

The European Research Council

ERC Grants – General Overview and Novelties in the 2026 Work Programme

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European Research Council Executive Agency

11 November 2025

**“ERC and national support measures for
researchers in Bulgaria”, Webinar**



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Overview

1. General outline ERC grant schemes
2. Submission and evaluation process (including novelties in the 2026 Work Programme)
3. Tips and hints for preparing your proposal
4. Bulgarian participation in ERC Programme

Questions & answers

ERC mission

".... to support investigator-driven frontier research across all fields, based on scientific excellence."

bottom-up
no pre-determined priorities

ERC is....

1. Part of Horizon Europe (2021-2027)



EUR 16 billion

ERC budget in Horizon Europe



17%

of the entire
Horizon Europe budget



ERC is....

2. The Scientific Council

Life Sciences



Geneviève
Almouzni
Molecular Cell
Biology



Liselotte
Højgaard
Medicine



Leszek
Kaczmarek
Neurobiology



Dirk
Inzé
Plant Biology



Luke
O'Neill
Biochemistry and
Immunology



Jesper
Svejstrup
Vice-President
Biochemistry



Maria Leptin
ERC President
Cell Biology



Gerd
Gigerenzer
Vice-President
Psychology



Eystein
Jansen
Vice-President
Earth Science

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



Conny
Aerts
Astrophysics



Tom
Henzinger
Computer
Science



Maarit
Karppinen
Chemistry



Sylvie
Lorente
Mechanical
Engineering



Björn
Ottersten
Electrical
Engineering



Tomaž Prosen
Physics



Nicola
Spaldin
Materials Theory



András
Stipsicz
Mathematics



ERC is....

3. The ERC Executive Agency

- Implements the ERC strategy as set by the Scientific Council
- Manages ERC operations (e.g. organizes peer-review evaluations, follows up on projects funded)
- Carries out communication activities and ensures dissemination of information to stakeholders



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Why should one apply for an ERC grant ?

- Research topic of own choice, with a team of own choice
- True financial autonomy for 5 years
- Negotiate with the host institution the best conditions of work
- Attract top team members (EU and non-EU) and collaborators
- Move with your grant to any place in Europe if desired ('Portability of grants')
- Attract additional funding and gain recognition: ERC is a quality label

Independence & flexibility & visibility

ERC in Figures



Over **14,000**
top researchers funded since
the ERC creation in 2007



Over **100,000**
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 **950** research institutions hosting
ERC grantees – universities, public or
private research centres in the EU or
Associated Countries



93
nationalities of
grant holders



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

ERC Grant schemes



Starting Grants

2-7 years after PhD

up to € 1.5 Mio for 5 years
possibility for additional funding



Advanced Grants

track-record of significant research achievements

up to € 2.5 Mio for 5 years
possibility for additional funding



Proof-of-Concept

bridging gap between research - earliest stage of marketable innovation

€150,000 **for ERC grant holders**



Consolidator Grants

7-12 years after PhD

up to € 2 Mio for 5 years
possibility for additional funding



Synergy Grants

2 – 4 Principal Investigators

up to € 10.0 Mio for 6 years
1 PI can be based outside EU/Associated Countries;
possibility for up to € 4 Mio 'additional funding'



Additional funding – Work Programme 2026

StG, CoG, AdG*

- Additional funding can be requested to cover further eligible costs if needed for implementing the project
- No more pre-defined cost categories for additional funding
- May include personnel costs

Up to €1 million

Applicants already based in an EU Member State or country associated to HE

Up to €2 million

Applicants re-locating to the EU or an Associated Country from elsewhere to take up their ERC grant

*** SyG: up to €4 million additional funding**



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Eligibility periods: What changes in ERC Work Programme 2027?



