

# EU research: the battle begins



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**SINGING TO RESEARCH'S GOOD  
FORTUNE: JANEZ POTOČNIK OPENS  
THE BID ON FP7 THIS MONTH.**

When he became European Union Research Commissioner in November, Janez Potočnik delighted research directorate staff in Brussels with his intelligent approach and his open, genial manner. He has even on occasion sung to his colleagues — though only behind closed doors, he insists — when the mood took.

But as an economist, he is on a steep learning curve in the research directorate, which he joined at a critical time. Already this month he must introduce to his political masters — the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers — the plans for the EU's seventh framework programme of research (FP7). Whether he will be relaxed enough to sing once tough political negotiations really get going remains to be seen.

EU framework programmes have become increasingly important for the European research community. But ever since their launch more than two decades ago, they too appear to have been on a steep learning curve. The form of each of the successive five-year programmes has changed dramatically as the beleaguered re-

search directorate tries to meet the ambitious, sometimes capricious, political demands of the parliament and council that have the final say on its shape. Each new programme has been hailed as just the right formula for European research — only to be almost completely overturned by its successor.

What do we expect from Potočnik? Materials scientists have been pleased with how FP6 in particular has allowed them to network and benefit from getting more efficient access to large infrastructures such as laser labs in different countries. But the research community wants more. More money, of course, but also a simple, unrestricted application procedure that is well peer-reviewed — and it wants continuity. Scientists have been serially disappointed in the past. True, funding levels have increased somewhat, but levels of bureaucracy have increased dramatically, making the paperwork a full-time job. Bottom-up research of the sort supported by national research agencies is still not part of the deal. The peer-review process has improved in FP6, but there has been very little continuity. What you learnt about how to successfully apply for funding in one programme has not been relevant to the next.

But if Potočnik has his way, FP7 may be different. The paperwork will not diminish, but for the first time the funding instruments will be broadly the same as its predecessor, though most probably the notoriously complicated Networks of Excellent will be merged with the more successful multi-million-euro Integrated Projects. A two-stage application procedure is likely to be introduced, so only those in with a serious chance of success will have to go through the tortuous, time-consuming process of application. Potočnik is also proposing the creation of a European Research Council (ERC) for basic research projects. And a doubling of the budget to help pay for it, as well as to cover costs of a new framework research line — space science — and increased cash for all of the other research priorities, among which materials and nanotechnologies are prominent.

How much of this will be realised? If the political wind continues to blow warm, then probably most. The European Parliament has already expressed its support for the general principles of FP7. And the Commission has in any case developed its ideas in discussion with representative of the member countries that make up the Council of Ministers. There is overwhelming support for the two radical items of change in FP7 — the budget doubling and the creation of an ERC — as well as for the idea of general continuity of the instruments.

But in practice, budget doubling may stumble at the highest political levels when EU member countries have to decide where the money will come from. A small overall increase in the entire Commission annual budget of 100 billion euros would make the battle for the research budget easy. But this may not happen, and so a more difficult turf battle within the Commission would ensue. Without a budget doubling the ERC would probably still be created, begin in more modest fashion.

Budget aside, the detailed shape of FP7 as proposed by Potočnik may also get a little battered in the turbulent seas of European politics, where local interests and political fashions can set up unpredictable eddies. But even if it does not emerge totally unscathed from the planned nine months of negotiations, the outcome is still likely to be an improvement. Assuming (perhaps rashly) no delays, materials scientists, who have been relatively well-served by the Commission compared with scientists from other disciplines, will be able to respond to first FP7 calls early next year — and Potočnik will be able to sing again with an easier mind.