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Nuclear Energy for a New Europe 2005

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon, not only because this is such an important international conference on nuclear energy, but also because it takes place in such beautiful surroundings.

In this short opening address I would like to speak about some of the challenges that I believe the European Union is facing today. I would also like to say a few words about its activities, especially about those I am responsible for.

EU today - budget discussions and the role of research

Following the no-vote in two referendums on the constitution and the failure of Member States to reach an agreement on the EU budget in June, I am not the only one to believe we are going through a very delicate period for the EU.

We can learn a lot from the negative referendums. Most importantly, we have to make a clear distinction between facts and perception. Let me give you just one example: Enlargement. Fact is that enlargement is a big success. It makes Europe stronger, internally and externally. And yet, perception in parts of Europe is that we are somehow going too far too soon. I would like to stress that the European Union would be dealing with the same problems today with or without enlargement. Therefore, before reaching any conclusions and rashly changing policy, let's have a very detailed analysis of the facts. It might well be that we have to work also on the perception, not just the policy.

Citizens were split on the constitution, but not on the analysis of Europe's main challenge. Many, in particular among the young, do not see the European Union as the best guarantee for their economic and social future while others believe exactly the opposite: They see the Union as the best protection against the challenges of globalisation. So the reason for the concern is the same, only the answer is different. Personally, I am deeply convinced that we have already formulated the right answer to this challenge – the knowledge based economy. This answer happens to be the priority of the Commission to which I belong: Building on what Europe can do best, providing excellent education, allowing excellent research, making room for creativity and innovation. That is what our "Lisbon" strategy is all about. And probably the reality is that even here we are going too slowly and not far enough.

And the lessons from the negotiations on the future European Budget:

There is clearly a gap between analysis and capacity to act. There is a broad consensus that knowledge is the key to Europe's competitiveness. Research Ministers from virtually all 25 Member States agree that the Commission's proposal for the next budget has rightly and properly linked competitiveness to growth and jobs. We agree that not acting now will make it more difficult and expensive to act later. And yet, signs are that the future EU research budget could remain close to that in the last compromise proposal in June, i.e. similar to what we have now. Yes, I'm worried that this compromise proposal may become reality, but even more than that, I'm worried about the "state of mind" in the Union. It is hard to believe that member states would compensate a decrease in the proposed European research budget by increasing research effort at national level. And even if they did so, this would not lead to a more coordinated, unified approach and the desired creation of the European research area.

This, without any doubt, is what is needed. Only together, by joining forces, can Europe cope with the challenges of a rapidly changing world. And knowledge is an ideal candidate for applying this unified approach.

I'm afraid that we cannot afford the luxury of "wait and see". Let me share with you the latest figures on science, technology and innovation: There is currently a stagnation of R&D investment in the EU. We will be at 2.2% of GDP in 2010, if trends do not change. At the same time, research intensity in China is currently growing at 10 % or more per year. If this trend continues, China will, in 2010, devote at least the same share of its wealth to R&D as the EU-25. In other words: China is catching up with Europe, rather than Europe catching up with the US and Japan. Business-funding of R&D has been decreasing since the year 2000. In 2002 it only stood at 55.9% of domestic R&D investment, compared to 63% in the US and 74% in Japan.

I therefore believe that it is time to make some courageous moves forward, including the one in the Commission's proposal for the EU budget, to turn the crisis into a real opportunity. We have to provide more attractive conditions for companies to work, invest, research and innovate in Europe. I sincerely hope that the Member States will reach an appropriate conclusion to their negotiations on the future EU budget in good time, and that we can avoid any interruption in support for the various important European endeavours, including research

Energy

Allow me now to turn to an issue, which probably lies closer to your everyday concerns. Energy. I believe I do not need to convince anybody that the issues confronting Europe and the world in the area of energy supply are serious and affect us all. At this very moment we are once again witnessing the price of oil going sky-high. How we deal with these energy challenges will affect the future well-being of our citizens, the competitiveness of our industry, and the state of our environment. Our society runs on energy, we are addicted to it. The ability to provide a secure, non-polluting, safe and affordable supply is one of the principal challenges facing governments, policy makers, industry and the research community alike.

I do not believe we can pin all our hopes on one single solution. It is our responsibility to keep options open, for ourselves and for our children and grandchildren. We should strive to have a sustainable energy mix. In order to achieve this, we need a comprehensive research effort looking at a broad range of energy technologies; from renewables, through clean coal, to nuclear fission and fusion.

Many questions are currently being asked in all these areas and society as a whole is not yet in a position to provide adequate responses. A well-focussed and effective Community research programme is helping to deliver these urgently needed answers.

Against this background, what is the role of nuclear power and what is the role of nuclear research, in particular research funded by the European Union?

Nuclear power provides approximately one-third of Europe's electricity and is by far the most significant source of base-load and carbon-free generation available today. It makes a major contribution to limiting our greenhouse gas emissions and enhances both our independence and security of supply.