StG: 0-10 years after PhD
CoG: 5-15 years after PhD

The eligibility period for both Starting and Consolidator Grant schemes will be widened:

- From 2027 on, researchers will be eligible to apply for a **Starting Grant immediately after successfully defending their PhD, and at any time within the following 10-year period**
- **Consolidator Grant** applicants will be eligible to apply **between 5 and 15 years after defending their PhD**
- Researchers will be awarded no more than one Starting Grant and one Consolidator Grant during their career
- The rules for the extension of the eligibility periods will remain in place

ERC PLUS – under discussion



New funding instrument

The ERC Scientific Council is currently working on a new instrument to offer ambitious researchers substantial funding for up to seven years, as part of the **Choose Europe for Science** initiative announced by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. More details about the modalities will follow in due course. The new funding instrument will be included in an amended version of the ERC Work Programme 2026 that is expected to be adopted by the end of 2025.

**Up to 7 years
Up to €7 million**

**Details to be
published
later in 2025
as an amendment to
ERC Work
Programme 2026**

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Evaluation criteria and process



Excellence
is the sole evaluation criterion

Excellence of the Research Project

- Ground-breaking nature
- Ambition
- Feasibility of the research project

Excellence of the Principal Investigator

- Intellectual capacity
- Creativity
- Commitment

The panels will **primarily evaluate the ground-breaking nature and ambition of the project**.
At the same time, the panels will evaluate the intellectual capacity and creativity of the PI, with a focus on the extent to which the PI has the required scientific expertise and capacity to successfully execute the project (no numerical scoring of PI)

Evaluation Process – Individual Grants

For main grant schemes (Starting, Consolidator, Advanced grants):
one single submission but a **two-step** evaluation

STEP 1

Remote assessment by **panel members**
Part I, CV and Track Record



Panel meeting



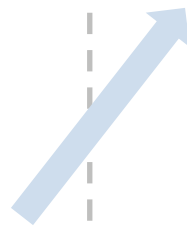
Proposal rejected
(Scores B&C)



Feedback to
applicants

Proposal retained
for step 2 (Score A)

- max. 44 per panel
- above 44: 'A non-invited'



STEP 2

Remote assessment by **panel members**
and **remote reviewers** of **complete research proposal**



Panel meeting
+ interview



Proposal not
funded
(Score B)



Feedback to
applicants

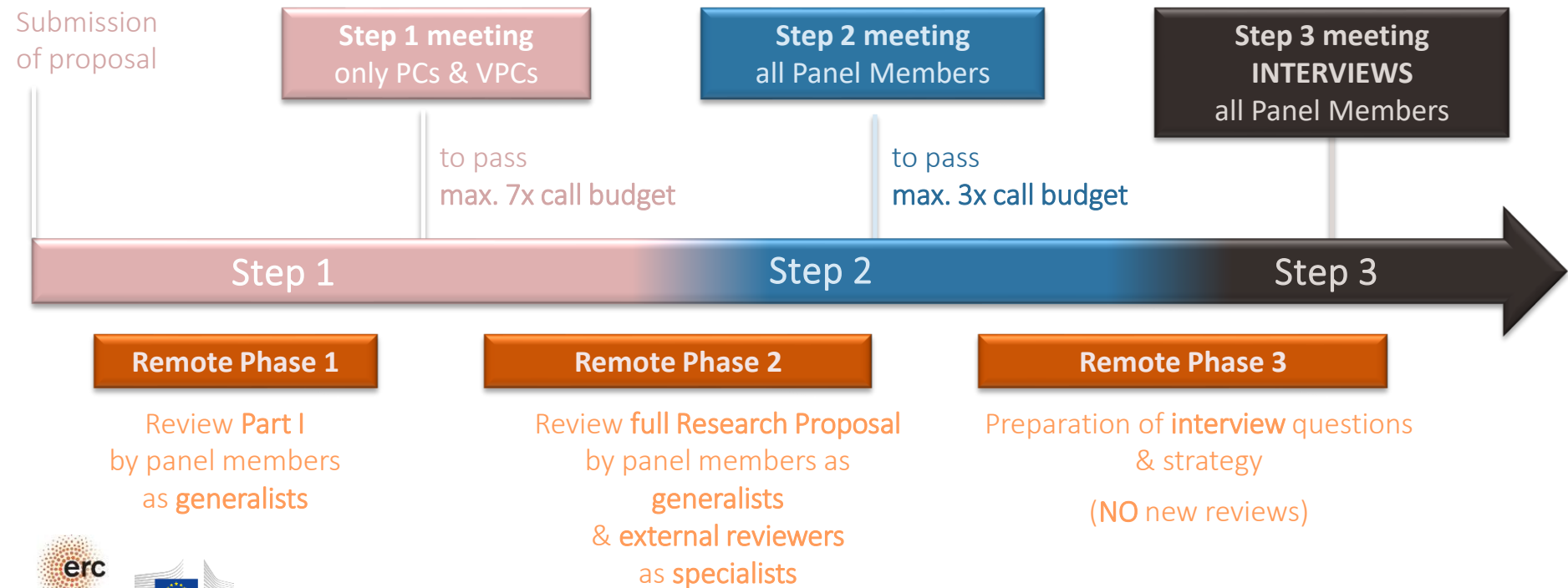
Proposal funded (score A)

