The European Research Council

An introduction to the ERC

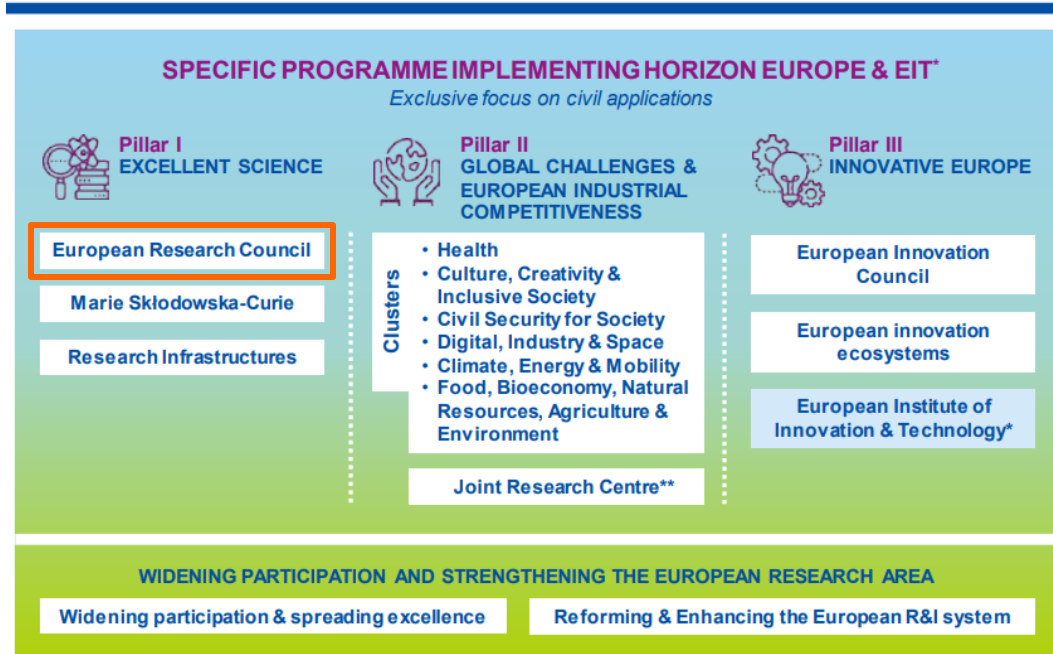Fotios Vikas

20 February 2025

OECI Academy Webinar

European Research Council

Established by the European Commission

ERC is Part of Horizon Europe (EU's key funding programme for research & innovation)

HORIZON EUROPE

SPECIFIC PROGRAMME IMPLEMENTING HORIZON EUROPE & EIT*
Exclusive focus on civil applications

Pillar I
EXCELLENT SCIENCE

- European Research Council
- Marie Skłodowska-Curie
- Research Infrastructures

Pillar II
GLOBAL CHALLENGES & EUROPEAN INDUSTRIAL COMPETITIVENESS

Clusters

- Health
- Culture, Creativity & Inclusive Society
- Civil Security for Society
- Digital, Industry & Space
- Climate, Energy & Mobility
- Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture & Environment

Joint Research Centre**

Pillar III
INNOVATIVE EUROPE

- European Innovation Council
- European innovation ecosystems
- European Institute of Innovation & Technology*

WIDENING PARTICIPATION AND STRENGTHENING THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA

- Widening participation & spreading excellence
- Reforming & Enhancing the European R&I system

HORIZON EUROPE
THE EU RESEARCH & INNOVATION PROGRAMME
2021 - 2027
#HorizonEU   EUROPEAN UNION

EUR 16 billion
ERC budget in Horizon Europe

17%
of the entire
Horizon Europe budget

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About the ERC

Scientific governance

- Independent Scientific Council with 22 members including the ERC President, with full authority over strategy
- Supported by a Dedicated Implementation Structure, the ERC Executive Agency

Scientific freedom

- Scientific excellence as the sole criterion
- Support to the individual scientist – *no consortia!*
- No predetermined subjects – *"bottom-up"*
- Support for frontier research in all fields of science and humanities
- International peer-review

