Moedas: future will be mix of physical and digital

By Jan Velinger
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The European Commission recently proposed that 100 billion euros should go towards research, science and innovation for the years 2021 – 2027. If approved, most of the sum will go to Horizon Europe, touted as the commission’s most ambitious research program to date, which could position the EU at the forefront of global research in the years to come.

Audio interview

The EU commissioner overseeing the plans, Carlos Moedas, was in Prague on Wednesday; we caught up with him ahead of his address at a meeting of the Czech Rectors Conference at Charles University.

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“So at the meeting of the Rectors Conference the idea is to present the program, which includes fundamental science, global challenges, and innovation parts of the program and to outline plans for the future. Of course, I hope to have support from the rectors in what is a really amazing journey: 100 billion euros in funding between 2021 and 2027.”

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“The Czech Republic is part of the EU, so I want to ask how this country and institutions like Charles University fit within the overall mosaic.

“The Czech Republic has been doing better and better in science, especially in fundamental science. In the last program, the country received around 280 million euros over seven years; in the current program that is more or less at halftime the country has already reached around 200 million euros, and that is a good thing. I think that the Czech Republic has the chance to double the amount it receives by the end of the seven-year stretch.

“Of course, it will still be a challenge, you have to do better, but great science is being done in the Czech Republic: you have more than 31 researchers from the European Research Council who have received grants to be here, so I am very positive about the future. I think that the country will do much better between 2021 and 2027.”
In recent interviews, you discussed aspects of where the money could go: medicine is a big one and there is a lot of focus on the development of AI… What are areas where funding is most needed, in your view?

"I think that there are global challenges which we will have to tackle. For me, they are in four very important sectors: food, water, health and energy. I think those sectors will be completely transformed by the digital world and we will have to invest in that transformation. The transformation will come through AI, through blockchain technology, through machine learning, and we will have to invest heavily in those areas and we will.

"Because I think we are very good in Europe when it comes to the physical world but that we are not as good in the digital world. Yet the future will be a mix between these two – the physical and the digital – and this is where we will put our money. We will invest in that merge, that meeting point of the physical and digital, across different sectors."

A big part of your message is the intention to bring in the broader public, to show that all Europeans have a stake in this…

"Yes I think that the link between science and people is important. As science has gotten more complex, it has gotten harder to link fundamental science to specific products. It was much easier, for example, in the 1940s it was much easier to link the invention of the transistor to physics and chemistry. Today, it is much harder to show clear connections because the science itself has gotten much more complex.

"So you have to find ways of explaining to the public what it is we are doing and that is the reason behind mission-driven science. The aim is to present missions that people can relate to: let’s be the first in Europe to have a zero-carbon car, let’s try and find a cure for Alzheimer’s. These are ideas and, of course, I have to find backing among people, among constituencies, among parliaments. But the thing is find and set new missions where Europe wants to be No. 1."