- A funded (within available budget)
- A non-funded (outside available budget)



Evaluation Process – Synergy Grant

For Synergy grant: a single submission but a **three-step** evaluation with interviews with all PIs in step 3



Changes in ERC Work Programme 2026

Grant application

- New structure of the scientific proposal:
 - Scientific Proposal Part I (up to 5 pages – same as before)
 - Scientific Proposal Part II (up to 7 pages or 10 pages for Synergy Grant – shorter!)



Same as before: The panels will use Part I for evaluation at Step 1 and both parts together for their evaluation at Step 2.

Changes in ERC Work Programme 2026

Part I of the Scientific Proposal: max. 5 pages (same as before)
(References should be included and do not count towards the page limit)

Why your proposal is an original, creative idea about an important question in your research field(s) and how the project will advance the frontier of knowledge.

What you expect may be changed, opened, challenged or how the current understanding will be different after your work has been undertaken.

- (1) lay out the current state of knowledge
- (2) explain the scientific question and the objectives of the project
- (3) present the overall approach or research strategy you propose to use to reach the project goals.



See pp. 21-23: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/information-for-applicants_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf

Changes in ERC Work Programme 2026

Part II of the Scientific Proposal: max. 7 pages (shorter than previously)
(References should be included and do not count towards the page limit)



Detailed explanation of the project implementation, including research methodology, work plan, risk assessment, and mitigating measures, justification for the requested budget and resources, and any further necessary background not included in Part I.

At step 1, only Part I and the CV & track record are assessed

At step 2, the panel assesses the complete Research Proposal:

- both Part I and Part II (**try to avoid repeating sections of Part I in Part II**)
- CV and Track Record
- Resources
- Time commitment

See pp. 21-23: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/information-for-applicants_he-erc-stg-cog_en.pdf

2026 Calendar

ERC call*	Call Opening	Submission Deadline
Starting Grants ERC-2026-StG	9 July 2025	14 October 2025
Consolidator Grants ERC-2026-CoG	25 September 2025	13 January 2026 ←
Advanced Grants ERC-2026-AdG	28 May 2026	27 August 2026
Synergy Grants ERC-2026-SyG	10 July 2025	5 November 2025 ←

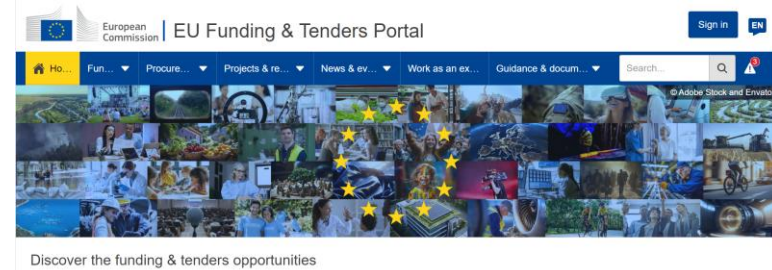
*New *ERC PLUS* scheme expected to be added to Work Programme 2026 later this year

