



ideas

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Focus on
BULGARIA
ERC in Sofia

What's new
Next ERC calls: changes ahead

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What's on
National funding schemes



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2012 • #2 (June)



Editorial by Jack Metthey



Dear reader,

When the ERC was created in 2007, it was decided that excellence would be the only criterion used to determine which research proposals would be funded: there would be no pre-set priorities, no geographical consideration, nothing but excellence. This was, and still is, a matter of fundamental credibility.

Although there was much debate at the time, the ERC has become one of the major success stories of the 7th Framework Programme (FP7). Several thousand ERC grantees and their team members have benefited from the ERC support, and demand continues to grow. Indeed, the ERC has set new standards for EU research, so much so, that a number of countries have stepped in to support reserve list candidates, who could not be funded due to the ERC's budget limitations. You will read more about these national initiatives within these pages.

However, as a recent letter co-signed by 12 research Ministers and some discussions in the European Parliament have shown, there is a growing political debate on "widening participation". Some argue that the benefits of ERC support should be spread more evenly across the EU.

Supporting talent everywhere in Europe is the goal but, clearly, one must not do this by lowering standards, or else the ERC "will lose its soul" and the hard earned respect of its supporters. We must find ways of raising standards across the board and encourage further involvement. In this issue of ideas, we will look to the East and put Bulgaria in the spotlight.

In fact, the issue of widening participation touches all parts of FP7. As we prepare to launch the final FP7 calls for proposals in July – the largest ever in budgetary terms – it is easy to see which Member States have done better than others. But again, one cannot lower standards or introduce quotas just to mask underlying structural issues.

This is why, along with Horizon 2020, which will focus on promoting excellence in both research and innovation, the Commission has also made a proposal to reform the EU's Cohesion policy. Through "Smart Specialisation", Structural funds will, where needed, be used to build research and innovation capacity in key areas to promote greater but targeted participation in Horizon 2020, creating so-called "Stairways to Excellence".

In this context, the ERC's *raison d'être* continues to stand, simple and clear: to maintain its relentless and uncompromising pursuit of excellence!



Jack Metthey, Director

'Framework Programme - Interinstitutional Relations', European Commission's DG Research & Innovation

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What's new

Next ERC calls: changes ahead

In the upcoming ERC calls, to be officially announced on 9 July, a number of changes can be expected. The main news is that the ERC Starting Grants scheme will be split in two, with one call for the 'real' starters and one for the 'consolidators'. Scientists, stay tuned!

New grant scheme - Consolidator Grant

From 9 July, the ERC Starting Grants scheme is expected to be divided into two separate calls. Starting Grants will be open to scientists with at least two, but no more than seven years of postdoctoral experience. The new **Consolidator Grant** (CoG), on the other hand, will target those who completed their PhD at least seven, but no longer than 12 years ago. What is more, the amount of funding will differ; the Starting Grant will remain at the level of a maximum of €2 Million for five years, whereas the Consolidator Grants will be worth more; up to €2.75 Million, for the same period of time. The two calls will be published separately.

The ERC Scientific Council is continuously monitoring the development of the ERC's activities and the CoG scheme is part of this fine-tuning, to fit the needs of top researchers in Europe. Formally dividing the Starting grant into two calls is in fact a reinforcement of the practice of the last two years, when the scheme simply had two sub-streams. In terms of the ERC's philosophy and objectives, nothing has changed.

New deadline for Advanced Grant call

Senior researchers should also take note of the fact that the ERC will change the application date for the next Advanced Grant call. The next call will be published on 10 July, instead of in the autumn, with a submission deadline in late November, and not in spring as in previous years.

One deadline for all domains

The Scientific Council has also decided to set a single deadline for all domains (Physical Sciences and Engineering, Life Sciences and Social Sciences and Humanities) for each call. It means that, from July on, all applicants for a certain call, regardless of their specialisation, will have the same deadline to send their project proposals to the ERC.

Expected dates for the upcoming calls

Call for proposals	Publication date	Deadline	Funding
ERC 2013 Starting Grants	10 July 2012	17 October 2012 (all domains)	Up to € 2 Million per grant
ERC 2013 Advanced Grants	10 July 2012	22 November 2012 (all domains)	Up to € 3.5 Million per grant
ERC 2013 Synergy Grants	10 October 2012	10 January 2013	Up to € 15 Million per grant
ERC 2013 Consolidator Grant	7 November 2012	21 February 2013 (all domains)	Up to € 2.75 Million per grant

NB: Please note that at this stage the information is indicative only, but expected to be formally confirmed on 9 July 2012, when the European Commission is expected to adopt the ERC's next work programme. Only the information published on the [Participant Portal](#) should be considered official.

