



Laudatio per al doctorat honoris causa atorgat a Helga Nowotny i Maria Leptin, a càrrec de Jan Eeckhout, professor d'investigació ICREA del Departament d'Economia i Empresa de la UPF

Barcelona, 28 d'abril del 2026

Dear
Professors Helga Nowotny and Maria Leptin,
Rector Laia de Nadal
Hon. Núria Montserrat, Minister for Research and Universities of the Government of Catalonia,
Distinguished authorities,
Members of the university community,
Dear friends

Today we celebrate two women. Two women who have been the driving force behind an institution that has revolutionized innovation in Europe—an institution that spearheads Europe's future.

Professor Helga Nowotny and Professor Maria Leptin could easily be honored today for their scientific achievements alone in sociology and biology. Of course, we also honor their groundbreaking impact as scientists. But today, we celebrate something different. We celebrate two academics who built an institution. We celebrate two women who made the European Research Council happen.

Family Saga

The European Research Council was born in the European way: through initiatives originating in Scandinavia, and a coalition forged in Brussels and the capitals of the member states.

Europe resembles a large family saga, something out of a novel by Thomas Mann or Gabriel García Márquez. A large upper-middle-class family, a little less prosperous than it once was, with a grand old house and a vacation residence full of history, where everyone gathers for Sunday lunches and birthday celebrations—grandparents, parents, children, cousins. Most are hardworking, decent people, even if there are rebellious members who threaten to leave or demand a larger share. Yet all share strong values and a desire to keep the family united and afloat, and to offer a better future for the next generation.

Professors Helga Nowotny and Maria Leptin are two central characters in this family saga.

Helga Nowotny and Maria Leptin

Helga Nowotny grew up in the Vienna of Stefan Zweig, who denounced the extreme polarization and intolerance —trends towards which we may again be drifting today. The ERC has been successful in large part thanks to her tireless diplomatic efforts to promote the values for which Europe and the research community stand. She is the reconciler, much like Erasmus, who mediated with the Vatican when his disciple Martin Luther pushed Protestantism too far during the Reformation.

Maria Leptin is the pragmatic biologist who brings energy and executive power. Born in Hamburg, she combines Teutonic discipline with Italian passion. Together, they form a partnership that turns ideas into institutions.

European Values

Why is a funding agency for fundamental research so essential for Europe?

After the traumatic experience of the two world wars, Europe has upheld values of progress, democracy, individual rights, equality, and the rule of law, combined with a strong emphasis on peace and social solidarity. Europeans like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman worked tirelessly to establish these values in Europe and beyond.

Europe has been successful in promoting these values over the past 85 years, but today they are being challenged, both at home and globally.

Science and Innovation

Fundamental research is key to achieving these European values, including long-term growth and progress, which we know are impossible without innovation.

Even proponents of degrowth want innovation—to cure cancer or develop sustainable energy sources. The goal of innovation is not more plastic toys or more polluting cars, but a higher quality of life and a more equitable distribution of the fruits of growth. Fundamental research works toward these goals.

Our two honorary doctors have made this possible.

Independence

But science is not just about discovery. Science is infrastructure and institutions.

It requires independence and freedom; Innovation does not thrive under centralized control. It does not thrive where power is concentrated.

It thrives where ideas compete. Sometimes fiercely. Like in football, competition only works when there are rules and an independent referee.

The ERC understood this. It built a system based on excellence, peer review and independence. It does not tell researchers what to study. It funds people—not agendas. As Bengt Holmström put it: *money follows people*.

This is not just good science policy. It is good institutional design.

Balance

Now, let us be clear. The ERC is powerful—but it is not large. Its €2.5 billion annual budget is only a fraction of the more than €100 billion that Europe spends on innovation from public funds every year. Most of that goes to private firms.

And that is necessary. Because companies turn ideas into products.

Take Uğur Şahin. An ERC-funded researcher who, within days of receiving the genetic sequence of COVID-19 virus, designed an mRNA vaccine, which became known as the Pfizer vaccine.

But that breakthrough was not built in a week. It was built on 20 years of fundamental research on mRNA technology for cancer treatment, by himself and by other researchers.

Science creates the possibility. Firms deliver the scale.

The Long View

Fundamental research takes the long view. It accepts uncertainty. It accepts failure.

It is a lottery with many tickets and few winners. Artificial intelligence is a perfect example. After early excitement, the field entered decades of what is now known as the “AI winter.” Yet research continued, laying the groundwork for today’s breakthroughs, even as private investment largely disappeared.

Scientific progress builds incrementally on the contributions of previous generations—standing on the shoulders of giants. Science buys the lottery tickets that no one else is willing to buy.

A New Threat: Scale

Today, research and technology face a new challenge: scale.

To implement advances in AI, we need massive investment —data centers, chips, infrastructure. And scale brings concentration. A few firms dominate and control the benefits of fundamental research.

The beauty of funding innovation in private firms is that it creates startups—like puppies. But in the digital age, these puppies can grow into wolves, concentrating power and threatening the broader ecosystem. What we need are firms that grow into border collies—guiding and supporting the system, rather than dominating it.

Maintaining independence in research and separating technological, economic, and scientific power is essential.

The success of ERC makes it the ideal institution to foster this independence.

Final Thought

The mission of European science policy goes beyond funding fundamental research. It is about ensuring that Europe continues to invest in innovation through independence and the separation of powers—technological, economic, and scientific.

While such independence is often challenged, today's laureates have defended these European values. I hope they will continue to extend this effort across all European institutions.

Catalunya

Aquí a Catalunya, la recerca ja no és només una activitat. És part de la identitat Catalana. Una identitat innovadora; Emprenedora; Econòmicament avançada. Històricament, Catalunya sempre ha mirat enfora. Cap a França. Cap a Europa. Cap al món.

Però també és una societat que sap que s'ha de reinventar continuament. I és precisament aquest compromís amb la recerca el que atrau l'excel·lència. I l'excel·lència, al seu torn, construeix un teixit internacional d'innovació.

El nostre col·lega Andreu Mas-Colell va ser clau en aquest procés. Va ser una figura catalitzadora, tant en la creació de l'ERC a Brussel·les com en l'impuls de la recerca aquí, a Catalunya. Per això no és cap sorpresa que hàgim tingut un èxit desproporcionadament gran en l'obtenció de beques de l'ERC.

Però el més important és que no es tracta només de beques. A poc a poc, veiem com els investigadors i científics porten molt més: porten startups, porten empreses, porten projectes que volen estar a prop del coneixement de frontera.

Això és el que realment transforma una economia. I això, sense l'ERC, no seria possible. L'ERC es un motor de canvi institucional. Un motor que transforma Europa. I que transforma també Catalunya.

Per això, avui, només podem dir una cosa: Us estem profundament agraïts. Gràcies, professora Nowotny. Gràcies, professora Leptin.