

The labours of Fotis Kafatos

Launching the European Research Council was a Herculean effort, says its outgoing president.

Amid the bustle of the life-sciences department at Imperial College London, Fotis Kafatos looks spent. For the past four years, he has nursed the European Research Council (ERC) to life, delivering the first pan-European initiative to fund cutting-edge basic research judged solely on excellence. The struggle has left him satisfied but exhausted. So on 1 March — a year earlier than his term was due to end — Kafatos handed over his presidency of the ERC to Helga Nowotny, a social scientist at the Vienna Science and Technology Fund, and one of the ERC's two vice-presidents. Kafatos plans to devote more time to his research on malaria, which he says has come practically to a standstill.

"I don't begrudge the time I spent on the ERC, but I would be foolish not to step down now — it was consuming me," he tells *Nature* in an exclusive interview. "If I knew how much time it would take out of my life when I started I might not have done it. But I am happy I did."

Kafatos, together with the other 21 members of the ERC's scientific council, helped to secure the ERC a 7-year €7.5-billion (US\$10.2-billion) budget, which has funded more than 1,000 projects worth a total of €1.7 billion. Like many of the world's best research agencies, including the US National Science Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, the ERC selects winners solely on scientific merit. "We delivered to Europe what we promised," Kafatos declares.

Colour begins to creep back into Kafatos's face as he tells of the ERC's other achievements. For instance, it has attracted more than 3,000 distinguished scientists from across the world to review applications. The review panels are "the backbone of our operations. We are very proud of it," he says. The council has also spurred individual nations to spend more money on research. "Ten countries or regions, including Switzerland and Spain, have injected additional national funds for runner-up candidates who were deemed excellent but could not be funded," says Kafatos.

Busting bureaucracy

However, the ERC has had its share of problems. Its first call for proposals from young researchers, in 2007, attracted more than 9,000 applicants, several times more than it expected — it had enough money to fund just 299 projects. "This huge interest could have been a disaster because the success rate was so low. But credit to young researchers,



F. BARON

Having battled the red tape of the European Commission, Fotis Kafatos will now focus on his research.

they were not put off," Kafatos recalls.

But it was not so much the teething troubles of the young ERC that wore Kafatos down, as the bureaucracy of the European Commission, which is responsible for ensuring that funding from the European Union pot — including the ERC's budget — is spent properly. An overly strict control culture permeates the commission, Kafatos says. "We continuously had to spend energy, time and effort on busting bureaucracy roadblocks that kept appearing in our way," says Kafatos. "At best, this costs us precious energy and resources. At worst it may hamper our zeal to inspire and continuously improve the ERC strategy, it can damage the morale of our staff and discourage the top talented researchers from applying to or reviewing for the ERC."

For example, the commission insists that winners of ERC funding, who already have to provide detailed research proposals, describe the milestones they aim to reach and how, so that their projects can be audited. How successful researchers are in reaching those goals could affect their chances of winning funding in the future. Kafatos says that this rule hampers the freedom of researchers to change their plans in the light of new science after their proposal has been accepted. "This is nonsensical. If you could a priori describe what your success will be, you would not have to do the experiments," says Kafatos. "I am convinced that proper and

secure use of public funds can be achieved in a much less domineering system," he adds.

He is not alone. A review led by the former president of Latvia, Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, and published in July last year, recommended that the commission make "immediate corrections" to the running of the ERC or risk inflicting a "deadly blow" on the funding body. Kafatos says that a pressing challenge for his successor is to ensure that the commission follows up on the report's recommendations and agrees to a further review in 2011 to consider whether more reforms are needed.

Kafatos also calls for new legislation to establish the ERC as a permanent institution. The ERC currently has a temporary status, raising the prospect, albeit unlikely, that it might not be funded in Europe's next research initiative — the eighth Framework programme, set to begin in 2013. Kafatos hopes instead that the Framework programme will include a "major expansion" of the ERC budget, which would allow the council to launch new funding initiatives, including supporting PhD programmes and institutes of advanced study, similar to the one in Princeton, New Jersey, at which researchers are free to pursue speculative ideas.

Most of all, Kafatos wants the agency he laboured to build to have the freedom to choose how it operates and how it is governed. "We need to build our institution to fit the needs of the mission and not vice versa," he says. ■

Natasha Gilbert