European research

Commission's new broom

Brussels

KARL-Heinz Narjes, the ex-U-boat officer who is now vice-president of the European Commission and responsible for industry, information technology and science, believes that the Commission's research policy is under test.

"If we fail this test, we will have a major political setback" said Narjes last week, sitting at pentagonal table at which commissioners representing the ten nations of the European Community regularly attempt to plan Europe's future.

A lawyer, and one of the founding fathers of the European Community, Narjes also firmly backs Esprit, the ambitious European programme of research in information technology started by his predecessor, Belgian Viscount Etienne Davignon. At the immense cost (by Commission research standards) of some £80 million a year, exceeding Europe's nuclear fusion research effort for example, Esprit attempts to knock European computer and electronics companies into some kind of coherent research policy and common standards.

Some major companies, such as Olivetti of Italy, have effectively spurned Esprit and believe they can dominate Europe with the help of US allies such as AT&T, while others continue to believe the programme can help (by forcing communication and joint standards). And for Narjes, "certainly Esprit is one of the tests". Moreover, "it is going very well", he claims. "Five hundred researchers are involved this year and there should be 2,000 next, and the first patent has already been applied for."

The setback in December when the European Parliament rejected the Commission's budget for 1985 will not much affect Esprit, the Commission claims, because the bulk of last year's money can be carried forward to 1985. On the other side of this coin, however, it seems the programme has been very slow to get moving.

Nevertheless, the Commission's political masters, the European Council of Ministers, had given a vote of confidence in Commission research programmes on 19 December with agreement in principle to support a substantial expansion of eight major programmes. Biotechnology, for example, will grow from its current budget of £6 million to £30 million a year. The Commission asked council for £2,000 million for 1984-87 and received a promised £1,400 million, still a substantial increase on current spending. "There's relief at being on the move again", said deputy research director-general David Hywell Davies last week, The test, said Narjes, is "whether we can manage the sums allocated".

But Narjes is already looking beyond this "first phase of solidarity" of European research towards the "horizontal problems". These are the mobility of scientists and "the need to expose them to challenges".

Narjes sees no easy solutions. There are mundane obstacles such as national insurance, pensions, work for a spouse, differing qualification and education systems, security. Language itself is an "underestimated" problem, says Narjes. And it is politically difficult to argue that scientists should be treated as a special case, although the current political interest in using science to solve the economic crisis has given scientists an opportunity that they should seize. "We must make a major, long-term effort" for mobility, says Narjes. Does he have any real hope of success? "We have experience of hard negotiations. We can be 10 per cent tougher than the toughest member state."

Narjes also emphasized:

- The poor access of some non-English-speaking scientists to major US research journals.
- BRITE, a Commission programme to inject new technologies and science into small and medium-scale industries, which will be "a key programme if it succeeds".
- Agriculture, which takes 70 per cent of the Commission's budget "despite serious reforms", where the new biotechnology programme may help to give farmers new economic non-food products.
- The "budget needle", the eye of the needle through which Commission research projects must pass (the total budget still lies around 2-3 per cent of national research programmes). Here "we are seeking other sources" in the Commission, Narjes hinted.
- Big European research machines, such as the politically troubled European Synchrotron Radiation Source, for which the Commission might consider buying a "users' ticket" to distribute through Commission programmes.
- Coordination of Commission research programmes such as BRITE with space station research.
- Intra-Community communications, in science as in other fields, which form "one of the major European problems".

Robert Walgate

European cooperation in the air

BRITE, the European Commission's programme of Basic Research in Industrial Technologies for Europe, may have been oversold by its enthusiastic directors — but it has stolen a march on some other Commission programmes.

According to Dutchman Hendrick Tent, programme head, there has been "overwhelming reaction" to BRITE's invitation to industry and research bodies to participate in projects that will improve production techniques and provide the research base for new product lines in the next 5-10 years.

BRITE has been promised £70 million over four years, to be doubled by industrial contributions, but, like all the new Community research programmes, it still awaits final official approval from the council of ministers of the member states of the Community. This is expected any day now. But BRITE did not delay, having already called for "expressions of interest" to speed up the often bureaucratic process of calling for tenders and choosing and defining final projects. The BRITE team already has a good idea of what projects will be submitted, and has helped companies and researchers to prepare appropriate ideas and consortia, which contain partners from two or more member states and at least one industry. The programme has so far identified a need for projects in reliability and wear, laser technology, joining techniques, testing procedures, computer-aided design, electrochemistry, catalysis and particle technology.

Of the 3,037 expressions of interest received by 31 December, more than half were from industry, and more than a quarter from applied research organizations such as TNO from the Netherlands and the German Fraunhofer Gesellschaft. Fewer than a quarter came from academic institutions, although the proportion was higher in Britain. Britain made the most replies: around 800, compared with 700 from Germany, 500 from France, 400 from Italy, and 100 from Ireland. Some 21 applications came from the Community's newest member, Greece.

- **The European Commission's "stimulation" programme aimed at getting European academic laboratories together rejected 90 per cent of the 700 applicants for its first experimental phase. And it may have to do the same in 1985, the first year of full operations even though its support should increase fivefold (according to the 19 December council of ministers decision).**

So said one of the stimulation programme administrators in Brussels last week, explaining that the demand for European integration at academic level — and the concomitant funds — is enormous.

The stimulation programme should now get at least £33 million for 1985-89 (compared with just £4 million for 1983-84), of which £20 million is to be spent in the first two years, when ministers have encouraged the Commission to reapply for an increase. Sixty per cent of the cash will be spent on the twinning of laboratories, but some cash will also be put aside to run a European version of the "Gordon conference", where a select group of scientists can brainstorm in privacy.

Robert Walgate