EASTERN EUROPEAN SCIENCE

# Program for Elites Draws Praise, Fire

**DRESDEN**—The European Commission (EC) has launched a new program to bring western European scientists to elite research institutions in central and eastern Europe. But the German administrator who was instrumental in persuading the EC to consider such a program now contends that the money fails to address the real needs of such institutions, which are hungry for first-rate labs and equipment.

Four years ago Wolf Lepenies, rector of the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin, approached the EC on behalf of the Collegium Budapest, a multidisciplinary institute in Hungary. His modest plea for funds to host Western scholars for extended visits and put on international conferences eventually blossomed into a program unveiled here last week to support 34 top research centers in 11 nations that are candidates to join the European Union, from the Czech Republic to Lithuania. Each center, selected from 185 applicants, will get between $90,000 and $900,000 over 3 years to fund academic exchanges.

By bolstering a handful of scientific bastions that have earned international reputations, the new "Centers of Excellence" program offers an oasis of stability for institutes that can't rely on substantial support in countries with fragile economies. The program, says Jerzy Langer of the Institute of Physics in Warsaw, "is really a far reaching and very wise move of Brussels," headquarters for the EC. Encouraging mobility to these institutes "is a very important trend," believes David Schindel, director of the U.S. National Science Foundation's Europe Office.

But Lepenies and others say that its focus is too narrow. "We were thinking of creating a very specific atmosphere, supporting centers with a mix of disciplines," says Lepenies about his idea, which was discussed at a 1997 meeting in Budapest. But to EC officials, he says, "a center of excellence just meant an excellent center." Several meetings with former EC research chief Edith Cresson failed to alter this view, Lepenies says: "She never understood what it meant and didn't want to understand." EC officials have a different view. "Brussels is not the place to create an atmosphere," says Barbara Rhode, who points out that the EC strove for a broader vision than funding only the Collegium Budapest. "We have a responsibility of fairness and justness to everybody," she says. Last spring the commission selected the winners—chosen according to criteria that included how well they are managed and the potential economic impact of their research on their home countries—but spent months hammering out contracts before money finally started flowing to some centers in November.

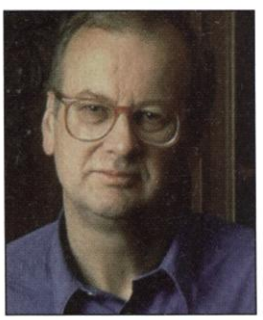
Describing the program here at a NATO forum organized by the journal *Nature*, Rhode noted that the peer-reviewed selection process bared some disturbing trends in central and eastern Europe. Whereas a large share of proposals from bioscience centers won grants or just missed the cut, the physical sciences fared poorly. "We have the feeling that [the region's] physics, materials science, and engineering are getting weaker," she says. Posting the worst showing were social sciences and humanities centers: Of 32 applicants, only two, including the Collegium Budapest, won funding. At the same time, countries that had been more aggressive in overhauling their scientific establishments after the Soviet Union dissolved tended to reap the biggest dividends: Four of five Estonian centers that submitted proposals got high marks, for example, and two won funding.

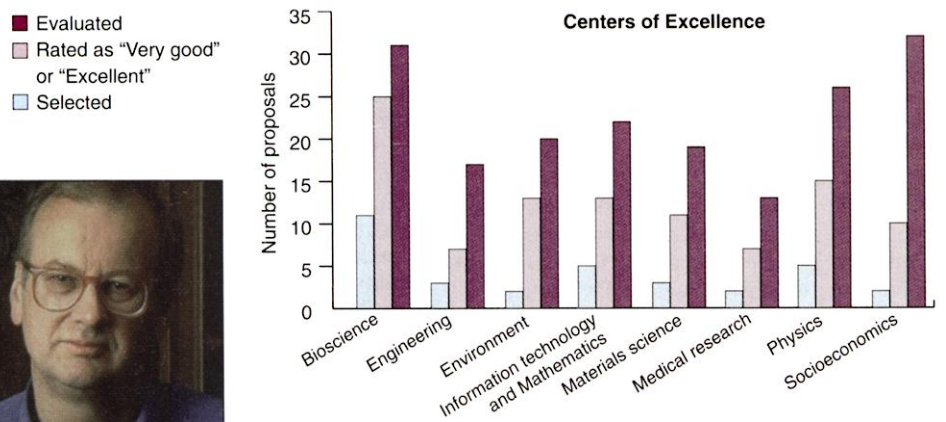
Now that Brussels has put these 34 centers on a pedestal, observers say, it should also help out on big-ticket items such as new buildings and instrumentation. "Many centers need money for upgrading machines, not networking," says Simeon Anguelov, a consultant to UNESCO's Office for Science and Technology for Europe. Although only E.U. member states are eligible for structural funds, the EC's Rudolf Meijer says that Brussels is considering other mechanisms for candidate countries. "This is certainly not something we have neglected," he says.

Lepenies isn't counting on Brussels to come through. He's helped organize a handful of institutes into a network called Agora, after the ancient Greek word for a meeting place. Agora will soon identify worthy projects, then lobby agencies and private donors for funding.

Others, however, want Brussels to incorporate the centers program into its next 5-year research program, Framework 6, which will begin in early 2003. "It would be rather stupid not to continue it," says Anguelov. "Forget all critics, forget all troubles," adds Langer, "we really have to pray for its extension."

–RICHARD STONE






**Stiff competition.** Success rates varied widely across disciplines. Wolf Lepenies *(left)* is looking for funds beyond Brussels.

CREDITS: (LEFT TO RIGHT) INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, BERLIN; SOURCE: EUROPEAN COMMISSION

HEPATITIS C

# New 'Replicon' Yields Viral Proteins

Twelve years ago, researchers identified hepatitis C virus (HCV) as the elusive pathogen that was causing liver disease in some people who had received blood transfusions. That had an immediate benefit: Donated blood is now screened for the virus, reducing the number of new HCV infections. But an estimated 1% of the U.S. population—more than 2 million people—has already been infected with the virus, which can persist in the body for many years. Most aren't aware of it, because the virus often produces no symptoms, or mild ones. But over time, it can damage the liver and increase the risk of cancer. Unfortunately, efforts to determine just how an infection develops—and how to combat it with antiviral drugs—have been frustrated by HCV's stubborn refusal to grow in the laboratory. Now, a team at Washington University in St. Louis led by Charles Rice has partly overcome that problem: On page 1972 of this issue, the researchers report the creation of an improved viruslike "replicon" that produces HCV proteins efficiently in the lab.

The innovation has piqued the interest of both industrial and academic scientists, who are racing to develop treatments. It should make it possible "for investigators to study the effects of antiviral drugs and host control mechanisms that regulate HCV replication," says Frank Chisari of the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California.

Rice's new system also may elbow its way into a highly contentious industrial arena, where biotech firms and pharmaceutical