ERC budget 2007 – 2027: EUR 36.5 billion
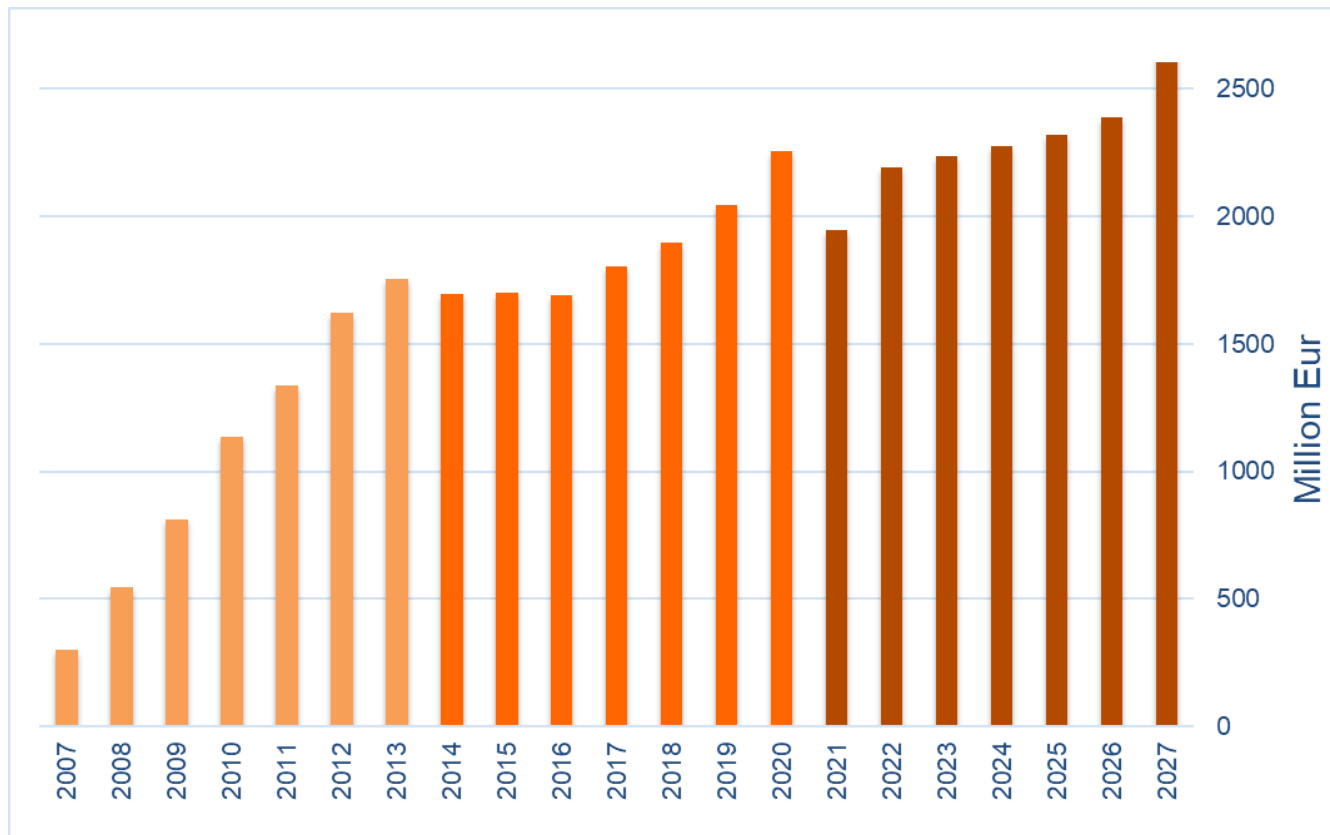
FP7: €7.5 billion

H2020: €13 billion

HE: €16 billion

ERC Scientific Council

Life Sciences

Geneviève
ALMOUZNI
(Molecular Cell Biology)

Liselotte
HØJGAARD
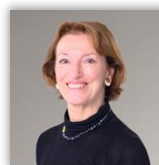(Medicine)

Leszek
KACZMAREK
(Neurobiology)

Dirk
INZÉ
(Plant Biology)

Luke
O'NEILL
(Biochemistry & Immunology)

Jesper
SVEJSTRUP
Vice-President
(Biochemistry)

Maria
LEPTIN
ERC President
(Cell Biology)

Eystein
JANSEN
Vice-President
(Earth Science)

Gerd
GIGERENZER
(Psychology)

Social Sciences and Humanities

Harriet
BULKELEY
(Geography)

Mercedes
GARCÍA-ARENAL
(History)

Torsten
PERSSON
(Economics)

Giovanni
SARTOR
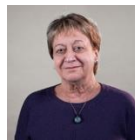(Law)

