

The miracle of Copenhagen

0 INTRODUCTION

Permanent Secretary, ERC Vice President, honored keynote speakers, honored ERC grantees, ladies and gentlemen.

This is one of more than 140 events across Europe and the world to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the ERC. And rightly so: the ERC is one of the most remarkable results of European integration during the past two decades. Scientists love the ERC. Research managers love the ERC. And, probably because of all this positive feelings, politicians love it, too.

Here is an attempt to explain all this love.

- The ERC provides great funding. Not only in terms of money, but, maybe even more importantly, in terms of symbolic value that goes along with it. An ERC grantee is recognized in Aarhus and Copenhagen as quickly as she is in Lisbon or Warsaw. Try the same with a grant from a national funding agency.
- ERC grants allow easy comparison. I have witnessed more than once casual talk between university presidents comparing how many ERC grants each institute hosts. The distribution of grants has become also an indicator for the performance of national research and innovation systems.ⁱ
- ERC funds thrilling ideas. Now that's a statement easy to make, but quite difficult to prove. But at least according to a recent study by the ERC, more than a fifth of all funded projects in the sample have led to a "scientific breakthrough" already, and another half led to a "major scientific advance".ⁱⁱ

The ERC was not born on a day. Actually, that it was born at all is sometimes called "a miracle". The person who first used this term is (allegedly) Fotis Kafatos, an eminent researcher in tackling the malaria epidemic, and also the first president of the ERC.

It is somewhat striking to hear scientists speak of a "miracle". After all, one would expect that scientists try to unveil the causes and mechanisms that, on the surface of things, look like a miracle. For me, this term of a "miracle" was a riddle, and one of the reasons why I decided to write a book on the ERC history.ⁱⁱⁱ

The miracle is how a crazy idea became reality. Note that the term "crazy idea" is also a quote. Tip of the hat: it's from the first Danish representative in the ERC Scientific Council, Jens Rostrup Nielsen, who cannot be with us today.

Today, I am speaking about a more specific miracle within this overall miracle of the ERC. As you may have guessed from the title of my presentation, that specific miracle is closely linked to Copenhagen. This specific miracle was an important step towards the creation of the ERC.

I TWO QUOTES

There are two quotes that I would like to present to you, from the year 2003. So we are now entering the time of ERC pre-history.

The first quote reads:

“The most likely founding fathers of the ERC are the national research councils”

It is from a press conference in Paris from 19 February 2003.^{iv} Peter Kind was then one of the highest ranking functionaries in the DG research of the European Commission.

The second one is stating about the ERC as:

“a realistic mechanism of funding basic research at the European level [with] funding [...] by the [European] Commission.”

It's from a report in “Nature” from 4 December 2003, it refers back to Achilleas Mitsos, then General Director of the DG.^v

These are not the most programmatic statements on the ERC, but what is important here is the change of direction. While in the first statement, the Commission was diplomatically saying, “go look somewhere else for support”, the second statement says: “we are embracing the idea of an ERC.”

In a nutshell, the two quotes highlight different moments of a momentous shift in the strategic reasoning of the European Commission towards the ERC idea. And this shift was essential for the overall miracle. And it would probably not have achieved without the miracle of Copenhagen.

II A BIT OF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

But before I tell you more about the miracle was, let's step back for a moment and reconsider where the idea of an ERC was at that time. Several years earlier, the European Union adopted two documents.

The first was very brief, and, actually, it was not even a formal legal document. But it was still one of the most influential policy decisions for the next decade or so. The so-called Lisbon strategy set the ambitious goal “to make Europe the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”.^{vi}

In the same context, but mostly unrelated to the Lisbon strategy, the European Commission, early in January 2000, released a Communication on the “European Research Area”. It entailed many pages, and it started with the frank statement that “in Europe today, the situation concerning research is worrying”.^{vii}

So on the one hand, there was high ambition towards a new facet of European integration. And on the other hand, there was acknowledgement that research in Europe – and research funding in particular – was not organized in the best way. It was in this political climate that the ERC campaign was taking off.

