

“Solve the problem with Brussels!”

Gerd Folkers, the new President of the Swiss Science and Innovation Council (SSIC), would like to increase the influence of this prestigious body. In political terms, much of what is at stake for scientists lies in international relations. *By Urs Hafner*

Prof. Folkers, you're taking up a position with a lot of prestige ...

... are you sure?

Yes: a lot of prestige but little impact. The voice of the SSIC is barely heard these days – the Federal Council certainly isn't listening.

I agree.

How do you want to change this?

With shuttle diplomacy. I'll be on the spot in Bern one day a week, where I'll be speaking with people in the civil service, in the SNSF and in parliament, about our general 'work in progress' in matters of science policy. I want to hear their assessments and their opinions. I want to take their temperature, as it were. We have to find a common language. The problems on the table are there for all to see: financing growth, economic pressures, falsification of data and fraud, getting young scientists onto the career ladder, and getting more women into academia ...

The SSIC has long been demanding an improvement in career opportunities for young scientists, for example.

There are problems that can't be solved definitively because the context changes so quickly. We have to put these issues back on the table, time and again. There's nothing else we can do about it, like the fight against cancer or the issue of inoculation. And then there are complex problems to which the SSIC can only offer a nuanced answer: "Not only do you have to do this or that, but you also have to take into consideration and weigh up the ethical, economic and legal dimensions".

Do politicians want to hear advice like that?

They have no choice. But there are also more clear-cut cases: Yes, we should introduce pre-implantation diagnostics. Yes, Switzerland should participate in the European ELI super-laser. The SSIC works on scientifically ascertainable truth. It doesn't determine science policy; it's the politicians who have to make the decisions. I hope that our parliamentarians will increasingly ask us for advice. But to achieve this, we have to become far more visible.



“I hope that our parliamentarians will increasingly ask us for advice”, says Gerd Folkers, the new President of the SSIC. Photo: Valérie Chételat

If you could advise the whole Federal Council on the action they should take, what would you say to them?

To be quite brazen about it, I'd say: think before you act. But in all seriousness: there's no single piece of general advice I would give the Federal Council.

But what would be your priority?

Maintaining international relations. Scientific findings don't keep to national boundaries. Knowledge flows globally. So in this, my advice would be: solve the problem with Brussels! But this is as trivial as it is urgent.

The majority in parliament doesn't see things like that.

Then I'd have to say this: does it make sense to have to invent everything again here – everything that's already been imagined and invented elsewhere? No. Switzerland mustn't isolate itself. If it does, then it won't profit any more from the knowledge that's gained elsewhere – nor will the outside world profit from us.

Given the wave of terror attacks, politicians have been focussing increasingly on policing and surveillance. The humanities could

explain the root causes of terrorism. Would this be a case for the SSIC?

Sure. Until now, regrettably, I have hardly read any astute analysis on terror in the newspapers. To be a little provocative: you could simply ask how we should weigh up the threat level against the other internal risks we're facing – such as fatalities in hospitals caused by a lack of hygiene. We need the humanities and social sciences to offer answers here. They can illuminate both sides: the motivation of the terrorists and the reactions of society, which prefers to prioritise security issues.

At the beginning of this year, Gerd Folkers assumed the Presidency of the Swiss Science and Innovation Council (SSIC), a body of fifteen people whose task since 1965 has been to offer support and scientific advice to the Federal Council. Folkers has been a full professor of pharmaceutical chemistry at ETH Zurich since 1994. He was the Director of the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich until 2014.

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