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The Development of International Peer Review in Central Europe

For someone coming from the Humanities with a PhD in Medieval Latin, it gives particular pleasure to read the title of the *Manifesto for the Humanities in Europe* of the European Science Foundation of 2007 in the Latin language: *In varietate concordia* – “unity in diversity.”¹ This motto of the European Union, dating from the year 2000, has much in common with the motto of the Great Seal of the United States of America, dating from 1782: *E pluribus unum* – “one from many.” Building on these principles, the development of international peer review in Central Europe is a good test of advantages and challenges. Acknowledging the distinction between international research and international peer review, the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund currently operates an electronic proposal review system online with domestic and international reviewers in the English language and it also administers calls for proposals for international cooperation of researchers. While the national components of such international proposals are reviewed at the national levels, however, there is no international cooperation of peer reviewers. The centripetal character of Central European research funds, that is, their connections to Western Europe do not substitute for formal interrelations in Central Europe that do not exist – in spite of similar challenges such as the small size of research communities resulting in conflicts of interest. It is symbolic, therefore, that the Czech Science Foundation hosted a conference of the European Science Foundation and the European Heads of Research Councils on *Peer Review: Its Present and Future State* in Prague in 2006. The conference report and the subsequent conference proceedings also indicate that there is a need for international peer review.² It happened in this spirit in February 2008 that the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund formally contacted fourteen partner organisations in the following ten countries in order to explore the interest in the development of international peer review in Central Europe: Bulgaria (National Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science), Croatia (National Foundation for Science, Higher Education, and Technological Development), Czech Republic (Czech Science Foundation), Estonia (Estonian Science Foundation), Latvia (Latvian Council of Science), Lithuania (Lithuanian State Science and Studies Foundation and the Science Council of Lithuania), Poland (Foundation for Polish Science and the Council for Science at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education), Romania (National University Research Council), Slovakia (Slovak Academy of Sciences and the Slovak Research and Development Agency), and Slovenia (Slovenian Science Foundation and the Slovenian Research Agency). The rest lies in the future ahead, but if common interest can be identified, a memorandum of understanding can lead to a joint action plan with the following sequence in mind: exploration and adjustment of existing systems and infrastructures, identification of best practices of Western models, sharing resources by means of linking databases of reviewers (allowing for a common pool and international recruitment of reviewers), sharing evaluation and selection criteria or establishing new standards, organizing international review panel meetings, and monitoring. This possible sequence has both advantages and challenges. Against the advantages of avoiding individual conflicts of interest and provincial patronage, the following challenges emerge: creation of national conflicts of interest and international patronage, lack of balance between national calls for proposals and international peer review leading to national funding, uneven quality of proposals and sometimes soft reviews, longer review cycle, different institutional and financial infrastructures of research funds and research institutions such as academies and universities, finally the danger of the Humanities being left behind again – with special reference to the languages of publication where the European Reference Index for the Humanities of the Standing Committee for the Humanities of the European Science Foundation and the Humanities in the European Research Area provides useful guidance. Overall, the development of international peer review in Central Europe, where the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund offers coordination, might create more problems than it might solve. Being a good test of advantages and challenges, however, this enterprise will bring closer to the principle of “unity in diversity” – *In varietate concordia*.³

¹ “*In varietate concordia*: A Manifesto for the Humanities in Europe,” in *European Science Foundation Humanities Spring 2007* (Strasbourg: European Science Foundation, 2007), 4–6.

² *Peer Review: Its Present and Future State* (Strasbourg: European Science Foundation, 2007), *Peer Review: Its Present and Future State* (Prague: Czech Science Foundation, 2007).

³ This communiqué was presented in the session on *International Review Panels and Referee Colleges* at the 1st Workshop of the European Science Foundation Member Organisation Forum on Peer Review at the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research, Hague, Netherlands, in 2008.