Milena
ŽIC FUCHS
(Linguistics)

Physical Sciences and Engineering

Ben
FERINGA
(Organic Chemistry)

Tom
HENZINGER
(Computer Science)

Chryssa
KOUVELIOTOU
(High-Energy Astrophysics)

Sylvie
LORENTE
(Mechanical Engineering)

László
LOVÁSZ
(Mathematics)

Björn
OTTERSTEN
(Electrical Engineering)

Nicola
SPALDIN
(Materials Theory)

Alice
VALKÁROVÁ
(Physics)

ERC structure

The ERC Dedicated Implementation Structure - ERC Executive Agency

- Executes annual work programme as established by the Scientific Council
- Implements calls for proposals and provides information and support to applicants
- Organises peer review evaluation
- Establishes and manages grant agreements
- Administers scientific and financial aspects of follow-up of grant agreements
- Carries out communications activities and ensures information dissemination to ERC stakeholders

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ERC basics

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD

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LONG TERM **GRANTS** TO PIONEERING PROJECTS
IN ANY FIELD OF FRONTIER RESEARCH

Life Sciences

Physical Sciences and Engineering

Social Sciences and Humanities

Why to apply for ERC grant?

ERC offers independence, recognition & visibility to:

- work on a research topic of own choice

- gain financial autonomy for five years

- negotiate the best conditions of work with the host institution

- attract excellent team members and collaborators from anywhere in the world

- move with the grant to any place in Europe if desired ("portability of grants")

- win additional funding

ERC grant schemes

Starting Grants

starters (2-7 years after PhD) up to € 1.5 Mio
for 5 years

Consolidator Grants

Consolidators (7-12 years after PhD) up to € 2 Mio
for 5 years

Advanced Grants

track-record of significant research achievements in the
last 10 years up to € 2.5 Mio
for 5 years

Synergy Grants

2 – 4 Principal Investigators up to € 10.0 Mio for 6
years
1 PI can be based outside EU/Associated
Countries

Proof-of-Concept

bridging gap between research - earliest stage of marketable innovation
lump sum €150,000 for ERC grant holders

Evaluation

Excellence

is the sole evaluation criterion

Excellence of the Research Project

- Ground-breaking nature
- Ambition
- Scientific approach

Excellence of the Principal Investigator

- Intellectual capacity
- Creativity
- Scientific expertise and capacity to execute the project

Evaluation: process

For individuals calls: a single submission but a two-step evaluation

STEP 1

Remote assessment by **Panel members see ONLY section 1: Synopsis and CV (Part B1)**

Panel meeting

Proposal rejected
(scores A-not invited & B&C)

Proposal retained
For step 2 (score A-invited)

STEP 2

Remote assessment by **Panel members** and **Remote Reviewers** of **full proposals (Part B1+B2)**

Panel meeting
+ interview StG, CoG and AdG

Proposal funded if within available budget (score A)

Proposal rejected
(score B)

Feedback to applicants

Anyone from anywhere in the world can apply

Opportunities for researchers outside EU/Associated Countries:

- Additional "start-up" funding for researchers moving to Europe (€ 1 Mio irrespective of grant scheme)

- Grantees can keep affiliation with home institute outside Europe ("significant part" of work time in Europe: at least 50%)

- Team members can be based outside Europe

- Grantees can move within Europe with the grant

2025-2026 Calendar

ERC calls	Call Opening	Submission Deadline
Starting Grants ERC-2026-StG	July 2025	October 2025
Consolidator Grants ERC-2026-CoG	September 2025	January 2026
Advanced Grants ERC-2025-AdG	22 May 2025	28 August 2025

ERC in figures

Over **13,000** top researchers funded since the ERC creation in 2007

Over **90,000** researchers and other professionals employed in ERC research teams

Over **2,400** patents and other IPR applications generated by ERC funding

Over **400** start-ups identified as founded or co-founded by ERC grantees

Over **220,000** articles from ERC projects published in scientific journals

Over **900** research institutions hosting ERC grantees – universities, public or private research centres in the EU or Associated Countries

89 nationalities of grant holders

14 Nobel Prizes, **6** Fields Medals, **11** Wolf Prizes and other prizes awarded to ERC grantees

Step 1: Get the information (early on)!

