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# Q&A: 'Our society desperately needs objective, truth-based knowledge'

**Basic, or 'frontier', research that expands the boundaries of our knowledge can help address some of the most important challenges of our time – and it's important that more people become aware of this, according to Prof. Maria Leptin who has today been appointed president of the EU's frontier research funding body, the European Research Council (ERC).**

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Prof. Leptin, a developmental biologist and immunologist, who is currently director of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO), will take up her role on 1 October 2021, following the start of Europe's new research and innovation funding programme, Horizon Europe. Here, in a written interview, she talks about her vision for frontier research and what she intends to bring to the new job.

**What is your vision for the future of the ERC and do how you intend to achieve that vision?**

The ERC needs stability, but at the same time cannot afford to stand still. Stability means not only financial stability, but also unwavering commitment to the founding principles of excellence and curiosity-driven,

frontier research across the whole range of knowledge. I want to honour these principles in an inclusive way. To do so, we must engage less-represented countries or communities and find ways of helping them get better access to ERC grants.

At the same time, we need flexibility. In my view, any organisation that wishes to represent excellence must be permanently self-critical and must continuously evolve. In its brief period of existence, the ERC has established widely admired mechanisms for allocating funds and selecting grantees, following an 'investigator driven' and bottom-up approach that rewards individual excellence and ideas venturing into new promising areas of research. In less than 15 years, the ERC has funded over 10,000 of the world's best researchers. We will require flexibility to implement new ideas and build on these impressive results.

**At the ERC's recent event to celebrate its 10,000th grantee, President von der Leyen said: 'We need the help of science to address the great challenges of our times, from climate change to mastering the digital age, to fighting pandemics.'Are people aware of the role of frontier research in addressing these challenges?**

To ensure the societal and political support needed to achieve the ERC's ambitious goals, much broader awareness must exist of the value and importance of frontier research. Frontier research stands at the basis of the most important scientific discoveries of our times that provide citizens, for instance, with food, mobility and health. This goes from the mRNA technology for COVID-19 vaccines, to digital technologies that connect citizens and generate new jobs and that reduce our carbon footprint. I want to develop creative ways to further enhance the ERC's communication so that everyone is aware of the role of frontier research in addressing global challenges.

**What makes you the right person for the job?**

At EMBO, I represented the community of researchers in the life sciences in Europe. My role was to implement and develop the 'General Programme' set by our funders, the 30 EMBC Member States. I believe I have established very good communication channels with both the community of researchers and our funders. My experience in working for the community on the one hand, and in finding consensus solutions with the relevant supervisory bodies on the other, should serve me well for the similar tasks the ERC President faces.

Moreover, I have considerable experience with the internal organisation and operation of the ERC, not only regarding the governance of the organisation but also towards the staff of the Executive Agency, and the Scientific Council on whose advice the ERC President can rely. I have served the ERC as chair of evaluation panels for ERC Advanced and Synergy Grants, and during that time I have learned to admire the operational side of the ERC, the work of the superb staff and the many experts that contribute to the excellent reputation of the ERC.

Finally, I am a researcher at heart, and since the ERC is designed by researchers for researchers, my familiarity with the workings and ways of the research community will allow me to communicate efficiently with and across the research community.

**The ERC has just been through a period of turbulence following the resignation of Professor Ferrari one year ago. How will you steady the ship in the first months in the job?**

I am following in the footsteps of Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, who has done a fantastic job in stabilising the governance of the ERC after the sudden resignation of the previous ERC President. Moreover, Jean-Pierre ensured the successful transition from the Horizon 2020 to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme (the EU's 2021-2027 research funding programme) and secured a record budget (of €16 billion) that will allow the ERC to finance investigator-driven frontier research across all fields over the next seven years. I will start my first term with implementing the work programmes that Jean-Pierre prepared, and build bridges between the ERC's outputs and the political priorities of the European Commission, Council and Parliament.

I want to contribute to strengthening and shaping the European research system, in particular through high-quality peer review and the establishment of international benchmarks of success.

Our society desperately needs objective, truth-based knowledge, not only in the natural sciences but rather in all the other domains of our intellectual and cultural inheritance. The ERC is increasingly becoming an essential guardian of research in the humanities, and to a degree also in the social sciences, as universities struggle to maintain teaching and research in these areas from local funding sources. I believe that it is urgent and important for the ERC to sustain and enhance this role.

**UK researchers and universities have traditionally been among the most active and successful with ERC grants. How will this change post-BREXIT?**

Cooperation is the essential ingredient for the development of skills and exchange of knowledge needed to advance discovery. We must protect international mobility and collaboration between EU and UK academics to the greatest extent possible. Access to European funding and the freedom to move without bureaucratic barriers in both directions are vital to making this a reality. I am naturally optimistic and therefore hopeful that the association agreement with the UK as well with the other associated countries will come into force when the first grant agreements are ready to be signed.

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