

## interview krasimir valchev

# Stepping up

As Bulgaria hosts the European Council, Krasimir Valchev, education and science minister, talks to **Antoaneta Roussi** about what to expect from its presidency.

*В крак с времето* (“In keeping with the times”) is a phrase most Bulgarians know well. Throughout the country’s communist era, it was used continuously at political party gatherings and in public appearances. It was intended to underline that Bulgaria was modern, innovative and abreast of the global competition.

Today, with technological development sweeping all before it, and the EU straining to ride the wave, the small country on the south-eastern edge of the bloc is struggling to keep up. And yet, on 1 January, Bulgaria—an EU member state since 2007—acquired the rotating presidency of the European Council for the first time. This gave it the opportunity, alongside the European Commission, to help set the EU’s agenda for the next six months, and to focus attention on its own priorities.

Of relevance to R&D, the presidency’s priorities include designing the EU’s next Framework programme and starting negotiations on the bloc’s next multi-year budget, both of which will begin in 2021 and last for probably seven years. So in the space of six months, Bulgaria will lead the EU into two of its largest undertakings.

Both endeavours are in their early stages. More near-term priorities include speeding up industry uptake of research results and developing large infrastructures, such as for high-performance computing.

But some of the short and long-term issues go hand in hand, Krasimir Valchev, Bulgaria’s minister of science and education, told Research Europe at the presidency’s first meeting of research ministers in Sofia on 2 February. Increasing the uptake of research results could help to secure extra funding from the next EU budget for the next Framework programme. It’s all part of “better explaining the impact of science to society, which is important for the future increase of resources”, he says.

As well as getting Bulgarian priorities onto the presidency agenda, most Bulgarians hope that their turn

in the spotlight will help the country align itself more closely with European tenets, such as equality and rewarding merit. Bulgaria has been marred by corruption, bureaucracy and economic stagnation—with problems even coinciding with the start of its presidency, when its parliament voted to reject a national anti-corruption bill.

Valchev, who spent a career in finance, says that one of his hopes is

that the presidency will help Bulgaria identify the right approaches to improving its own research.

In 2015 Bulgaria piloted a performance-based funding system for its universities, opposed by some academics; this year the government plans to implement the model. This means that funding for research in higher-education institutions will be based not on the number of students they have enrolled, but on outputs including the number of papers they publish and patents they’re awarded.

Some of Bulgaria’s national priorities mirror those of its presidency. Like other eastern European countries, its infrastructure is rooted in Soviet design. So one of its biggest challenges is to update and modernise its higher-education and research facilities.

In October 2017, a group of independent experts published a report on Bulgaria’s research and innovation system at the government’s request. They arrived at 10 policy messages, one of which was that the current glut of 51 universities for a population of just 7.1 million should be cut, to concentrate resources on excellence.

Most of the report’s conclusions are indisputable—including the need for consolidation, Valchev says. “A number of Bulgarian universities have the potential to be research-driven, and the changes that we are making to financing research are in this direction.”

It is “critical” for Bulgaria’s competitiveness that it increase its scientific potential, Valchev says. This should include modernising its educational infrastructure “so that we can provide leading scientific information and be able to work in knowledge networks”.

With more than 30 per cent of PhD-holding Bulgarians pursuing careers abroad, according to a report for the Commission published in 2013, the government needs to create a lucrative environment to encourage them to stay or return. The government knows this: “We need our young researchers,” Valchev says.

But for a country with a forecasted GDP decline due to a drop in the working-age population, increasing science spending is likely to be a tough sell. Problems such as public healthcare, energy prices and pensions are more pressing for most of the public.

So, for the Bulgarian government as for the rest of the EU, there is a need to better communicate the impact of science on the economy. As Valchev puts it: “When we talk about science it is sometimes the most difficult of all fields to see the effects and give a high degree of transparency.”

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