- Register early, get familiar with the European Commission's Funding and Tender portal and download the templates

    - https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/home

- Read the call documents (*Information for Applicants*, *Work Programme*, *Frequently Asked Questions*) that explain how to prepare your proposal

- Talk to your Institution's grant office

- Talk to ERC grantees

- Contact the ERCEA to ask all your questions well ahead of the submission deadline– e.g., ERC-2025-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu , ERC-2025-COG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu , ERC-2025-ADG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu

- Get the written consent of your collaborators before the submission deadline (a simple email exchange is OK)

Step 1: Get the information (early on)!

Other useful links:

- ERC page for all grants: https://erc.europa.eu/apply-grant

- ERC 2025 Workprogramme: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2025/wp_horizon-erc-2025_en.pdf

- Information for Applicants: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/information-for-applicants_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf

Step 2: Choose Host Institution (HI)

- Your choice (in an EU Member State/Associated Country)

- You can change it during the project's life

- Negotiate with the HI (your position, equipment, administrative support, access to infrastructure, etc.)

Rumour: *The quality/fame of the HI is increasing my chances/scores.*

✖**NOT true:** the HI is not an evaluation criterion!

Step 3: Choose your grant type & make sure you are eligible!

- Eligibility window is calculated according to the 1st of January of the year of the Call:

  StG 2026: **1 January 2019** to **31 December 2023 (inclusive)**

  CoG 2026: **1 January 2014** to **31 December 2018 (inclusive)**

  > The reference date is the certified date of the successful defence of the first PhD degree

- If you previously applied to an ERC call, check resubmission restrictions
- Minimum 50% of PI working time in an EU Member State or Associated Country
- Time commitment on the project: Min. 50% (StG), 40% (CoG), 30% (AdG/SyG)

Step 3: Choose your grant type & make sure you are eligible!

- Extensions of eligibility window possible for StG and CoG for documented cases of:

  - *Maternity – 18 months per child (before or after PhD)*
  - *Paternity – actual time taken off*
  - *Long-term illness (for the Principal Investigator or a close family member (child, spouse, parent or sibling))*
  - *Military service*
  - *Clinical training*
  - *Natural disaster*
  - *Seeking asylum*
  - *Disability*

- No limit to the total years of extension

Evaluation panel structure (2025)

Life Sciences

- LS1 Molecules of Life: Biological Mechanisms, Structures and Functions
- LS2 Integrative Biology: From Genes and Genomes to Systems
- LS3 Cell Biology, Development, Stem Cells and Regeneration
- LS4 Physiology in Health, Disease and Ageing
- LS5 Neuroscience and Disorders of the Nervous System
- LS6 Immunity, Infection and Immunotherapy
- LS7 Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment of Human Diseases
- LS8 Environmental Biology, Ecology and Evolution
- LS9 Biotechnology and Biosystems Engineering

Physical Sciences & Engineering

- PE1 Mathematics
- PE2 Fundamental Constituents of Matter
- PE3 Condensed Matter Physics
- PE4 Physical and Analytical Chemical Sciences
- PE5 Synthetic Chemistry and Materials
- PE6 Computer Science and Informatics
- PE7 Systems and Communication Engineering
- PE8 Products and Processes Engineering
- PE9 Universe Sciences
- PE10 Earth System Science
- PE11 Materials Engineering

Social Sciences and Humanities

- SH1 Individuals, Markets and Organisations
- SH2 Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems
- SH3 The Social World and Its Interactions
- SH4 The Human Mind and Its Complexity
- SH5 Texts and Concepts
- SH6 The Study of the Human Past
- SH7 Human Mobility, Environment, and Space
- SH8 Studies of Cultures and Arts

Choosing the right Panel is very important!

- Proposals are initially assigned to the Panel of the PI's choice.
- The PI can flag one "Secondary Review Panel" → the PI must explain the interdisciplinary nature of the proposal in Part B1.
- Transfer of proposals between panels may occur if:
  - there is a clear mistake on part of the applicant.
  - the necessary expertise is available in a different panel.

Rumour: Choose the panel "strategically" in order to increase chances of success

✘**NOT true**: Choose the panel that best fits the proposal. The budget is distributed among the scientific panels as a function of demand → success rate is equal amongst panels!

Step 5: Preparing your application

PART A – admin forms online

Section 1 Proposal and PI info
Section 2 Host Institution info
Section 3 Budget
Section 4 Ethics
Section 5 Call-specific Questions

Annexes – submitted as .pdf

- Statement of support of HI
- copy of PhD or equiv. (StG & CoG)

If applicable:
- document for extension of eligibility window (StG & CoG)
- explanatory info on ethical issues

Seen by the panel

PART B1 – submitted as .pdf

Abstract and Cross-Panel explanation 1 p.
Extended Synopsis   5 p.
CV & Track Record   up to 4 p.