See further ERC website: [click here](#)





What's on

National funding schemes: building on the ERC

The arrival of the European Research Council as a new actor on the European research landscape quickly had a wider impact at different levels. The ERC has already become a model for, or strongly influenced, a number of national funding agencies (Poland, France, Spain). Another striking effect is that a string of countries have launched initiatives to fund those candidates who passed the ERC competitions' strict quality threshold, but were left unfunded due to the ERC's budgetary constraints. This shows that there is still much talent out there to be funded across Europe, or as ERC President Helga Nowotny puts it - "there is still room at the top".

Already after the ERC's first grant competitions in 2008, some national initiatives were launched to capitalise on the ERC's high quality selection process and nurture top researchers at home. Others soon followed suit; in the last five years over a dozen countries have invested in this talent. Currently,

nine schemes are active (Czech Republic, Flanders (Belgium), Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Romania) for the Starting Grants, and some of them also for the Advanced Grants. On top of this, Bulgaria has one in the pipeline which will use the EU Structural funds to finance it. Others are yet to come.

Among the most recent ones is the Greek programme, launched this year to target ERC reserve list candidates with €7.5 Mio. The Czech equivalent, with almost €25 Mio, started last year and will run until 2019. Since last month, Romania has two schemes for ERC applicants, worth nearly €8 Mio.

It is pleasing to see that there is a will to invest in excellent frontier research even in times of economic austerity. The initiatives can also be seen as a vote of confidence for the ERC peer review.

Going global

Heading to South America

"South America is a dynamic region for addressing the fortunes of top researchers. This is a good match to the ERC... South Americans understand mobility". These were the words of ERC Secretary General Prof. Donald Dingwell during his tour to Brazil and Chile in May. The purpose of the visit was to promote the ERC funding opportunities among top talent and to forge closer ties.

Since 2007, six South American researchers have benefited from ERC funding; a number that the ERC wishes to see increase.

Prof. Dingwell started his tour in Santiago, Chile, where he met with members of the National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research and a Chilean Senator, and spoke at a conference at the University of Chile.

In Brazil, he stopped in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia to interact with scientists, representatives from Brazilian research organisations and universities, and officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

He also discussed the ERC and the need to boost "brain circulation" at a round table with university representatives.

Latin America was the third stop, after **Canada** and **South Africa** (see picture), of the 'ERC goes Global' campaign, aimed to encourage top talent overseas to apply for ERC grants. The tour will continue to **South-West Asia** in July; followed by **Russia**, and later in the year the **US West Coast** and **Mexico**.

To read more, [click here](#)





Research in the spotlight

What the water under Greenland's ice can teach us about climate change



This time we put the spotlight on ERC Advanced Grantee Prof. Dorthe Dahl-Jensen, who is returning to the Greenland ice sheet this summer for the final season of her ice drilling project.

By drilling for ice cores from the last interglacial warm period - around 120,000 years ago - the research team hopes to chart the impact of a rise in global temperatures on the Greenland ice sheet. The team's engineers have been refining their equipment to create a tool capable of cutting into rock, rather than just ice. The hope is that this precision tool will be up to the challenge: applying the force necessary to bore into the ice when it is at melting point risks the drill getting stuck. The ambition for the current drilling programme is to reach pure rock in order to gain an insight into the composition of the ice sheet, without the impurities and cavities that have been present in previous years' samples.

Prof. Jensen's project studies the ice flow over the bedrock beneath the Greenland ice sheet. A wet bedrock means that the ice reacts more rapidly to changes in climate and flows faster, which makes a greater contribution to the fresh water supply to the ocean.

The team uses radio echo sounding information, ice core data and ice sheet models to search for lakes under the ice. Scientists in this field are uncertain why no sub-glacial lakes have been found in Greenland, when many have been found in Antarctica. An accurate picture of the hydrological stability of the Greenland

ice sheet is fundamental to scientists' ability to predict how the ice sheets have evolved, and future sea levels worldwide.

The ERC funding has made Prof. Jensen's project possible and has enabled her to build up an interdisciplinary team of young researchers, whose expertise covers everything from ice sheet modelling to DNA sampling. On 28 June, her project will be featured on an edition of *Euronews*, the European news TV channel, with shots taken at the basecamp in Greenland.