However, it is also an energy source that provokes significant public and political controversy despite the high levels of nuclear safety within the European Union, both in the operation of nuclear plants and in the management of radioactive waste.

Research under the Euratom Treaty has been part of the Union's research priorities since the first Framework Programme. The latest EURATOM programme, the sixth in the series, is providing more than 1.3 billion euro of Community funding for research into fusion energy, nuclear fission and radiation protection.

The majority of this money is allocated to fusion research, but some 200 million euro over five years are being spent on "shared-cost" actions in the field of fission and radiation protection. The shared-cost nature of this research means that up to half a billion euro are being channelled into cutting-edge research in a number of crucial areas such as management of high-level radioactive waste, aspects of radiation protection such as the risk of low doses, and other activities covering reactor technology and education and training.

These are all areas of concern for many Member States and are of major political importance to the European Union as a whole. It therefore makes sense for Europe to collaborate as much as possible in order to deal with them. The EURATOM programme is fostering the necessary degree of cooperation within the nuclear research community, thereby ensuring greater effectiveness of the overall research effort and the development of a consensual European view on key issues. The European Union's overriding principle in this regard is that of maintaining high levels of nuclear safety across the region, and Community research is a pivotal element of this policy.

Within the nuclear sector, cooperation has always been an integral part of the EURATOM research effort and there are already clear signs of the added effectiveness of the new funding instruments. The Commission is keen to see that current trends continue in the future, for example by setting up so-called technology platforms in one or two key areas. This policy has proved very successful in other domains of research.

By bringing together the key research stakeholders and achieving the necessary focus and consensus, Europe can more effectively push forward towards shared objectives.

The Commission is aware of the challenges that lie ahead in the fission sector. We must continue the momentum towards implementation of geological disposal. We must perfect our knowledge of innovative reactor concepts. We must strive to maintain high levels of nuclear safety. We must ensure that competences and know-how are retained in a sector that has become less glamorous in recent years.

We must also ensure the long-term competitiveness of Europe's nuclear sector in the face of increasingly stiff competition from abroad.

In fusion energy research the technical difficulties and the projected timescales are even greater than for fission, but so perhaps are the potential benefits for mankind as whole. When talking about fusion energy research I must of course mention ITER. It is a visionary project. If successful, it will be for the benefit of the entire world, a world increasingly dependent on energy. Just recently we have agreed with our international partners that ITER will be built in Europe, and there are number of good reasons for this decision. Trust me when I tell you that negotiations were not easy. I doubt that even the most powerful and influential country would alone have been able to convince the other international partners to allow it to host the ITER project. However, together we got the required agreement, not just for the benefit of one Member State, but for Europe as a whole.

And with this we can start an international cooperation of unprecedented nature. Attracting the best minds to Europe, keeping them there, creating new jobs and important new industrial opportunities, providing an example for the future of how we can cooperate effectively at the international level.

But all these challenges I've mentioned need proper funding, and I believe that this requirement is properly reflected in the Commission's current proposal for the 7th EURATOM framework programme.

I cannot end this short address without mentioning in particular the progress in the field of radioactive waste management. As part of the sixth Euratom Framework Programme, the Commission has launched a group of major projects integrating all necessary research in the key topics of deep geological disposal and waste minimisation through "partitioning and transmutation". With the help of independent external experts, the first round of annual reviews has recently been completed and there is every sign that these projects will fulfil the ambitious objectives set out in the original proposals. This will have a profound effect on the sector as a whole.

The EURATOM programme has been dealing not only with the "hard" technical questions but also with "softer" ones of public acceptance, local democracy, and more participatory approaches to decision making. Member States now realise just how important these issues can be in their national waste management strategies, especially in the selection of potential disposal sites.

Recent progress in Finland and Sweden towards geological disposal of spent nuclear fuel shows the success of an approach which is more holistic and less "technocentric". Similarly, a number of Member States also face difficulties implementing disposal of low-hazard radioactive waste, and here too important progress is being made, notably in Belgium, Hungary and, I'm delighted to say, Slovenia.

Recent Eurobarometer public opinion surveys conducted by the European Commission show that a clear majority of European citizens are prepared to support nuclear power if they believe the waste is being managed safely. However, the same surveys also show that people are ill-informed and have little trust in the nuclear industry. Crucially, people are less concerned by nuclear waste - and more ready to accept the pros and cons of nuclear power - in those countries where the industry is perceived as more open and the decision-making procedure more transparent. These factors have undoubtedly contributed to the success in confronting the waste issue in countries like Finland and Sweden.

Ultimately, the decision whether or not to use nuclear power - just like any other energy source - is a political and societal one taken at the national level. However, this should be a decision based on knowledge, not one taken in ignorance. Research can and must supply this knowledge.

I wish you all a successful and stimulating conference.

Thank you.

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