

Germany and Poland launch research ‘twinning’ effort

Bilateral partnership may provide new blueprint for EU east-west collaboration.

Quirin Schiermeier & Alison Abbott

04 July 2017

Germany and Poland are to jointly fund top scientists to start research groups at Polish institutes, in a scheme that could provide a new blueprint for east–west research collaboration in the European Union.

On 4 July, the two nations announced the Dioscuri programme — named after the ancient Greek word for the mythological twin brothers Castor and Pollux — which will provide ten scientists with up to €3 million (US\$3.4 million) each over the next decade, to establish their own centres of excellence in Poland.

The programme aims to boost research excellence in the EU’s less-developed science regions, and is overseen by Germany’s prestigious Max Planck Society (MPS). If successful, it will be extended to nearby EU countries, says society president Martin Stratmann.

The society already has connections with the EU’s largest Eastern European country: it operates two research groups with sites in Poland, but they are entirely Polish-funded. By contrast, the new centres will get half of their funding from Germany. Poland’s National Science Centre, a government research-funding agency in Krakow, will manage the centres, and the MPS will oversee an international committee to select the winning scientists. Calls for applications will go out in November.

Related stories

- [Poland: Into the light](#)
- [After the Berlin Wall: Central Europe up close](#)
- [Europe waters down transnational 'research buddy' plan](#)

Related stories

- [Poland: Into the light](#)
- [After the Berlin Wall: Central Europe up close](#)
- [Europe waters down transnational 'research buddy' plan](#)

The programme is modelled on the MPS's 'Minerva' scheme, which has supported research in Israel along similar lines for more than 50 years, albeit with different historical roots. Minerva was designed to build bridges between the two countries after the Second World War.

A new way to team up?

The EU has already spent hundreds of millions of euros on 'twinning' and 'teaming' initiatives that fund centres of excellence at labs in poorer regions, formed in partnership with elite institutions in richer countries. But critics say these programmes are heavily bureaucratic, are influenced by political and geographical factors as well as research excellence, and focus on centres of technological innovation rather than on individual scientists. "Why should a research programme focus on business and innovation when what we really need is a culture of excellence?" says molecular biologist Maciej Żylicz, president of the Foundation for Polish Science, a large research-funding agency in Warsaw.

Poland does participate in the EU programmes, but has not done particularly well. This year, for example, institutions in the country won just 3 out of 30 EU 'teaming' grants — whereas those in the Czech Republic received 6, and those in tiny Cyprus scored 9. (The European Parliament raised queries about Cyprus's surprising performance, but research commissioner Carlos Moedas responded in June that the competition was impartial and fair, and put the discrepancy down to a relatively low number of applications overall.)

Stratmann says that the EU teaming initiatives encourage "wise spending" of the bloc's funds on science, although they are not based on excellence alone. "But the EU money has to fall on fertile ground," he says — and the Dioscuri initiative could help on that score.

Such lean and less-bureaucratic efforts that focus on individual researchers have the best chance of closing the EU's east–west gap in science, says Tomasz Dietl, a semiconductor physicist at the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Physics in Warsaw. "This is the right way to go to improve the quality of research here," he says.

"Poland is a land of opportunity now, with an excellent national granting system," says Marcin Nowotny, a group leader at the International Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology in Warsaw and one of a few scientists in Poland who have received grants from the European Research Council. "But it needs more entry points — and a Max Planck-stamped programme will help exactly this."