PART B2 – submitted as .pdf

Scientific Proposal   14 p.
Funding ID   1 p.

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Part A: Carefully choose your descriptors and free keywords!

Descriptors and free keywords

- influence which Panel will evaluate your proposal

- are the basis of allocation to the panel members

- will determine whether a cross-panel evaluation is necessary

Rumour: The panel descriptors represent ERC scientific priorities

✗NOT true: The panel descriptors are indicative so that PIs can see what expertise is in the Panel. It is the PIs that choose the subject of their proposal and the Panels use the excellence criterion to judge whether it should be funded.

Rumour: The more cross-panel descriptors I indicate, the higher the funding chances, since I emphasize like this the interdisciplinarity of my proposal.

✗NOT true: even though these are used to allocate proposals to Panel Members, once the proposals are allocated, the Panel Members do not see the keywords and descriptors used.

Part B1: Research Project

Evaluation <u>primarily focused</u> on the ground-breaking nature, ambition, and feasibility of the <u>proposed research project</u>

- Streamlined evaluation questions
- No explicit reference to 'high-risk/high-gain'
  - *Instead: 'ground-breaking, ambitious, and feasible'.*
  - **The ERC will always encourage risky research.**
- No explicit reference to 'novel methodologies'
  - *'Novel methodologies' is an element that may be positive but is not strictly necessary for an excellent proposal.*

<u>Questions for reviewers:</u>
Ground-breaking nature, ambition, and feasibility

To what extent does the proposed research address important challenges?

*To what extent are the objectives **ambitious and beyond the state of the art (e.g., novel concepts and approaches or development between or across disciplines)?***

*To what extent is the outlined scientific approach **feasible** bearing in mind the groundbreaking nature and ambition of the proposed research (Step 1)?*

*To what extent are the proposed research **methodology and working arrangements** appropriate to achieve the goals of the project (Step 2)?*

*To what extent are the **proposed timescales, resources, and PI commitment** adequate and properly justified (Step 2)?*

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Part B1: Research project
Questions to ask yourself

- Is my project new, innovative, bringing in new solutions/theories?
- Does it promise to go substantially beyond the state of the art?
- Why is my project important? Answering a complete question (not only 'what' but also 'why') - Think Big! Make sure that your idea needs an ERC to do it
- How can I prove/support my case? Do I have a hypothesis? Do I have supporting evidence? Have I proven the project's feasibility? Are my goals realistic?
- Is it timely? (Why wasn't it done in the past?)
- What's the risk? Is it justified by a substantial potential gain? Do I have a plan for managing the risk? Make sure that your risk is not too early on in the project. Have I proposed alternatives?
- Why am I the best/only person to carry it out? Know your competitors – what is the state of play, and why is your idea and scientific approach outstanding compared to them?
- Have I given a realistic picture of my collaborations? Show that you can drive the collaborations but that it is *you* who will be leading the project.

Part B1: CV and Track Record

1. **PERSONAL DETAILS**

   PI's education and key qualifications, current position(s) and relevant previous positions they have held.

2. **RESEARCH ACHIEVEMENTS (<=10) AND PEER RECOGNITION**

   - demonstrating advancement in the field, with emphasis on more recent achievements
   - prizes, fellowships, academy membership, etc.

   *The applicant can provide a **short, factual narrative** on the significance of the listed achievements and recognitions in relation to the research field and the proposed project.*

3. **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

   Relevant additional information on their research career to <u>provide context</u> when assessing their research achievements and peer recognition.

   - career breaks, diverse career paths, life events
   - other noteworthy contributions to research community

Part B1: Your CV and Track Record

- Use the recommended template with the 3 sections as much as possible.

- Explain what has been your own contribution to your publications/how they have impacted the field

- Convince the panel that you are the forefront of your research field

- Explain publishing habits in your field and country if needed.

- Describe accurately any other activity that can indicate scientific maturity

- If you know that you have gaps or other issues in your CV, explain them in the Additional Information section

Rumour : *One needs publications in Nature/Science/High IF journals to succeed.*

✖**NOT true**: however, publishing with senior scientists (former supervisors) may raise doubts about maturity/scientific independence.

