

Competing in Science while working in the Eastern part of Europe

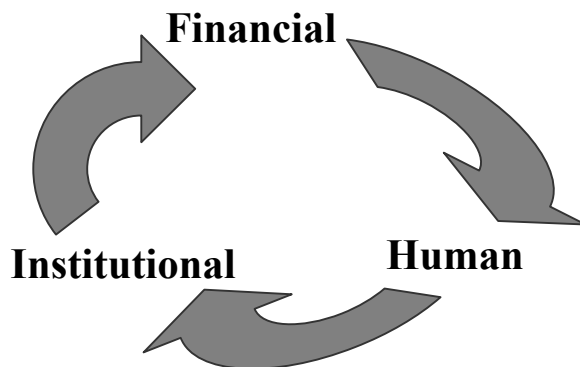
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We are living in a “small world”, i.e., scientists share the same scientific as well bureaucratic problems all over the world. There are several general Land Marks that govern scientific activity, the same everywhere across Europe, Japan, US,..:

- I. There is a GLOBAL not Local Science;
- II. SAME Problems Require SAME Resources;
- III. RTD is a NON PROFIT enterprise, i.e., PAYMENT MATCH EXPENSES!
- IV. It is a high risk activity ...

We can't just talk about science without talking about Resources:

Human <-> Infrastructure <-> FINANCIAL in an intermixing power play!



However, besides similarities there are several particular features characteristic for countries from Eastern Europe, derived not only from a tougher economic environment but from specific mentality and culture, as well.

I am presenting the situation faced by the International Centre of Biodynamics, but the example, especially concerning “the battlefield” is far from being singular.

In our case, as the one shared by most Research Institutes (not affiliated to Universities) Permanent Position does not mean a Regular (guaranteed) Income! We rely 100% on Project Competition, NO Institutional funding,...no GIFT!

Therefore, we had to be pretty active to submit and get financed RTD projects to National and International Programs with success in FP5, COBASE of the National Research Council, US and projects financed in the frame of the bilateral agreement between Romania-Flanders and Romania and Germany to enumerate some of the recent or current projects.

With very few exceptions (e.g., Framework Programs of the European Commission) International Programs do not cover research activity (that would also comprise salaries) that takes place in Romania. The Framework Programs do finance RTD activities in our home institutes, however this source could not cover more than ~ 50% of total expenses.

Therefore, National Programs & (local) Industry grants are to represent the sources to fill the gaps:

- to balance the expenses in respect with international grants;
- to provide means for “preliminary” research studies, including BASIC RESEARCH!

Last but NOT least,

- to support (new) bridges between research and industry!

Clearly, the framework of both international and national programs is similar, at least across Europe.

The current economic recession triggered a Marked Decrease of the actual budgets of National Programs in Eastern and Western Europe, as well. Therefore, the competition for EU programs (FP6) became a matter of “survival“, tougher than ever, regardless the location of the actors!

One, should have in mind that preparation of any proposal represents an INVESTMENT that requires RESOURCES, that should be granted by National / Local Programs.

To access EU Programs one has to be not only at “Crossroads“ but the competence of the respective group has to play a solid, not formal role, within the Consortia that are developing Proposals (IP, STREP, NOE,..). The location issue for institutions from the Candidate Countries in Central or Eastern Europe is no longer an asset.

Another prerequisite to be accepted in the team preparing a proposal is the VISIBILITY of the group! Definitely, both Visibility and Competence are developing in conjunction with networking, i.e., collaboration at local, regional and European/International scale.

Nothing can be achieved without skilled people. Development of Human Resources in Conjunction with Mobility of either Junior or Mature researchers has to be considered!

At ICB great efforts are devoted to this issue: an International Post Graduate Program in Biodynamics has started in 2003, organised together with the University of Bucharest, and UNESCO Centre for Membrane Science and Technology, Sydney, Australia. This initiative is meant both for training and building up new collaborative bridges at regional and international scale. Mobility related to advanced training (under co-tutelage) and/or joint RTD projects seem the “rescue boat” facing the Stream of Brain Drain.

ICB aims at the development of a regional collaborative network, initiated by the former Centre of Biodynamics, that gathers representatives from Romania and from 15 European Countries

This network pursues the following main objectives:

- to contribute to the stabilization of the RTD potential in the region through a continuous stream of joint projects offering to young researches and post graduate students a suitable working place after accomplishment of different training stages;
- to act as a powerful array of flexible, highly competent, small size research groups;
- to become rapidly compatible with International Programs dedicated to the development of Central and Eastern European Region, as well as with the Regional Market; in respect with an appropriate program, a specific chain of partners within the network could be readily formed;
- to effectively use the existing resources without major investments to equip a large number of laboratories belonging to a single, huge institute; the equipment for small size research units might be, at least partially covered from national, local sources;
- to mutually reinforce Research Institutes and Universities particularly from Central and Eastern Europe, their research and training capacities, by sharing resources, and by undertaking joint activities based on equal partnership.

Survival and, nevertheless, Development implies a new condition not only for managers of Research Units but for research staff as well: The entire team should learn to conduct research but also to manage proposals from the earliest step to the, hopefully, successful one of negotiation.

I still believe that managing a research institution should not necessarily mean disappearance of the scientist inside us.

Unfortunately, the increase of Romanian contribution to FP6 (~75 Million Euro/year which is NOT related to the sum received by Romanian participants, expected to reach a level of ~ 10% from this amount!) led to a

marked decrease of the Budget of National Programs and an erratic calendar of their calls for proposal.

Transparent, simple rules to support RTD activity through National Programs, including temporarily institutional funding, based merely on scientific quality have to be applied. Stabilisation of RTD potential is strongly dependent on such achievement.

The problems, including the delicate economic environment seem to be pretty similar in Eastern Europe, therefore stronger regional cooperative links could & should contribute to solving common problems.

Instead of conclusion, in a both somber and optimistic tone, I would like to stress that this Workshop may not solve the problems but, hopefully, will trigger a chain of events that will eventually provide practical solutions leading to increasing motivation of young / mature researchers to pursue a scientific career, most important, in connection with their home country.