Scientists and scholars across Europe had long argued for an independent European Research Council, modelled after the NSF in the US. Now they felt that the time was ripe. Over a series of meetings, advocates of the ERC idea met and broadened the base of advocates across Europe. The scientific communities were so excited, they even established new fora for discussion, such as the European Life Sciences Forum (ELSF), and, later, the Initiative for Science in Europe under Mariano Gago.

The meetings also created enough noise so that the ERC idea made it into official EU calendar; most significantly, there was an official EU Presidency conference in Copenhagen. That conference took place in October 2002, and it posed a rhetorical question: “Do we need a European Research Council?”^{viii}

You will not be surprised by the answer: Oh yes! But by the time the Copenhagen conference was over, the ERC advocates faced a problem. Despite all sympathy, there was still no viable support from the political side. The only result of the Conference has been a line in the next meeting minutes of the EU science ministers, saying that member states are invited to “continu[e] discussions on the purpose and scope of a European Research Council and explor[e] options for its possible creation”.^{ix}

III THE MIRACLE OF COPENHAGEN

By late 2002, there was a danger that the ERC momentum would vanish. And this is where the miracle of Copenhagen took place. The conference had put the Danish in charge. The persons involved Mogens Flensted-Jensen, then Vice chairman of the Board of the Danish Research Councils, and his colleagues, such as Vibeke Hein Olsen, but also researchers like Julio Celis, a cancer researcher at the Danish Cancer Society, among others.^x They made a desperate attempt to create a vehicle that would allow them to extend their realm of activities.

In German, there is a saying: *Wenn du nicht mehr weiter weißt, gründe einen Arbeitskreis*. Roughly: When you're at loss, you are setting up a working group. And, actually, that's what they did. They set up the ERC Expert Group. It was formally incepted by the Danish minister, Helge Sander, who sent a letter literally days before the Danish EU Presidency ended, informing his colleagues in Europe that this group would take up the ministers' conclusions and continue to explore “possible options for creating an ERC”.^{xi}

Despite the haste of setting it up, the ERC Expert Group was a masterstroke. That was not because of its chair, Federico Mayor, who mostly served as a figurehead. It was because the others in the group were all deeply convinced ERC advocates. It was because, for the first time, this group had formal political backing and was expected to present real options.

It is notable that the group was not supported financially by any public office; apparently, politicians still did not really believe in this idea. Rather, funding for meetings of this group came from your Northern colleagues, where Dan Brändström, one of the most fervent and earliest advocates of the ERC unlocked money from the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (he was the CEO of that foundation at the time). That just tells you how precarious, how ad hoc, and with how limited resources, this campaign was run, and now led into its most crucial phase.

Maybe the group's most important feature was that its meetings were attended also by an observer from the European Commission. At that time, as we have seen, the European Commission leadership was in a process of rethinking its take on the ERC idea. There were three distinct promises for the Commission:

- That it would have a considerable reform impulse on the entire European Commission research funding regime
- That it would add academic research to the Commission's funding portfolio
- That it would allow the Commission to ask for more money in the upcoming budget negotiations.

The danger, for the Commission, was to expose its shift too early. The regular meetings of a group of ERC advocates who shared the same goal but were willing to compromise to achieve this goal was an ideal setting to discreetly establish and discuss the shift of the Commission. And so this is where a crucial consensus formed between advocates and Commission leadership. That consensus would not have been achieved in public conferences. And without that consensus, the ERC idea would have faced much more doubts from the political side; and the engagement of the Commission would have been met with much more skepticism from the scientific community.

IV CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

By the end of 2003, the ERC was still not reality, and it was even far from having unanimous consensus from all member states, an important prerequisite for transforming the crazy idea into a unique European funding instrument. So there were a few additional crucial steps towards the eventual establishment of the ERC. But that does not alter the impressive achievement of Mogens, Vibeke, Julio, and many others involved.