> **Grantee:** Prof. Dorthe Dahl-Jensen

> **Host Institution:** Centre for Ice and Climate, Niels Bohr Institute, University of Copenhagen (DK)

> **ERC Project:** Where is the water under the Greenland ice sheet? (WATERUNDERTHEICE)

> **ERC Call:** Advanced Grant 2009

> **ERC Funding:** € 2.5 million for five years

Links:

<http://www.iceandclimate.nbi.ku.dk/staff/description/?id=45103>

<http://neem.dk/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndmnX1On5u4>





Focus on Bulgaria

To Sofia with a mission



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How do you attract more Eastern European top talent to the ERC calls? Aiming to widen participation across this region, the latest Scientific Council plenary meeting and an information event took place in April in Sofia, Bulgaria. The ERC received a warm welcome there from the Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev and Minister of Research, Education and Youth Prof. Sergei Ignatov.

During a press conference, the Minister broke the news that his country is launching a **new national funding scheme** for Bulgarian top candidates who were not funded by the ERC competitions (see also p. 4). In addition, he confirmed Bulgaria's solid support for the ERC and its budget boost, proposed by the Commission for the framework programme 'Horizon 2020'.

ERC President Helga Nowotny applauded the new Bulgarian initiative. She also noted that "it is a great

concern to the ERC that the participation rate is low in this part of Europe" and reiterated that "the ERC is very keen to see more top talent from this region participate in our future calls".

It was therefore very encouraging to see some 160 participants flock to the information session organised at this occasion by the Bulgarian Ministry, with the cooperation of the ERC and the EC Representation office in Sofia. The high-level speakers were supported by two Bulgarian grantees, who shared their ERC experience with the audience. Other workshops will be held in Sofia and Varna in September.

Similar ERC events aimed at spreading awareness about the ERC funding have already taken place in Hungary, Romania, Poland and Latvia, and the Scientific Council has met in several other countries in the region.

ERC Grantees in Bulgaria

- > 3 ERC grantees are based in Bulgaria, representing a total funding of around € 3.3 million
- > All projects are in the field of Social Science and Humanities
- > 1 selected project is a Starting Grant and 2 projects are Advanced Grants
- > 5 ERC grantees of Bulgarian nationality are based in other countries

Bulgarian involvement in the ERC

- > Around 7 Bulgarian scientists are serving as panel members or reviewers in the ERC evaluation of proposals and the selection of grantees
- > The Bulgarian ERC National Contact Points are Radka Kaneva from the Medical University, Sofia, and Yuri Todorov from Sofia University.





Three questions to Prof. Sergei Ignatov, Egyptologist and Bulgarian Minister of Research, Education and Youth



What is your view on the Commission's proposal for a new framework programme and the ERC's role in it?

'Horizon 2020' is an ambitious concept for establishing stronger and better connections between education, research and innovation in Europe to support the further development of the European Research Area (ERA). I think that the future Framework Programme has the potential to contribute to shaping the future of European society by tackling major societal challenges and promoting excellence in research.

I believe that as a flexible and modern instrument for implementing research policy, the European Research Council will strengthen its fundamental role; providing outstanding scientists with both the funding and the freedom to conduct research in new scientific areas. In this way, the ERC will contribute to achieving coherence and unity in science, will promote the passion for new discoveries and will support the development of Europe's research capacity.

Let me refer to a quote that, some say, belongs to the ancient theologian St. Augustine the Blessed; "*unity in necessary things; liberty in doubtful things; love and kindness in all things*". But how do those words have any connection with science and innovation? When I say *unity*, what instantly comes to mind is the notion of a united European Research Area. By *liberty*, I mean freedom in research and innovation. And that is exactly what the ERC is all about – no limitations, neither thematic priorities, nor geographical quotas. And finally, as for *love*, how else could you describe the ERC than as love for science?

I consider 'Horizon 2020', and especially the ERC, as a reflection of those three main principles: *unity in science, liberty in science and love for science*. Only with the mutual efforts of Member States can we achieve these goals.

How can the number of ERC grantees in Bulgaria be raised?

This year the Bulgarian Ministry of Education, Youth and Science has taken measures to inform the public, policy-makers and scientists about the role of the ERC in the development of the ERA.

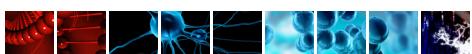
To raise the awareness of the Bulgarian scientific community about the ERC funding schemes, we will also organise a series of sessions in two of the biggest university cities in the country. Our Ministry also plans to support projects submitted by Bulgarian researchers that were highly rated but did not pass the threshold for ERC funding.

