue of justice. No, the real tragedy is: we, in the EU, obviously fail to make a proper use of our resources. This is a big problem and a challenge for the whole of Europe. We cannot, in fact, afford the mass exodus of top scientists from Eastern and Southern Europe to the United States and Asia on account of a lack of proper working conditions in their home countries.

The ERC makes an enormous contribution in this respect and fights this trend. You have recently started a global campaign to attract outstanding scientists to Europe and you make a great effort to raise awareness for the ERC in countries that are so far

under-represented. This is a great commitment for which I thank you very much!

But what can be done at the political level? How can we adhere to the principle of excellence - and we must do so - and at the same time boost research and innovation in the convergence countries?

My predecessor as Chair of the ITRE Committee, Mr. Herbert Reul, submitted a proposal, which was supported by Parliament, and you, Commissioner, incorporated it into your draft programme Horizon 2020. The aim was to launch a competition for the establishment of top scientific research institutes in the convergence countries.

The winning concepts to create such institutes could be implemented by using the Structural and Cohesion Funds, with additional funds from the Horizon programme for high-class research. I believe that such a competition would give vital momentum to the open and innovative regions of convergence

countries, which would ultimately contribute to long-term sustainable growth in these areas.

All in all, I am convinced that we should link structural funds and research funds more closely, which is something that is also promoted by many of my colleagues. Therefore we will hold a joint hearing of the two competent committees, ITRE and REGI, in spring. I hope that the ERC, with its valuable experience, will get involved in this discussion. Your advice, Prof. Nowotny, is always welcomed by the ITRE Committee.

Thank you very much for your attention.