



*The exiting Spanish government, in its last meeting in December 2015, gave the green light to a long-awaited State Research Agency, Agencia Estatal de Investigación, which has been created three years later than planned. The term of its governing body will be three years in order not to coincide with the legislature length. All parties criticised this last-minute decisions. Furthermore, commentators pointed to issues arising in Spanish research, due to the huge budget cuts imposed on research, during the People's Party's previous term in office.*

## **New Spanish research agency born prior to national elections**



### **New agency gathers as much support as criticism**

Most of the Spanish scientific community has welcomed the long-awaited decision of the Government to launch a State Research Agency ([Agencia Estatal de Investigación](#)). The decision was made by the incumbent right-wing People's Party--Partido Popular (PP)-- at the end of November 2015, before the general election, on 20th December 2015. The ruling took the most votes but fell well short of a majority, raising the prospect of new elections or of a coalition government.

The Agency could start dispensing grants as of 2017. Its creation was decided under the [Science, Technology and Innovation Act](#) of June 2011. The law fixed a one-year term for the creation of the Agency. However, it has taken the government four years to complete the procedures to launch this

new body. It is expected to manage around 75% of national R&D funding, corresponding to around 700 million euros in 2016. Funding for the public Research Council [CSIC](#) will be provided for separately.

This new Agency will be in charge of evaluating and assigning resources to R&D projects and will assess the impact of the research. Allegedly, one of the models that the government has in mind is that of the European Research Council (ERC).

[According to the Government](#), the goal of the Agency is “to foster research and the development of innovation in Spain,” in the words of the vice-president Soraya Sáez de Santamaría. In addition, the Agency has “to ensure more effective and more flexible funding of research while guaranteeing its control and a strict system of accountability,” says Luís de Guindos, who heads the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which is in charge of the Secretary of State for Research.

Some of the opposition parties, namely the Socialist Party and Podemos, have [criticised](#) the late approval of the Agency. In their pre-election campaign, they promised to revise the way it operates. It is too soon to know the political colour of the future Spanish Executive.

One of the issues of contention is that the Agency has not been allocated any extra *ad hoc* funding. In addition, it will incorporate the 300-strong staff currently employed by the Secretary of State for Research. This new body is expected to show greater flexibility and develop long-term planning strategies. To date, all the unspent money allocated to science goes back to the Ministry of Economic Affairs. Now, the Agency will be able to re-allocate this funding directly.

The managing director of this new organisation is expected to be a “highly recognised” scientist. They will be nominated by a 15-member governing council from three candidates proposed by the Secretary of State for Research. The exiting government promised that the council should be in place before February. Its term is due to run for three years, deliberately different from the four-year government term of office.

Some are supportive of the new agency. “This is a step in the right direction,” says astrophysicist Rafael Rebolo, director of the [Institute of Astrophysics of the Canaries](#), one of the [Severo Ochoa](#) Centres of Excellence recognised by the Spanish Government. He believes that the main advantage of the Agency is its “flexibility” and that it will make it easier to undertake multi-year projects. “But to make the Agency a success, it will be important to listen to the scientists, inside and outside the country. They are familiar with the limitations of research projects,” he warns.

Other supporters see an opportunity to further develop research in the country. “It will be a turning point in research, development and innovation management in Spain,” María Blasco, director of the Spanish National Cancer Research Centre [CNIO](#) tells [EuroScientist](#). “It is crucial that the Agency be headed by a first-class scientist and that it be independent of political shifts in the country.” Chemist Nazario Martín, president of [COSCE](#), a lobby of more than 75 scientific societies representing more than 80,000 scientists, also believes scientists should be a key part of the governing body of the newly established Agency.

Not all scientists are convinced that it is really going to change Spanish research. In an [op-ed](#) in [El País](#), economist Aurelia Modrego argued that the main problem Spanish science faces is the [lack of](#)

[stable funding](#). Science investment in Spain [has indeed dropped dramatically](#), reaching 12,800 million euros in 2014, a slightly greater figure than in 2006. This amount accounts for a meagre 1.23% of the GNP. [Average R&D expenditure](#) in Europe is around 2%.

As expatriated astrophysicist Amaya Moro-Martín, who is based at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, USA, wrote in [a very critical letter to Mariano Rajoy](#), head of the incumbent government, Spain [lost 12,000 scientists](#) since 2010. [In 2013](#), Moro-Martín became a [symbol of the self-exiled community](#) of Spanish scientists forced to leave the country.

For now, some believe that Spanish research needs stronger political support. "It's impossible to support a research policy that has caused so much damage to science in these years of recession. We need a Ministry for Science and Technology that has an important say in all government's decisions," Martín tells *Euroscientist*.

In addition, "we have to get back to the level of expenditure of seven years ago," Rebolo points out. "Science should be considered a key asset for a country, like education, health or justice." Blasco concludes, "research, development and innovation is not an expense. It generates resources and a quality workforce, and it supports economic growth."

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