

INTERVIEW

**Interview with Prof. Dr. Ing. Francesco Fedi
former COST President 2004 - 2010
on the occasion of the 50th year anniversary of COST**

1. What led to the founding of COST back in 1970? Which countries were the main drivers?

The EUROCOOP-COST, the acronym for **EURO**pean **CoO**peration and **CO**ordination in the field of **Scientific and Technical** research, originated in **1967** when the Council of the Science and Technology Ministers of the six EEC (European Economic Community) countries (*Belgium, France, Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands*) decided to give to a **Committee of national experts** the task of examining the possibility of European cooperation on the following seven topics: **Information Systems, Telecommunications, Transport, Oceanography, Meteorology, Metallurgy and Pollution.**

This decision was the result of a general feeling in Europe where the increasing economic and industrial power of the United States of America was regarded with an increasing concern. In those years the famous French journalist and writer Jean Jacques Servan Scriver had published his very well known book “Le defi Americain” (the American challenge).

The decision of the Council had the objective to recuperate the delays of Europe in many areas of scientific and technical research.

The Committee of national experts terminated its work in **1969** with the proposal of a number of subjects for possible collaboration.

Twelve non EEC countries were also invited to examine the feasibility of these projects and to participate in their possible implementation :*Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Spain,*

Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Yugoslavia. At a later stage Turkey was also invited. Acceptances were received from the 13 countries and in **1970 seven committees** - one for each of the above mentioned topics - of national experts from the 19 countries were formed to examine the feasibility of the various projects. A **Committee of Senior Officials** was also appointed to coordinate the work of the 7 Technical Committees.

In **late 1971** the Committee of Senior Officials presented the reports of the 7 Technical Committees to the Science and Technology Ministers from the 19 European countries.

On **23 November 1971** the Governments of the 19 countries adopted a **Resolution** whereby they agreed to put into effect 7 joint research projects - since then denominated COST Actions- centered around the topics chosen by the Council of the six EEC countries.

The date of 23 November 1971 can be considered as the birth date of COST.

2. What were decisive moments in the history of COST?

Of course the first decisive moment in the history of COST was the Resolution adopted on 23rd November 1971 by 19 European countries to launch the COST Program and the first 7 COST Actions.

The number of COST Actions remained equal to 7 for a long period due to the difficulties connected to the fact that the new Actions had to be ratified by the Parliaments of the participating countries. These difficulties were overcome when it was decided to adopt a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to be approved by the COST Committee of Senior Officials as a means to launch a new COST Action. This made it possible the remarkable increase of the number of running COST Actions.

But the most important and decisive moments of COST were those connected to the lack of legal status of COST.

Although very successfully operating for the first period of more than 40 years COST still did not have a legal personality and consequently could not become a contractor of the European Commission (EC): hence the need of having an implementing agent for COST.

The lack of legal personality of COST was put in particular evidence in 2003, when the EC ceased to provide the scientific secretariat and the financial administration of COST.

The Committee of Senior Officials of COST (CSO) then started discussions with the European Science Foundation (ESF), which led to the establishment of a COST-ESF Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in September 2002, according to which ESF accepted to act as the COST Implementing Agent and to provide and manage the administrative, technical and scientific secretariat for COST, its Technical Committees and its Actions. The COST Ministerial Conference in May 2003 endorsed the MoU between COST and the ESF. A contract between the EC and the ESF was concluded in July 2003 for the entire period of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6).

This COST-ESF cooperation was in line with the conclusions of the EU Council of 26 November 2002 which welcomed "efforts currently being undertaken in the context of ERA to achieve closer linkage with other European co-operation initiatives such as COST and ESF, with a view of creating synergies while respecting their complementary roles".

In October 2006 COST and ESF approved an Addendum to the COST-ESF MoU with the objective of strengthening COST and ESF as two actors fostering the ERA and further developing the synergy between them, while maintaining a clear distinction between their individual characteristics and their complementary roles. The ESF was invited to continue to act as the Implementing Agent for COST during the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). In January 2007 negotiations between the EC and the ESF for the grant agreement for COST in FP7 were started.

In June 2007 the "Final Review of COST in the Sixth Framework

Programme", the so-called "Monfret Report" commissioned by the European Commission at the end of FP6, made the following recommendations on the governance of COST: "either COST should create an independent legal entity or the ESF should take over the full operation of COST including the strategy formulation and the linkages with the Member States".