It is also good to showcase examples. I am very pleased that a Bulgarian ERC grant holder, Prof. Roumen Daskalov, was recognised by the European Commission: his project was published in a booklet on FP7 success stories.

Last, but not least, achieving excellent research results requires a specific environment and infrastructure. Therefore, I am convinced that enabling synergies between 'Horizon 2020' and the Structural Funds is key and will result in an increased number of ERC grant holders, not only from Bulgaria.

What are your thoughts on the policy of funding projects based on excellence only?

Competition based on the sole criterion of excellence is without any doubt the best way to encourage human creativity. It is the unifying factor, as it demonstrates the demand for agile and bright minds; minds that will take us to the frontier of knowledge. To bring excellent ideas to life, great passion and dedication are needed. New ideas are precisely what is necessary for Europe to maintain its competitiveness and its leading role globally.





Interview with...

Prof. Ivaylo Znepolski - An eyewitness to the ex-communist regimes in Eastern Europe



© Ivaylo Znepolski

ERC Advanced grantee Prof. Ivaylo Znepolski, Bulgarian former Culture Minister (1993-1995), specialises in the history of communism. In his project, he elucidates the significance of the fall of former Soviet bloc regimes. By analysing the motives and behaviour of individuals and groups, he hopes to identify the key factors behind the social and political changes that took place in Eastern Europe from 1956 to 1989.

What are your ambitions for this project?

My goal is to explore the dynamics of the relationship between communist regimes and societies in some countries in Eastern Europe from 1956 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We are trying to get an insight into the period that followed the “destalinisation”, when classical Stalinist models were no longer at stake.

What key research questions are you addressing?

The main element of our research is to understand how unexpected democratic change became possible. Until now, the scientific literature in Western and Eastern Europe has focused on traditional political theories of totalitarianism. This is too crude a vision of these societies: it cannot capture late communism in all its singularities. We analyse the role that individual actors, such as artists and social groups, like professional associations, have played in the transformation of ex-communist societies.

You are using the concept of “incidents”. Can you explain to us what this notion is about?

I use the term ‘incident’ in its philosophical sense, i.e. events that are unexpected, or that cannot be predicted, but which changed expectations

and behaviour. The ‘incident’ is also a structural phenomenon as it is perpetuated by a deviant conduct, and is often repressed and sanctioned by the authorities (e.g. a forbidden publication, an unauthorised demonstration). I see it as a promising notion: it matches our goal of examining individual and collective everyday practices under communist regimes to understand what really happened.

What are the wider applications of your research?

It is not possible to say yet, but I expect that my research will strengthen the interest in the role of various actors in the history of these regimes, and help to introduce a more balanced and precise appreciation of the individual and collective motivations behind certain decisions and acts. I also hope it will highlight the need for new historical curricula, which can offer younger generations a history of communism less full of revulsion, less disorientating and uncertain. I am confident that this project will influence current political theories and help decision-makers to analyse our communist past.

You are a former Minister for Culture; with this background why did you apply for an ERC grant?

After 1989, many university teachers like me were swept up in the uncontrolled transformational flood. We were driven by the illusion that we could combine academic and political functions, and actively contribute to the establishment of new democratic institutions. I realised that this was not possible, so in 1995 I refused an offer to join the new government and went back to academia. Thanks to my ERC grant, I have been able to build an exceptional multinational research team of seven people at the University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski, and to devote my time fully to my topic – things that I could not have afforded in the past. I regret that not much has been done in Eastern Europe to support scientists. This is why I welcome the new Bulgarian initiative to fund scientists from the ERC reserve lists.





Highlights – Did you miss this?

Global Summit on Merit Review

Leaders of major research funders from 44 nations met in Washington DC in May to agree on principles on the evaluation of research. These principles apply to the highly recognised ERC peer review procedure, based on scientific excellence only. Also, a Global Research Council was launched to provide a discussion forum for the policies of funding agencies worldwide. The event was organised by the National Science Foundation and the ERC was represented by Prof. Helga Nowotny.

To find out more, [click here](#)

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ERC on Facebook

The ERC launched itself on Twitter in January – it now also has an official Facebook page. The aim is to inform Facebook readers in real-time of some of the ERC activities: news on the funding schemes, calls for proposals and ERC researchers' projects. Join us to discover our latest pictures and videos; share, comment and like them!

[Facebook & Twitter](#)



ESOF goes to Dublin

The fifth edition of the Euroscience Open Forum (ESOF) - Europe's largest science meeting - will be hosted in Dublin from 11 to 15 July. The ERC will participate with a press conference and three scientific sessions, in which grantees will speak on various topics. From the ERC, President H. Nowotny (keynote speaker) and Secretary General D. Dingwell will attend. One of the key personalities present will also be European Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn.

