

Star academy

Persuading the bright stars of today to remain in Europe is key to leading the world of research, Jorgo Chatzimarkakis tells Matt Williams



Jorgo Chatzimarkakis's interest in research goes back to when he was working for the German government as a science policy officer at the Bundestag, and then later on as the managing director of a technological consultancy. His interest was sparked by being part of the research world, a world of competitiveness, high-tech science and problems with competition law, along with the challenge of China and Asia, which he says was absolutely fascinating. "Being involved in this industry, advising companies about what they go do within Europe in order to be more competitive, is really what inspired me to become involved in this field."

Chatzimarkakis is currently a member of the committee on Industry, Research and Energy, as well as a substitute member of the agriculture committee. Part of his work, he says, has involved proposing projects as part of an ongoing process of 'Lisbonising' the budget.

"This idea of 'Lisbonising' the budget means, sticking with the same proportion of the budget for agriculture but instead of using this money to subsidise farmers, using the funds to improve the environment of rural areas and to make them more competitive, more technology-driven, rather than just giving these areas money simply to survive," explains Chatzimarkakis. "Using the money in a different way would transform the whole environment of rural areas in Europe."

Chatzimarkakis is optimistic about other ambitious research ideas circulating around the parliament, including the European Institute of Technology (EIT). The exact location of Europe's new technology institute remains to be decided. However Chatzimarkakis says that an EIT based in Strasbourg has a lot of potential. →



“Had we proposed Strasbourg as the EIT at the time when the idea was going through parliament, it would have likely had a negative effect on the whole proposal. Now that the EIT proposal will be implemented, we have to decide within 24 months where the seat will be. This is why we waited and remained calm about making the case for Strasbourg. I also waited until France had a new government, because Chirac would have been hopeless if he had been presented this idea but Sarkozy is more open-minded. The most important thing, however, is to turn

Strasbourg into ‘Science-bourg’, to make it not only the seat of the EIT, but also of the European Research Council (ERC). There is also at the moment an idea of a university of Europe, which is a private initiative but which could become European. Strasbourg has the potential to attract researchers from all parts of the world to come to Europe. It is important to remember, however, that EIT is simply a framework; now we need to provide the content.”

The key challenge, for Chatzimarkakis, is to foster brilliant research within Europe and to keep it there. “We have wonderful universities, it’s true, but we have lost this aura, which now exists in MIT and the US, and increasingly in Asia. Recapturing this aura is something we are working on. We need to ask ourselves, where do we Europeans want to go with our research? We’re not doing badly in research, in fact we’re doing very well. Maybe we don’t invest as much money as others do, but the output of ideas is very high. What we need is to bring these researchers back to Europe and to implement the ideas here.”

Chatzimarkakis also has his own personal aspirations for the future of research in the EU. “I have a vision of turning Europe into the leading ‘biozone’ of the world. A zone where life is respected more than anywhere else in the world. We have excellent preconditions to achieve this, because we have a high standard of democracy here. We have the best transparency in the world. Everybody can come to our committees. We also have the highest standard of the rule of law and respect of human rights.

Guantanamo bay, for example, shows us that in other parts of the world, human rights are not respected as much as they are here. We have very high environmental standards. These features mean that we are perfectly set up to aim for this vision. Admittedly, maintaining these standards means that the decision-making processes are slower, and so we lose competitiveness, but this will change as the things that are required for sustaining life become increasingly important. For this, of course, we will need high standards of research, and learn how to combine our research efforts with this vision of a Europe with the highest respect for life.” ★