

Science as a Pioneer

DFG Conference on European Perspectives on German-Russian Research Cooperation

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In the end the objective was clear: a European Research Area in which the exchange of scientists and scholars, research findings and technology would be as natural as the free movement of goods, people, services and capital. A vision for the year 2020.

Although there is still a long way to go in achieving this objective, a very promising start has been made in many areas. This was apparent at the international conference "European Perspectives for Scientific Cooperation between Germany and Russia," which took place in Moscow last week.

The conference was organised by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation), with the support of the European Commission's Delegation to Russia, and was attended by approximately 200 participants, primarily from Germany and Russia.

"Russia's integration into the European Research Area is one of the main objectives of the DFG's activities in Russia," emphasised the President of the DFG, Professor Matthias Kleiner, in his welcoming speech. The great potential for German-Russian cooperation in science that has developed over the course of many years can and must be utilised for the whole of Europe, he added. Science has a pioneering role in this respect. The DFG's Russia Office, which was opened in 2003, shows that from the DFG's point of view Russia plays a key role amongst its strategic partnerships.

The high level of German-Russian research collaboration that already exists was demonstrated by presentations from a variety of areas of science. For example, the University of Stuttgart has been cooperating with the Khristianovich Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics in Novosibirsk since the early 1990s, with aerospace engineers working on the development of hypersonic transport systems.

In archaeology there are very close scientific links between the two countries. For over 15 years German and Russian archaeologists have been working together on a number of excavations, explained Professor Hermann Parzinger, the President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin. The scientific cooperation is so effective and strong that German-Russian teams of archaeologists have even been collaborating on digs in other countries such as Yemen and Mongolia. The cooperation among students from the two countries, who often share accommodation at the base camp during the excavations, is a basis for trust and life-long scientific relationships and enrichment for both sides that should not be underestimated, Parzinger added.

In quantum physics scientists from the Institute for Solid State and Materials Research in Dresden are collaborating with the Moscow State University. This cooperation is to be extended significantly to include other institutes in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, as well as a number of other Russian research institutes.

Finally, in life sciences, an International Research Training Group, including doctoral researchers from the universities of Gießen and Marburg as well as the Lomonosov University in Moscow, has been studying enzymes since 2006. With a Marie Curie research training network funded under the 6th Framework Programme, the Research Training Group already has access to more European funding and locations.

How can the number of successful cooperation projects be increased and made more prominent at a European level? This question, which is asked by the Russians in particular, was evident throughout the entire conference. Professor Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, Secretary General of the European Research Council (ERC) and former President of the DFG, also offered an answer, presenting the funding opportunities offered by the ERC. Programmes are available to outstanding scientists and researchers from any country in the world, provided that they do at least 50 percent of their work in a European country.

Associated team members in so called third countries such as Russia can already be funded for work done there. Since the possibility of including Russia as an associate in the 7th Framework Programme is still under discussion at the political level, all of the speakers at the conference encouraged the researchers to continue and expand their cooperation, under the radar screen of politics, to attract joint European funding.

The new opportunities and possibilities certainly had the intended effect. Although the very low level of investment in research and technology by the Russian government, at just 0.8% of the GDP, was bemoaned at the round table discussion with high-ranking representatives from the Russian Academy of Sciences and vice-chancellors from Russian universities, there were also voices such as that of Professor Mikhail Ugryumov, an advisor to the Executive Committee of the Academy of Sciences, who highlighted the academy's willingness to cooperate with the ERC. He announced that the academy plans to set up a national contact point for the ERC. Konstantin Skryabin, Director of the Centre for Bioengineering at the Russian Academy of Sciences, called for the promotion of young, talented scientists and researchers and the establishment of centres of excellence. Smaller numbers and better funding opportunities as well as uncompromising support for the very best students and researchers are the decisive factors for ensuring the success of the Russian science system too.

The great interest in individual consultations on national and European funding opportunities and the success that has been seen to date already indicate that the vision of a free European research area by 2020 may not be so distant after all.

Further Information

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