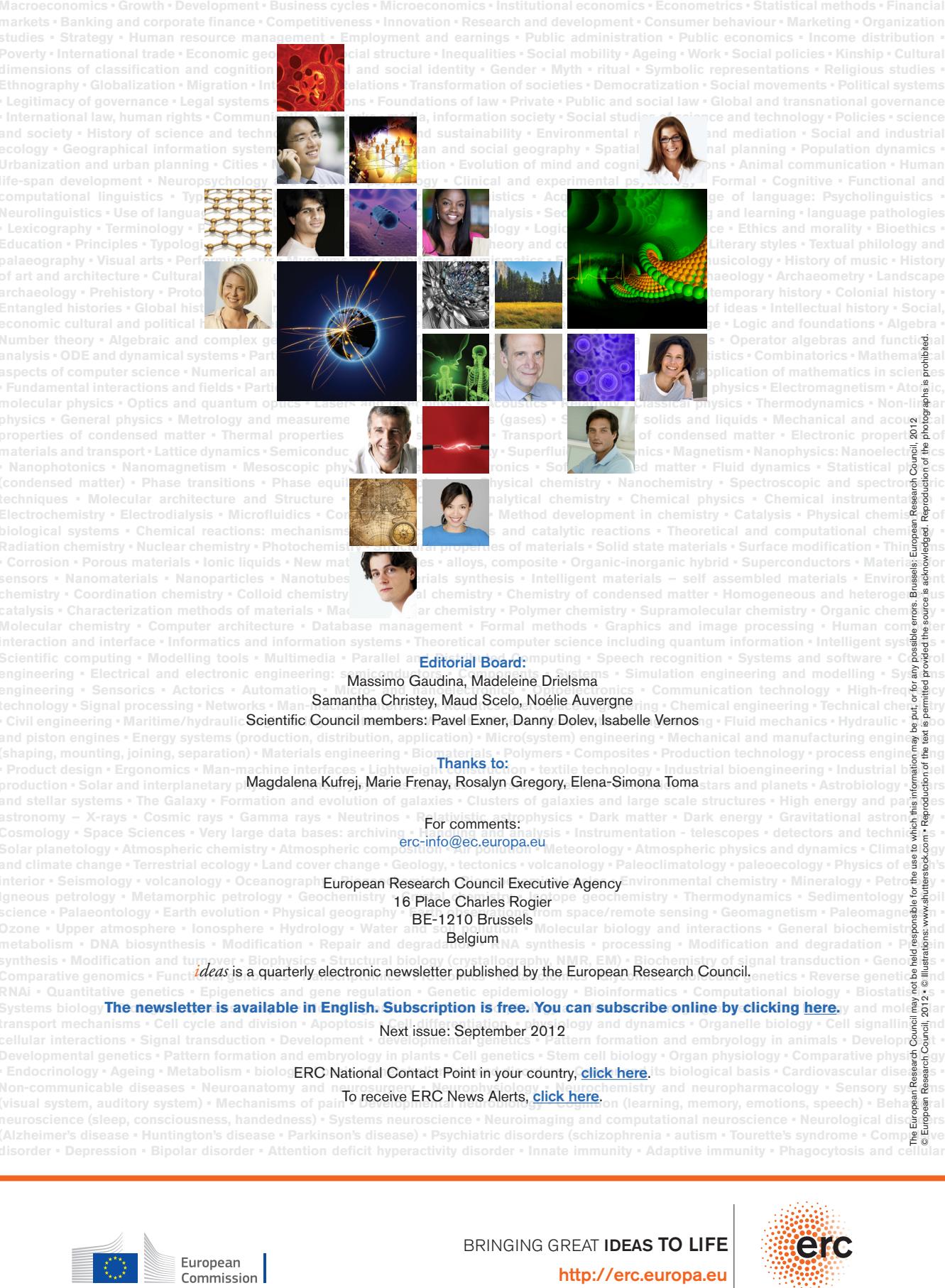
To find out more, [click here](#) and [here](#)

Ci vediamo a Roma!

From 25 to 26 June, an event for potential applicants and ERC grantees will take place in Rome. It will mark the ERC's first five years and will give an insight into the ERC schemes. Prof. Helga Nowotny and Italian Research Minister Francesco Profumo will participate in a roundtable discussion, and Italian ERC grantees will get together for the first time.

To find out more, [click here](#)





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