Part B1: CV and Track Record
Questions to ask yourself

- Have I shown my scientific leadership?

- Am I able to work independently, and to manage a 5-year project with a substantial budget? List prior research endeavours, explain your role and contribution.

- Am I internationally active? Speaker in international conferences, served in committees, have become an editor, given expert service, etc. Do I have any international collaborations?

<div style="border:1px solid;">

Questions for reviewers:
Intellectual capacity and creativity

To what extent has the PI demonstrated the **ability** to conduct ground-breaking research?

To what extent does the PI provide **evidence of creative and original thinking**?

To what extent does the PI have the **required scientific expertise and capacity** to successfully execute the project?

</div>

Part B1 is all about finding the right balance

Part B1 gives the first impression of your project/yourself and will determine if you pass to Step 2, therefore:

- avoid jargon
- no excessive highlighting
- do not oversell it
- make sure there are no typos
- make it as accessible as possible to a generalist (have it proof-read by many people)
- make sure that there are proper legends to the figures/tables as well as that the figure axes are clearly visible

Part B2 is for filling in the details

- Make sure that there is an obvious link between B1 and B2 - no surprises
- Make the project easy to read and attractive
- Use full space available (14 p.)
- Make sure you give full references (these are excluded from page count so there is no excuse)
- You should add/describe some sort of timeline
- Do not repeat the synopsis, go into details on your methodology and work plan
- Explain your hypothesis or provide supporting evidence (if it exists)
- Make sure that the quantitative and qualitative differences to the state-of-the-art are clear and referenced - show you did your homework!
- Provide alternative strategies to mitigate risks.
- Fill in your Funding ID fully.
- Think of the project as a team - explain involvement of team members and collaborators (be careful though: ERC proposals are NOT consortium proposals)

Part B2: Explain properly your resources and budget

- Budget analysis carried out in Step 2 evaluation
- Panels have responsibility to ensure that resources requested are reasonable and well justified
- Budget cuts need to be justified on a proposal-by-proposal basis (no across-the-board cuts).
- Costs can be cut when they have not been explained
- Panels do not "micro-manage" project finances
- Awards made on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis: no negotiations.
- Ask for funding for Open Access – this is obligatory in HorizonEurope

Rumour 1: *If I do not ask for a large sum, I have no chances- only complex and expensive projects get funded.*
✖**NOT true**: There are many areas where it may make little or no sense to ask for the maximal amount of funds. No grant was ever rejected for asking too few funds.

Rumour 2: *Ask for funding beyond the max, the panel will anyhow cut it down.*
✖**NOT true**: unexplained or non-motivated requests can be cut down, so if you artificially inflate your budget, the extra funding will be indeed cut.

I have been invited for an interview – now what?

- Have clear and representative slides and focus on SCIENCE! Don't try to make a business presentation – you are talking to scientists.

- Keep the time

- Try to anticipate questions. Prepare also for cases where you do not have an answer

- Give to the point answers- be mindful not to talk too much in an unfocussed way

- Know the details of your proposal and methods, as well as your research area – who are your main competitors/collaborators?

- If you have new work on the topic – present it!

Typical reasons for rejection

Research Project
- <u>Scope</u>: Too narrow ←→ too broad/unfocussed
- Not clear groundbreaking aspects/Incremental research
- Collaborative project, <u>several PIs</u>
- <u>Work plan</u> not detailed enough/unclear
- Insufficient <u>risk</u> management
- Part B2 did not give sufficient information on the methodology- concerns on feasibility

Principle Investigator
- Insufficient <u>track-record</u>
- Not clear they can carry out the project (not independent, lack of relevant expertise)

If rejected, KEEP TRYING

Reapplications have a higher success rate

Use the feedback from evaluation reports

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Contrary to what you may think

- The panel descriptors do not represent ERC scientific priorities
- The success rate is not linked to academic age
- Publication record is not decisive in selection decisions
- The Host Institution is not an evaluation criterion

Where can you find more information?

Videos - ERC Classes

- What to consider before applying
- How to fill in the application
- The interview
- How the evaluation works.

[Click here to watch!](#)

Thank You!

