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Dutch ministers quietly confident about achieving Presidency priorities

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'The problem in Europe is that we have a structural crisis but no sense of urgency,' says Laurens-Jan Brinkhorst the Dutch Minister for Economic Affairs. The Dutch Presidency therefore aims to issue a wake up call to the continent, heralding a wave of changes.

Speaking about the Presidency's priorities in the research field, Mr Brinkhorst and Maria van der Hoeven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, told CORDIS News they were very optimistic about achieving their goals.

'The research priorities of the Presidency were set in December 2002 during a kick start meeting between the Dutch universities and Commissioner Busquin,' explained Ms van der Hoeven. 'They have not changed since. I see a good opportunity to do something about them during our presidency. I am confident we will achieve those goals.'

Mr Brinkhorst concurred, adding that both ministries had been preparing for the presidency for over a year. 'We want to set a standard. Our ambition is to set a sort of benchmark for other Dutch Presidencies. It requires a lot of work but it is worth it. We are doing it for the benefit of Europe.'

The research priorities for the sixth month Presidency are the promotion of fundamental research with the possible creation of a European Research Council (ERC), the improvement of the human capital base, the enhancement of European cooperation in the field of research infrastructures, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and European technology platforms, explained the ministers.

Speaking about the European Research Council, Ms van de Hoeven told CORDIS News that she had been amazed at the broad support given to the idea during the informal Competitiveness Council on 1 July. 'I am very happy with the fact that ministers felt the urge to give their ideas, their suggestions, about the conditions that have to be fulfilled concerning the legal framework, the issue of transparency and the notion of excellence as the basis for choosing and giving opportunities to the best researchers in Europe,' she said. 'We all agreed that the ERC would have to be a small council with as little bureaucracy and regulations as possible. Making it simple and transparent is vital.'

Fundamental research, insisted Ms van der Hoeven, is as necessary for the European research landscape as applied research, and the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) must ensure that both ends of the scale get the attention they need.

According to the Minister, industry and fundamental research need each other: 'Fundamental research is important in itself, but it's also important for industry and innovation. Therefore, it is not a question of choosing between applied or basic research. We need to finance both.'

Ms van der Hoeven applauded the fact that the ERC concept has received both broad political as well as scientific support. 'I am also very pleased with the remarks that Commissioner Busquin made on this issue. He is very eager to bring it forward, not only



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M van den Hoeven and L-J Brinkhorst

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on the agenda of the Competitiveness Council in November but even perhaps already for the September Competitiveness Council,' she added.

Turning her attention to the subject of ITER, Ms van der Hoeven told CORDIS News the subject had been broached after the end of the informal meeting. 'The situation is that we will proceed following the ordinary Community procedure. What happens after that will depend really on whether our American and Japanese friends are going to say something more than they have said until now.' All the ministers, she said, expressed a wish to put the matter on the agenda for the Council meeting of 24 September.

Regarding the mid-term evaluation of the Sixth Framework Programme's (FP6) new instruments by Ramon Marimon's high level group, presented by Dr Marimon to the Competitiveness Council on 3 July, Mr Brinkhorst explained that the report presented 12 recommendations for a more efficient framework programme. 'We are hoping to achieve at least six of those,' revealed Mr Brinkhorst. 'There is an interesting comparison to made with Eureka. It takes Eureka 50 per cent less time to do the subsidy evaluation. This should be our model.'

The two ministers appear committed to making the Dutch presidency synonymous with increased competitiveness and innovation for Europe. However, they both agree that if there is one potential stumbling block, it is the issue of a Community Patent.

'A Community Patent is a great need for Europe. If you really want to improve competitiveness and the interaction between public research, infrastructure and private enterprise, you have to solve the problem of Community Patent,' said Ms van der Hoeven.

'However,' added Mr Brinkhorst 'we have the problem not only of languages but also of producers of patents and the consumers of patents to contend with. We really must find a balance between the two.'

Because this issue has been around for so long, the Dutch Economics Minister will choose not to put it on the agenda of the Competitiveness Council unless he finds a solution. 'We agreed that I would have bilateral contacts with various Member States. We want success on the matter and not each time a repetition of failure. It is only if we get a green light, that we will put it on the agenda,' concluded Mr Brinkhorst.

For more information on the Dutch EU Presidency, please visit the following web addresses:

<http://www.cordis.lu/netherlands/home.html>

<http://www.eu2004.nl/>

<http://www.ircnederland.nl>

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