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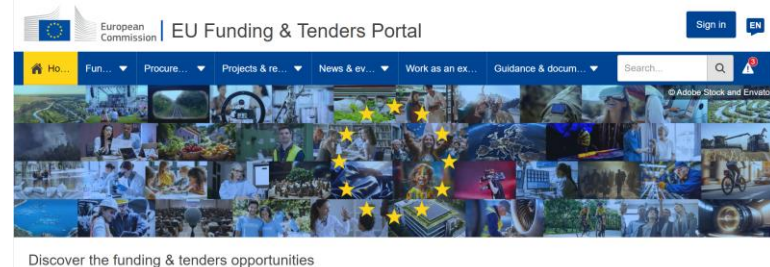
Before you start:



- Do you have that idea for an ERC project? Start developing it, do your literature research, **discuss your idea with peers/mentors**
- Are you convinced your idea is innovative and potentially ground-breaking?
- Are you passionate about your idea and eager to demonstrate that it works?

If the answer is yes, then go for it !

Step 1: Get information (early on!)



- Register early, get familiar with the European Commission's **EU Funding & Tenders Portal*** and download the templates
- 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 – get a HI letter (start this process early); contact your NCP, keep your eyes open for ERC-related events
- Talk to ERC grantees and former panel members
- Contact the ERCEA to ask all your questions well ahead of the submission deadline– e.g., ERC-2026-STG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu, ERC-2026-COG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu , ...
- Get the written consent of your collaborators before the submission deadline (a simple email exchange is sufficient)

Step 2: Choose grant type & ensure eligibility

- Date of PhD: Window is calculated as according to the 1st of January of the year of the call (i.e. 1 January 2026 for the 2026 calls).

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

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

StG-2027: 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2024 (inclusive)

The reference date shall be 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)



Starting/Consolidator Grant: Extension of the Eligibility Window

For documented situations occurring before the call deadline

- Maternity leave: 18 months for each child born before/after the date of the successful defence of PhD degree;
- Paternity/parental leave: documented time taken for each child born before or after the date of the successful defence of PhD degree;
- Long-term illness (>90 days for the PI or a close family member) or national service: documented amount of leave taken for each incident that occurred after the date of the successful defence of PhD degree;
- Clinical training: documented amount of clinical training received after the reference date of the 1st eligible degree, up to a maximum of 4 years;
- Major disaster (natural or human-caused such as armed conflicts)
- Seeking asylum
- Gender-based violence or any other form of violence



Step 3: Start writing...

PART A – admin forms online

Section 1 General information

Section 2 Participants

Section 3 Budget

Section 4 Ethics and security

Section 5 Other Questions

Annexes – submitted as .pdf

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

If applicable:

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

PART B1 – submitted as single .pdf



Abstract (2000 characters)

Secondary panel explanation (1000 characters)

Part I Scientific Proposal 5 p.

References (does not count towards page limit)

CV & Track Record up to 4 p.

PART B2 – submitted as single .pdf



Part II Scientific Proposal 7 p.

References (does not count towards page limit)

Funding ID (does not count towards page limit)

seen by the panel



Step 4: Choose a panel

Panel structure: Annex 1 of [Work Programme 2026](#) available on the ERC website

- When you submit your proposal, you need to **choose a review panel**
- ERC panel structure provides **guidance**, not meant to be a complete scientific classification (***not exhaustive***);
- Panel titles, subtitles, descriptors **do not reflect priorities**;
- **Any topic/field** is equally welcome, whether mentioned in panel structure or not;
- You can flag one '**secondary review panel**'. Explain in Part B1 why proposal is such a 'cross-panel' proposal!