More information: erc.europa.eu

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Success rate by country of Host Institution

Success rate by country

Success rate (2007-2022)
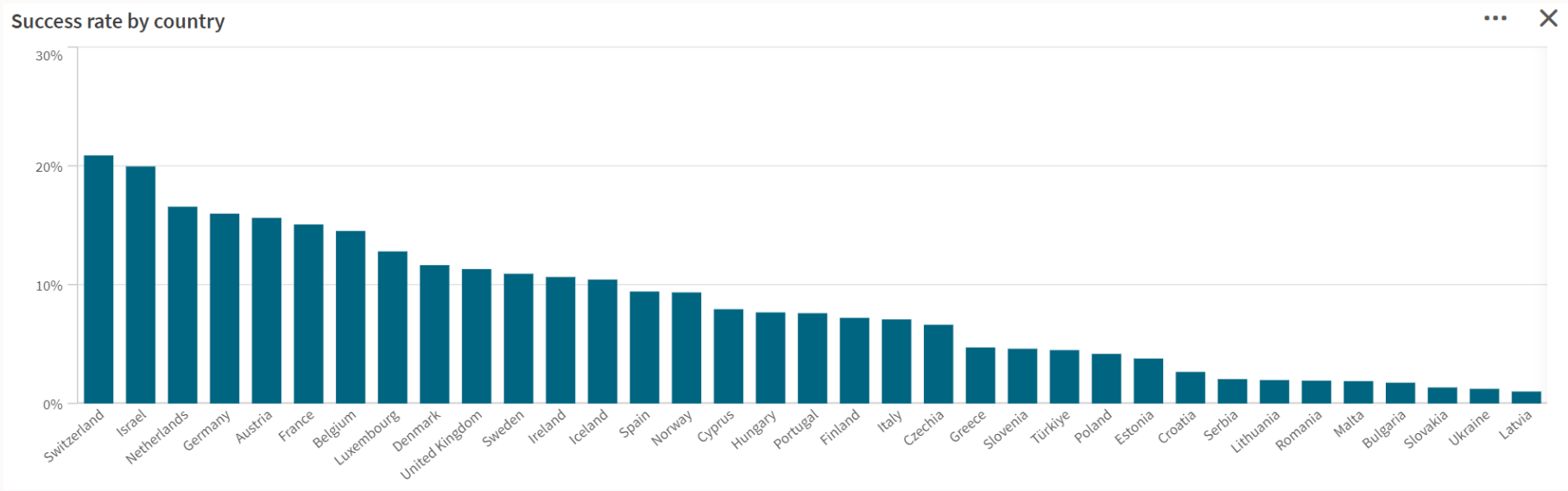
ERC-funded projects by country of Host Institution

Host country (as of 04/01/2024)

ERC calls 2007-2023
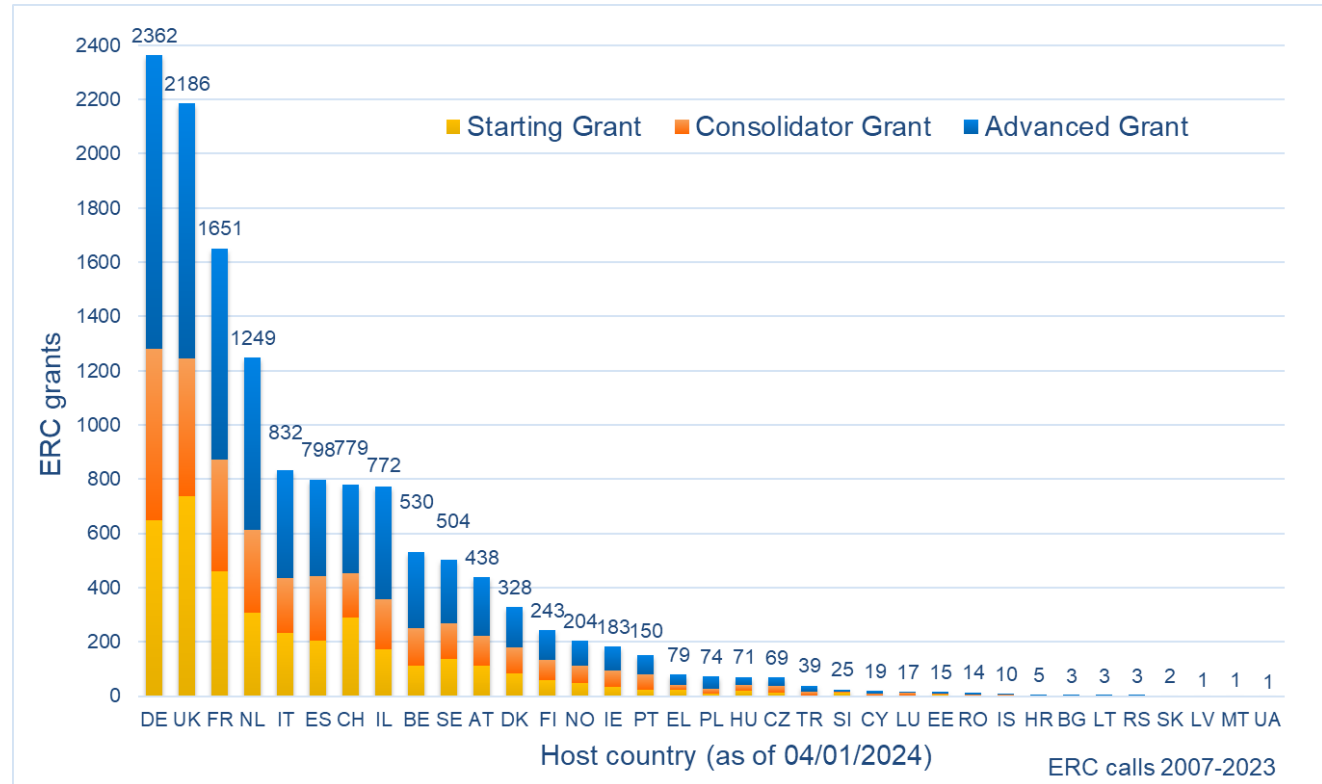
48 non-EU/Associated Country grantee nationalities - 8% of all ERC grants

