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Continuity a major feature of Potocnik's responses to Parliament questionnaire

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Janez Potocnik, the Commissioner designate for Science and Research under the new Barroso Commission, has responded to a questionnaire prepared by MEPs in order to provide an insight into his thinking on key issues in EU research.

The questionnaire addressed issues such as the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) and its budget, the international thermonuclear experimental reactor project (ITER), and the European Research Council (ERC). Mr Potocnik's answers suggest that there will be a high degree of continuity from one Commission to the next, if and when he assumes the Science and Research portfolio recently vacated by Philippe Busquin.

Asked whether he would support the current European position in the ongoing negotiations surrounding a site for ITER, Mr Potocnik said: 'I intend to firmly pursue the line taken by the Commission so far.' He argues that building ITER in Cadarache would be the best way of ensuring the project's success, and said that he would consider it a 'major defeat' if it proved impossible for all partners involved in ITER to agree on the site.

'Building ITER at Cadarache is not only very important for European research,' Mr Potocnik stressed. 'Cadarache is also the best site in international comparison based on objective criteria. For these two reasons, our first objective must be to ensure agreement on Cadarache.' If that fails, he suggests that the EU could consider building the reactor in Cadarache anyway, in cooperation with those partners who are willing to be involved, but described this course of action as 'the very last resort'.

In response to the question of whether he would support Parliament's proposal for a 30 billion euro budget for FP7, Mr Potocnik said that he fully supports the Commission's proposal to double the EU's research budget. This, he pointed out, would result in an overall amount even larger than that requested by MEPs, adding: 'I am determined to defend this proposal and am counting on Parliament's support in this respect.'

Doubling the Union's research budget is vital in order to help meet the Barcelona objective of increasing EU research spending to three per cent of GDP, believes Mr Potocnik, and will also help to create new jobs, leverage private research investments, and respond to the huge increase in complexity and cost of modern scientific investigation.

Asked whether he feels a major review of the financial rules is necessary for FP7, the Commissioner designate said that he considers it a priority to achieve a simpler, faster and more transparent implementation of the Framework Programme. 'In my mind, how we spend the money is at least as important as how much we spend,' he said. The Commission would also consider delegating some of the management responsibilities for the programme to participants or external organisations, revealed Mr Potocnik, but added that maintaining overall control is important to ensure that the Commission remains in touch with the reality of research, which is indispensable for shaping good research policies.



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Mr Potocnik promised that, depending on the outcome of consultations with users of the Framework Programmes and the EU institutions, including the Parliament, he would 'not shy away from proposing a major revision of the rules that govern the management of EU funds, if that is needed to reach our objectives.' He also welcomed the findings of the Marimon report on the new FP6 instruments, and pledged to make the instruments more flexible for small businesses and research groups, especially from the new Member States. He revealed that FP7 would seek to strike a balance between large and small scale projects, and said that consideration is being given to specific initiatives designed to support excellence in those regions of the EU where it has been insufficiently developed.

On the question of the best legal framework for a European Research Council, Mr Potocnik said that while there are several options, the Commission would not take a decision on which it favours until it has heard the opinion of the relevant users and institutions involved in the process, including the Parliament. Concerning the proposed European Security Research Programme, the Commissioner designate's opinions were clearer. He believes the programme should focus on border surveillance, protection and security of networked systems, the fight against terrorism, crisis management and the interoperability of integrated systems. It should have a budget in the region of one billion euro, he said.

Finally, and in a separate questionnaire, all Commissioners designate were asked what they would do to accelerate progress towards the Lisbon goals, and what they believe are the main priorities. Mr Potocnik replied by stating that the first step towards revitalising the process should be a return to the 'spirit' of Lisbon, by focusing on development and competitiveness. The main priorities, in his opinion, should be meeting the three per cent Barcelona target, making further strides towards a true European Research Area, and getting the general framework conditions right, for example by introducing scientific career paths, improved mobility, and a European patent.

Mr Potocnik's responses to the Parliament questionnaire should allow MEPs to assess his broad policy approach, and provide a basis for his oral hearing, which will take place in Brussels on 1 October.

For further information, please consult the following web address:

http://www.europarl.eu.int/hearings/commission/2004_comm/default_en.htm

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