

Press release

## ERC projects behind exoplanets discovery

22 February 2017

**There is also the EU, and in particular the European Research Council (ERC), behind the revolutionary discovery announced today by NASA about potentially inhabitable exoplanets.**

After the announcement, ERC grantee Dr Michaël Gillon said: *"Without the EU funding it would not have been possible to arrive at this discovery. I'm very grateful that the European Research Council invested in our idea and believed in our intuition back in 2013."*

European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation Carlos Moedas also commented: *"This ground-breaking discovery shows that international collaboration and the crucial support from European Commission take us closer to one of the most fascinating quests - to find life beyond our solar system. Congratulations to Belgian Michaël Gillon and his international team. Thanks to the EU funding through the European Research Council, he has paved the way to this revolutionary discovery."*

ERC President Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon said: *"The international team of astronomers who announced this major breakthrough includes several ERC grantees among whom Michaël Gillon. The ERC is proud to have contributed to this incredible discovery through its support to parts of their ambitious research. This shows both that global cooperation is paying off and that Europe knows how to anticipate winners."*

This discovery of the Trappist-1 system was made in the context of 'SPECULOOS' (Search for habitable Planets Eclipsing Ultra-cool Stars), an ambitious project led by Michaël Gillon (University of Liège, Belgium), supported by a Starting grant from the ERC. After this first discovery, SPECULOOS aims to detect more systems of this type, thanks to four telescopes currently being installed on the European Southern Observatory of Paranal (ESO) in Chile that will be able to observe more targets than this prototype. According to Dr Gillon, "SPECULOOS, which will observe ten times as much targets and with greater precision, should detect many more, placing itself at the frontline of research into the search for life elsewhere in the Universe"

These results are published by [Nature](#). Dr Gillon acknowledges the support from the European Research Council for his SPECULOOS project, as well as ERC grantee Jeremy Leconte, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), France, and Emeline Bolmont, University of Namur, Belgium, and Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique et aux Énergies Alternatives (CEA), France.

**The SPECULOOS project:** searching for habitable planets amenable for biosignatures detection around the nearest ultra-cool stars.



European Research Council  
Established by the European Commission



Researcher: Michaël Gillon, Université de Liège, Belgium

ERC Starting grant running from 2014 to 2018

Funding: EUR 1.96 million

[Project website](#)

More information on the observation, in May 2016, of three habitable Earth-like planets:

<https://erc.europa.eu/projects-and-results/erc-stories/three-habitable-earth-planets-observed-erc-grantee>

## Background

The European Research Council (ERC), celebrating its tenth anniversary in 2017, is the first funding organisation for excellent frontier research set up by the EU. Every year, it selects and funds ambitious and creative researchers of any nationality and age, to run projects based in Europe. The ERC also strives to attract top researchers from anywhere in the world to come to Europe. To date, the ERC has funded some 7,000 top researchers at various stages of their careers.

The ERC offers three core grant schemes: Starting Grants (up to €1.5 million each), Consolidator Grants (up to €2 million each) and Advanced Grants (up to €2.5 million each).

The ERC is led by an independent governing body, the Scientific Council. The ERC President is Professor Jean-Pierre Bourguignon. The ERC has a budget of over €13 billion for the years 2014 to 2020 and is part of the EU research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020, for which European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science Carlos Moedas is responsible.

[ERC website](#)

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