The COST Committee of Senior Officials took the recommendations of the "Monfret report" into very serious consideration.

On one side COST confirmed its decision to appoint ESF as its implementing agent for FP7, only to ensure the continuity of COST activities for the benefit of the European scientific community. The ESF- EC Grant Agreement for FP7 was signed in July 2007.

On the other side, in 2007 the COST CSO started the re- examination of the COST legal status and appointed Professor Raoul Kneucker as Rapporteur on this question. Based on his report, released in September 2008, various possible solutions were examined. The solution that appeared to have the strongest support from the CSO delegations, the "COST Office Association" (COA), was given particular attention.

In June 2009 the COST CSO commissioned a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis on COST-ESF Relationship from Technopolis, who built their report on the assumption that it would be desirable for COST to establish a legal personality, whatever the future relationship with ESF would be, even in the case ESF would continue providing services to COST.

On the basis of the above results, during 2010, the COST CSO took important decisions regarding the two recommendations of the Monfret Report.

On one side, the representatives of the 35 COST Member States unanimously rejected the possibility of ESF taking over COST.

On the other side, 26 (later 27) COST Member States voted in favour of establishing an independent COST Office Association (Summary of

Conclusions 178th COST CSO meeting May 2010 COST Doc. 4173/10).

The subject was carefully examined by the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) during 2007, 2008 and 2009.

On 8 June 2010 at the initiative and the request of Germany and Spain Professor Fedi convened a meeting to set up the COST Office Association (COA) as an independent legal entity in the form of an international non-profit making Association under Belgian law in Brussels at the Permanent representation to the European Union of Germany.

COA was set up on 1 July 2010 by 10 COST Member States as founding members: *Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Turkey.*

With the publication of its Statutes and of the names of the members of its Administrative Board in the Moniteur Belge on 17 September 2010 COA was officially established as an International non – profit Association (AISBL) under Belgian Law. *Greece and Israel* also joined COA at a later stage.

Professor Francesco Fedi and Professor John Bartzis were elected President and Vice - President of the Administrative Board, respectively. Professor Fedi resigned on 25/09/2012.

The remarkable work done to establish the COST Office Association led the way to establish in September 2013 the COST Association as an international not-for-profit association under Belgian law located in Brussels that integrates governance, management, and implementation functions into a single structure.

3. How was COST interacting with the first Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation, back in the 1980's?

In 1971 COST Actions - networks of researchers built around a research project with clear objectives nationally funded and with COST economic support only for the networking- were the only form of cooperation in Europe.

In 1974 the European Science Foundation, in 1983 the first Framework Programme and in 1985 EUREKA were launched.

The existence of these initiatives notwithstanding the interest of the European scientific community in COST constantly increased. From 7 COST Actions in 1971 to the various hundreds of Actions of today, from the 19 countries of 1971 to the 38 countries of today.

In particular the complementarity between the COST Actions and these programmes has to be underlined.

COST was and is a European "exploratorium" of new ideas in the most promising fields of research, thus functioning as a generator of initiatives in the Framework Programmes and as a potential source of industrial applications in EUREKA.

4. How important has the intergovernmental structure been in the history of COST?

Due to its intergovernmental structure COST contribute to decrease the fragmentation of research efforts in the ERA.

A "multiplier effect" originates from COST. The funds provided by COST are only about 1% of the total value of the Actions. For instance in FP 6 with only about 20 million € per year more than 30.000 European researchers were involved in research whose total value exceeded 2 billions € per year.

To underline the intergovernmental nature of COST for the first 40 years of its life the Secretariat of the COST Committee of Senior Official was provided by the EU Council.

5. What role did COST play in opening up borders between Eastern and Western Europe?

COST- presently known as “European Cooperation in Science and Technology”- includes 38 **COST** Members: *Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, The Netherlands, The Republic of North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom*. Israel is a Cooperating Member (A Cooperating Member implies non-voting rights in the COST CSO. However, researchers from COST’s Cooperating Member enjoy member rights in COST Action participation). South Africa is a Partner Member (A Partner Member implies no rights to attend the COST CSO. However, researchers from COST’s Partner Members enjoy observer rights in COST Action participation).

From the list above it can be clearly seen the important role of COST in opening up the borders between Eastern and Western Europe.