To sum up:

1. The ERC is a child of its time: of a distinct period in the European integration process. Back then, politicians were talking about a European constitution, and the Euro was freshly conceived and thought of as something great. Yet even though the climate back then may seem so receptive to the ERC idea from today's perspective, it is noteworthy that the ERC was highly unlikely. After all, most policy makers back then (as today) were interested in innovation for economic growth; the predominant perception was that Europe lacked the ability to transform its basic knowledge into products. So establishing the ERC was completely counterintuitive to the general mood.
2. This only underlines that the ERC, essentially, is result of a bold, brave, maybe even reckless campaign of a handful advocates. But the ERC would not have become reality without the self-interest of the European Commission leadership. I know that's hard to swallow for some ERC advocates, as it may be difficult for many scientists. After all, the Commission bureaucracy is not exactly a natural ally when "researcher-friendly" is one of your top priorities for funding.

Anyhow, the ERC has upended the way politicians perceived what research funding at European level should do. It added European-wide competition and academic research to a portfolio that was, up until then, about collaboration and, to use the preferred term of those days, “pre-competitive research”.

What lessons do we draw from the ERC history?

1. I think it is important to keep in mind that the European integration process offers avenues for bottom-up initiatives. It is not a place for politicians and bureaucrats alone. But, to be sure, such an initiative is a long-term project, and, at one point, you need someone from the political realm to stand on your side.
2. Miracles happen. But underneath them, there are causes and mechanisms. Moreover: as of lately, the European integration process has been beset by rather unpleasant events. Let’s not forget that the ERC is an instrument for scientists run by scientists. That’s ingrained in its history; but bureaucratic routinization and external effects may wreck lasting damage on this great instrument. I can only plead to you not to forget that the ERC, more than anything else, belongs to you.

ⁱ See, for example, Sjoerd Hardeman, Vincent Van Roy, and Daniel Vertesy, “An Analysis of National Research Systems (I): A Composite Indicator for Scientific and Technological Research Excellence,” Reference Report, JRC Scientific and Policy Report (Brussels: European Commission - Joint Research Centre Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen, November 2013), JCR Publication Repository, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2788/95887>.

ⁱⁱ “Qualitative Evaluation of Completed Projects Funded by the European Research Council” (Brussels: ERC, July 2016), https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document/file/Qualitative_Evaluation_of_completed_projects_funded_by_the_ERC.pdf.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas König, *The European Research Council* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017) The material of this speech is drawn from my research on this book.

^{iv} “Politicians, Scientists and Officials Begin to Give Shape to ERC,” Press Release, Cordis (Paris: European Commission, February 21, 2003), Cordis, http://cordis.europa.eu/news/rcn/19760_en.html.

^v “Science Needs the Commission, Sturm Und Drang and All,” *Nature* 426, no. 6966 (December 4, 2003): 481–481, doi:10.1038/426481a.

^{vi} “Lisbon Strategy,” Presidency Conclusions (Lisbon: European Council, March 23, 2000), http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm.

^{vii} European Commission, “Towards a European Research Area,” Pub. L. No. COM 6/2000, O.J. 38 (2000).

^{viii} Jørgen Søndergaard and Mogens Flensted-Jensen, “Towards a European Research Area. Do We Need a European Research Council?,” Summary Report (Copenhagen: Danish Research Councils, November 2002).

^{ix} 26 November 2002, “Draft Minutes of the 2467th Meeting of the Council of the European Union Competitiveness (Internal Market, Industry and Research),” ST 14815 2002 INIT § (2002).

^x A personal reflection of his engagement can be found in Mogens Flensted-Jensen, “Mathematics and Research Policy - A View Back on Activities, I Was Happy to Take Part in” (Step-down lecture, Copenhagen, May 3, 2013), MFJ, <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/51833007/Afskedslecture-mfj-final.pdf>; ; a similarly personal account of the overall process of establishing the ERC is to be found in Julio E. Celis and José Mariano Gago, “Shaping Science Policy in Europe,” *Molecular Oncology* 8, no. 3 (May 2014): 447–57, doi:10.1016/j.molonc.2014.03.013.

^{xi} The letter by Sander to his colleagues is reprinted in the official report by the ERC Expert Group; cf. Federico Mayor, “The European Research Council. A Cornerstone in the European Research Area,” Report from an expert group (Copenhagen: Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, December 2003), 17, MFJ, <http://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/content/ERCexpertgroupfinalreport.pdf>.