Misconception: Choose the panel '**strategically**', to increase chances of success

X NOT true: The budget is distributed among the scientific panels as a function of demand, success rate is equal amongst panels → **choose the panel that is right for your proposal!**

Evaluation panel structure (2025, 2026)

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



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Choosing a panel

- Check the keywords of the panel
- Check the panel members of previous calls of a particular panel ([Panel Members | ERC \(europa.eu\)](#))
- Check funded projects from a particular panel ([Projects & statistics | ERC \(europa.eu\)](#))
- Proposals are initially assigned to the panel of the PI's choice.
- Transfer of proposals between panels may occur if:
 - there is a clear mistake on the part of the applicant
 - the necessary expertise is not available in the panel chosen by the applicant

Both Panel Chairs must agree on the transfer

CV & Track Record: Updated principles for evaluating the applicant - as of Work Programme 2024

- No prescriptive Principal Investigator profiles in Work Programme
- Simplification of CV and track record documentation
- Allowing researchers to provide narrative descriptions of their work
- Room for explaining career breaks or unconventional career paths
- Room for describing contributions that go beyond standard academic duties
- Extramural funding not an evaluation criterion
- Supervision of graduate student or post-docs not an evaluation criterion



New Curriculum Vitae and Track Record template - as of work programme 2024

1. Personal details

2. Research achievements and peer recognition

*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.*

- Research achievements (≤ 10 outputs):
 - Demonstrating advancement in the field
 - Emphasis on recent achievements
- Peer recognition, such as prizes or awards

New Curriculum Vitae and Track Record template - as of work programme 2024

3. Additional information

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

- Career breaks, diverse career paths, life events
- Other noteworthy contributions to the research community

Novelties – Research Assessment (as from work programme 2024)

Evaluation of research proposals: the why and what of the ERC's recent changes, 2024,
Maria Leptin, ERC President

<https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/ercs-new-approach-research-proposal-evaluations>

General tips

- **Writing a competitive proposal is hard – devote plenty of time!**
- **Get critical feedback on your proposal from peers and colleagues!**
- Make the project easy to read – divide into sections, use figures/tables, large enough font
- Avoid typos in the text and mistakes in figure captions and references
- Make sure you list all relevant references – they do not count towards the page limit
- Focus on the main points, avoid ‘bonus’ objectives (usually overly ambitious, vaguely articulated and poorly integrated)
- Don’t oversell your own work/contributions and give credit to work of others where it’s due
- Do not submit the proposal in the last minute (a submitted proposal can be replaced until the call deadline)



I have been invited for interview – now what?

- Have clear and representative slides and focus on the science! Do not oversell, avoid showmanship – you are talking to scientists
- Anticipate questions. Keep your answers focused – it is in your interest to answer as many questions as possible
- 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
- Know the details of your budget, be prepared to explain the necessity of any and all budget requests
- No need to over-explain your CV – the panel members know it
- **Practice, practice, and then practice again (mock interviews) – you have only 30 minutes in total, use them well, stay focused, be prepared**



Common reasons for rejection

Research Project:

- Scope too narrow or too broad
- Progress incremental or project unfeasible
- Work plan not detailed enough or unclear
- Insufficient risk management
- Insufficient information on methodology (B2)
- Collaborative project

Principal Investigator:

- Insufficient track record
- Interdisciplinary proposals: lacking expertise in one area
- Lack of independence

Interview:

- Answers too vague
- Unaddressed issues/questions
- Lack of supporting evidence
- Similar work published in the meantime

General Remarks

- **Don't exclude yourself from participating in ERC calls** - if you have an idea that you think will make a significant change in your field of research: go for it!
- **If you fail, try again!** Panel feedback is useful and resubmissions have a higher success rate
- **Take risks**, explain your project's high scientific impact if you reach your aims, and **provide evidence that you can do it**
- CV and track record: no pre-defined profiles, room for narrative description of contributions, room for out-of-the-usual contributions
- Evaluation: more focus on project, less on PI
- Aspects which are **NOT** a factor in the evaluation: Journal impact factors, mobility, host institution, previous grants, supervision experience



Where can you find more information?