Non-EU/AC Principal Investigators	Starting and Consolidator grants	Advanced grants	Total main grants
USA	295	139	434
Canada	110	20	130
China	86	1	87
India	79	3	82
Australia	62	16	78
Russia	65	11	76
Japan	34	10	44
New Zealand	21	6	27
Argentina	24	2	26
Other	157	13	170
Total	933	221	1154

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Increased international participation in Starting and Consolidator calls
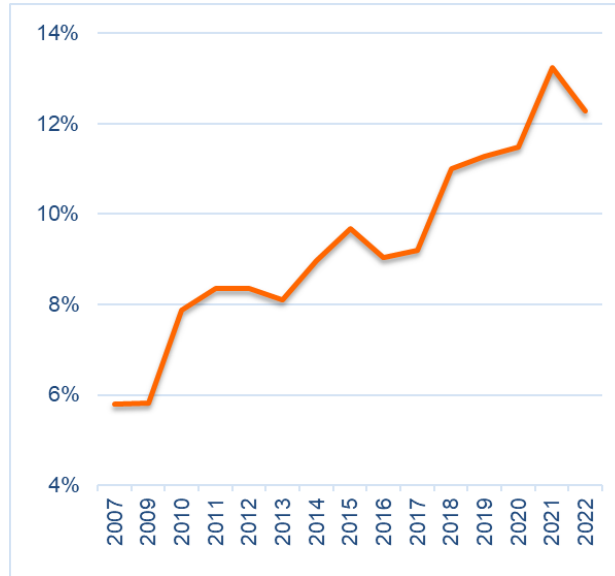
Starting and Consolidator
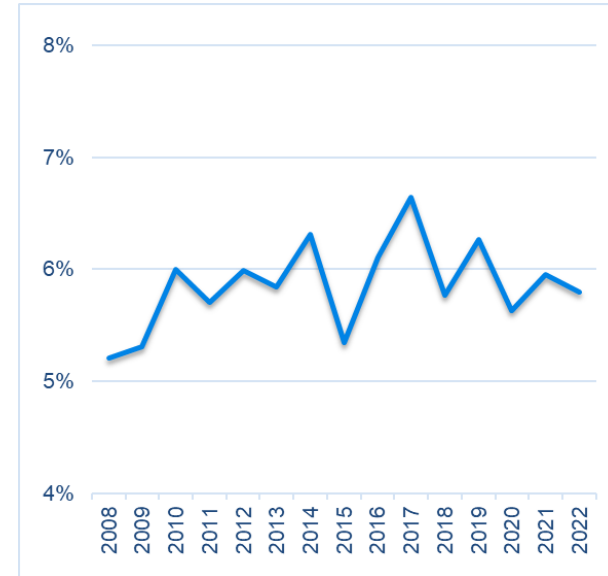
Advanced

Proportion of evaluated proposals from non-EU/Associated Country nationals by call year