

Moedas's legacy — and what Europe must do next

The successor to the European Union's research chief must act to prevent budget cuts.

Carlos Moedas was little known outside Portugal when he took over as the European Union's research and innovation chief in 2014.

Now, at the end of his tenure, that is no longer the case. In five years, the engineer-turned-banker-turned politician has demonstrated thoughtful advocacy for research. He has listened to researchers and delivered — except on one issue where it really matters.

The funding settlement for Horizon Europe, the next research framework programme for all EU member states, has hit a roadblock. Moedas's successor, Mariya Gabriel, and Europe as a whole must work hard to fight cuts and potential delays to its start.

On the positive side of the ledger, it is because of Moedas that around €9 billion (US\$10 billion) — around one-tenth of the next round of European research funding — will be set aside for large collaborations in five global challenges or 'missions' — in climate change, cancer, oceans, smart cities, and soil and food. This was an idea that Moedas adopted after discussions with researchers, notably the innovation economist Mariana Mazzucato.

But a European research commissioner's core job — some would argue the most important one — is to protect the budget. Earlier this month, negotiations between EU member states on the next seven-year budget cycle (for 2021–27) stalled. The European Commission is asking for €1.135 trillion, including around €100 billion for research. Member states want to cut the total budget by between €35 billion and €85 billion. Facing such a shortfall, it isn't uncommon for those in charge of setting budgets to look to research for cuts.

Protecting research needs firepower — it requires support from heads of government, and especially from national ministries of finance. Moedas and his boss, commission president Jean-Claude Juncker, should have assembled high-level support much earlier, before we got to this point. The responsibility for ensuring that research does not bear the brunt of any cuts now falls to Gabriel.

An added complication is that, under the incoming commission, the department for research and innovation is being merged with that for education, youth, sport and culture. This expanded department is called Innovation and Youth — 'research' has been lost from the title — and Gabriel will have extra, and possibly competing, priorities, one of which is a trebling of the budget for the student-exchange programme Erasmus+.

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Moedas has been a popular commissioner, known as a team player and a conciliator — playing the 'good cop' to his former head of research Robert-Jan Smits's 'bad cop' in budget discussions. Smits describes Moedas as “a genuine, nice person who doesn't like to put people in an uncomfortable situation”. These are important qualities.

But the EU faces some significant challenges, and Gabriel will need to adopt a tougher persona. Economies are slowing; austerity has been painful and many governments want to spend more at home on social programmes. At the same time, budget planners will need to adjust for the potential absence of — or reduction in — the UK contribution to the EU.

If they want to see their EU research budgets protected, research organizations can help Gabriel by putting pressure on their national governments, especially finance ministries. Everyone needs to push harder to protect funding — so that the spirit and support that has helped make the EU a model for collaborative research can live on.

Brexit promises are premature

Government offers of new funds for UK scientists could be unaffordable.

There's a research group in Britain that has become a staple of the country's news shows, and it's called The UK in a Changing Europe. On most nights, the team of political scientists, economists and lawyers dispassionately responds to broadcasters' questions on the impact — economic, political and societal — of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union.

The researchers, who are funded by the UK government's Economic and Social Research Council — but whose work is independent of the government's own policies — do not have an easy task. But it's an important one, in part because the government has not yet released its own detailed analysis of Brexit's impacts.

Lawmakers know that most researchers would like nothing more than for the United Kingdom to remain a member of the EU. That is one reason that The UK in a Changing Europe team, which is one of just a handful of independent analysts, is careful not to dwell on the impact of Brexit on the research community — but instead is keeping the focus on the bigger picture.

As this Editorial went to press, the EU had agreed to a request from the UK government to delay Brexit to 31 January 2020 — three months beyond the recent, 31 October, deadline. And with Prime Minister Boris Johnson and members of the Parliament at loggerheads over the terms of the exit, politicians were preparing for a general election. Researchers will have breathed a sigh of relief at avoiding an