[Apply for a grant | ERC](#)



7 Videos - ERC Classes

- How can you get started with your ERC proposals?
- How can you write your ERC proposal?
- How do we evaluate your ERC proposal?
- What do you need to know about the ERC Synergy Grants?
- How can you best prepare for your ERC interview?
- Why care about ethics in your ERC proposal?
- How to communicate on your ERC science project?

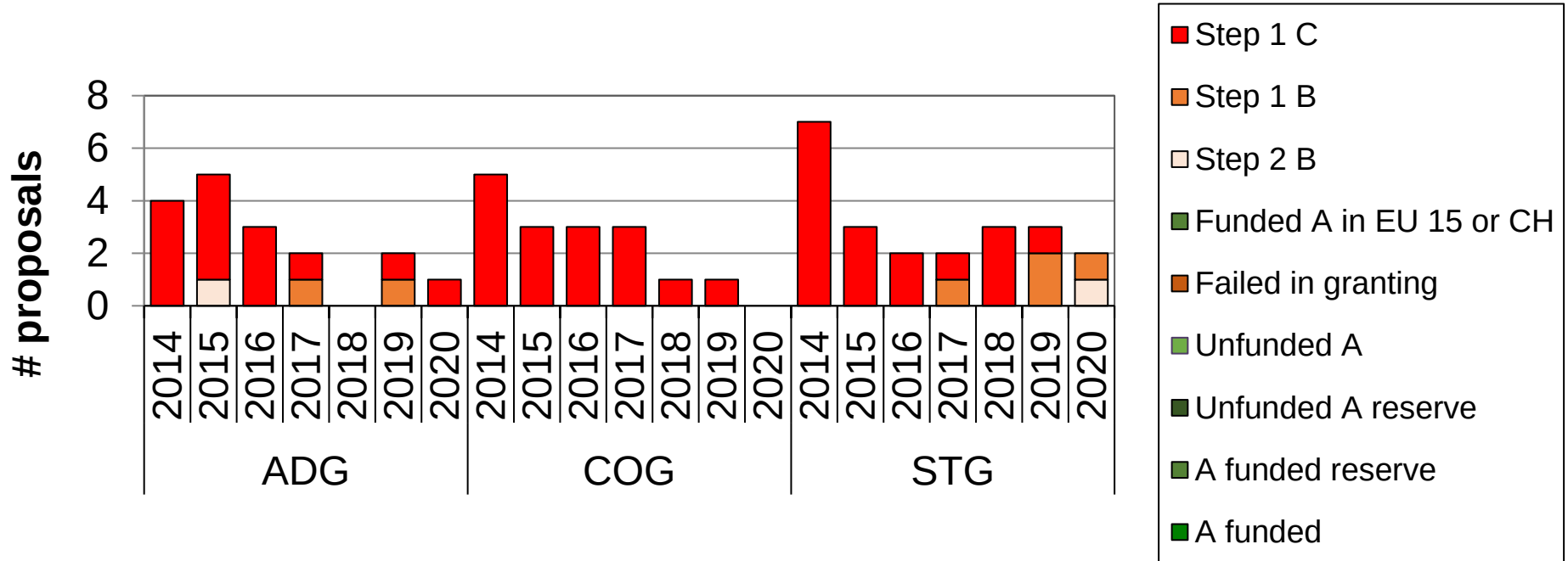
[ERC CLASSES - YouTube](#)