6. What are you most proud of in your term as President ?

In 2004 I was unanimously elected by the then 35 COST countries as President of the Committee of Senior Officials. In 2007 I was elected again as President of the CSO for a subsequent three year term.

That was a very difficult period for COST. Many thought that COST deserved an “honorable funeral” and that it was about time to terminate this program.

The results of these six years as President that somebody defined as “the COST renaissance” are extensively described in my Report to the COST Ministerial Conference held on 15 June 2010 in Palma de Mallorca on progress made by COST since the COST Ministerial Conference held in Dubrovnik in 2003.

These results can be summarize as follows. From 180 COST Actions in

2003 to the more than 280 Actions. From the 70 Institutions from non-COST countries participating in COST Actions to the more than 350 Institutions in 2010. From a contribution to COST of 50-80 M€ for the four years of FP6 to the contribution of 210-250 M€ for the seven years of FP7. From the strong criticism of the European Commission toward COST in 2003 to the situation in 2010 when nobody could dispute that COST was one of the most effective instrument of the European Research Area and to the “chorus of praises” for COST - as it was reported in the press - during the COST exhibition in the European Parliament or during my presentation of COST to the EU Research Working Party in 2009.

A recognition of the results of my Presidency is contained in the “liber amicorum” (the book of friends) which very kindly the members of the Committee of Senior Officials prepared and which can be found in my URL: www.francescofedu.eu.

As I wrote in my letter to them at the end of my Presidency the sentence “parting is such a sweet sorrow” that Shakespeare used for Romeo and Juliet was an oximoron that reflected well my state of mind.

“Sorrow” since the end of my CSO Presidency concluded the more than 40 years of my association with COST. I participated in the preparatory work for the launching of COST in 1970. Then as President of two consecutive COST Actions on radiopropagation at frequencies higher than 10 GHz which led the way to a method for the design of Earth-satellite communications since then adopted in all parts of the world. Subsequently as President of the Scientific Committee on “Telecommunications and Information Science” and finally as President of the COST Committee of Senior Officials.

“Sweet” since I was sure the my successor as CSO President and the entire COST community will keep up the very good work to ensure the success of COST in the future.

7. What future do you see for COST?

COST continues to be a flexible, fast, effective and efficient tool to

network and coordinate nationally funded research activities at project level, bringing motivated scientists together under light strategic guidance and letting them work out their ideas, thus contributing to overcome the fragmentation of research in the ERA. A significant share of the European scientific community is involved, directly or indirectly, in COST activities. [L]
[SEP]

COST responds to future needs; it acts as an *exploratorium* for ideas and addresses emerging and unforeseen developments. It addresses ambitious goals and more complex questions and has enhanced its precursor role. COST Actions are objective-driven and often multidisciplinary. Their objectives are clearly defined and information arising from COST Actions provides well-structured evidence-based input for policy making and they contribute to Europe's competitiveness and socio-economic development. Whilst maintaining its bottom-up character, COST is open to support longer-term planning processes in the development of new COST Actions. [L]
[SEP]

COST acts as a catalyst for long-term networking and in particular supports early career scientists and newly established research groups, strengthening their future participation in European and other international research initiatives. [L]
[SEP]

COST provides a framework for pre-normative cooperation leading to international norms and standards. [L]
[SEP]

COST is an inclusive and flexible international framework for the benefit of the European scientific community. COST has a worldwide geographical coverage which will be further extended in a pragmatic way by continuing to involve non-member countries in its Actions and through a more structured series of collaborative arrangements.

As I wrote in my report in my capacity as COST President to the Ministerial Conference in 2010 :“if COST will continue to receive the same high number of proposals for new COST Actions and if the same high number of Institutions of non-COST countries will continue to participate in COST Actions then COST should not have any problem

for its future. An extremely efficient mechanism under the direct control of the COST Member States to contribute to decrease the fragmentation of investments in research in Europe coordinating bottom-up initiatives and to open the European Research Area to a global collaboration.

“If COST did not exist it would be necessary to invent it” was the result of survey made in the ERA.

8. How would you describe COST in 1 word / sentence?

COST is a fast, efficient, effective, flexible framework to get brilliant scientists together and to let them work out their ideas under light strategic guidance.

9. Conclusions

I wish to conclude this interview with my best wishes with all my heart for a long long life to COST.