Overview

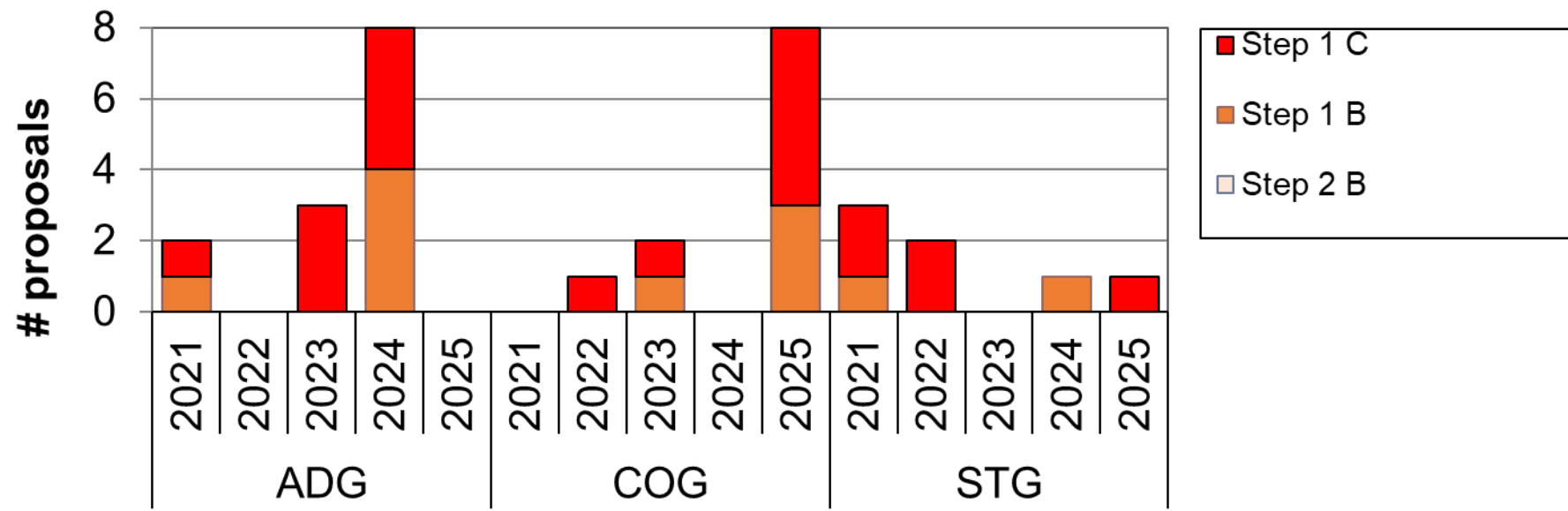
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Horizon 2020: Evaluated Proposals from Bulgaria (2014-2020)



Horizon Europe: Evaluated Proposals* from Bulgaria (since 2021)



*individual-grant proposals only. There were 4 SyG-proposals all C in step 1 (two in 2022, one each in 2024 and 2025)

Success rate by country of Host Institution (HI)



Average success rate: 12%



Widening European Participation: Challenges

- WEP country applicants apply or reapply less frequently and less successfully to the ERC. However, **proposals that pass to Step 2 do as well as any other**
- Often fail in step 1 due to grantsmanship skills, **no difference in CVs**
- Low national investment into R&I, leading to e.g. fewer/less equipped research facilities and less attractive working conditions
- Lower support level (if any) by institutional granting offices or by National Contact Points
- Lower exposure to international research and innovation networks

When national support structures developed, the number of submissions and number of successful applications go up! (e.g. Austria)



[Webinar: Applying for an ERC grant: where to seek support](#)

Opportunities for applicants

- Visiting Fellowship: visit an ERC lab and then write your ERC application
Participating countries: Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia
 - Success rate of Visiting Fellows is **higher than for other WEP country applicants**, in particular for StG, 13%
 - → Bulgarian participation planned
- Mentoring Initiative: personalized guidance (from ERC grantees or former ERC panel members) on how to write an ERC grant
Participating countries: Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Turkey, Ukraine
 - → Bulgarian participation planned

Thank You!

More information: erc.europa.eu



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