European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Widening excellence Bridging the ERC gap for a truly pan-European Research Area

ERC Scientific Council White Paper

The ERC Scientific Council has reflected on ways to further support researchers in Widening countries. The Scientific Council recognises that the research policies and investments of each EU Member State will remain the main factors influencing national research quality and competitiveness in ERC calls, and that the most effective solutions must largely be developed within Widening countries themselves. The Scientific Council is also resolute in its commitment to maintaining excellence as the sole criterion in ERC evaluations. At the same time, the ERC stands ready to contribute further and continue to cooperate closely with Member States in supporting outstanding researchers.

This position paper presents an analysis of the factors underlying the comparatively low performance of researchers in Widening countries in ERC competitions, highlights progress, success stories, and good practices, and offers recommendations for actions to be taken by all relevant stakeholders, including governments, EU and national funding bodies, and the scientific community. Finally, it outlines new support measures the ERC is considering for the next Framework Programme.

Introduction

Increasing participation of researchers from EU “Widening countries"—Greece, Portugal, and the 13 Member States that have joined the EU since 2004—in Europe’s leading frontier science competition is a desirable goal for those countries and the ERC. A performance gap also affects most associated countries and Outermost Regions and should not be overlooked.[1]

[1] According to the Horizon Europe regulation Widening countries include 15 EU member states, 14 Associated Countries with equivalent characteristics in terms of R&I performance, as well as the Outermost Regions (defined in Art. 349 TFEU). This paper adopts the same definition, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

The Widening countries make up a quarter of the EU population and boast high levels of education and rapid economic growth, yet they secure barely one-twentieth of the ERC grants and show a disproportionally lower success rate. This persistent imbalance is not a mere regional footnote but a symptom of a deeper divide that diminishes the continent's collective scientific strength.

Despite the strong scientific tradition of the region, talent is often driven away as promising researchers face multiple barriers in their home countries—from unattractive academic environments to lack of funding for innovative ideas, to insufficient grant-writing support and limited access to international networks. Meanwhile, policymakers across Europe risk becoming sceptical toward pan-European competitions, as grant successes remain concentrated in a handful of countries.

Table 1: Success rate of researchers in Widening countries by EU framework programme (2007-2023)

Programme	ERC evaluated proposals		ERC funded proposals		Success rate	
	Widening	All countries	Widening	All countries	Widening	All countries
FP7	4872	41866	161	4354	3%	10%
Horizon 2020	4477	53094	257	6609	6%	12%
Horizon Europe	2397	21365	185	2953	8%	14%
Grand Total	**11746**	**116325**	**603**	**13916**	**5%**	**12%**

Source: ERC evaluation data

In several Widening countries the situation has improved over the last decades, and their efforts have contributed to the overall improvement(see Tables 1 and 2). Some have invested in national research, adopted programmes to support applicants, and improved their competitiveness in ERC calls. These are important lessons to share. Even one additional ERC grant can have an impact on the national research system, encouraging more excellent scientists to apply in the future. The presence of ERC grantees creates "happy islands" in Widening countries that can be a draw for domestic as well as diaspora researchers.

Table 2: Success rate of researchers, by Widening country and EU framework programme (2007-2023)

Country	Success rate		
	FP7	H2020	HE
BG	2%	0%	0%
CY	6%	5%	10%
CZ	3%	8%	9%
EE	6%	4%	7%
EL	4%	4%	9%
HR	3%	4%	0%
HU	7%	10%	8%
LV	3%	0%	0%
LT	0%	2%	4%
PL	2%	4%	9%
RO	0%	3%	5%
PT	5%	8%	8%
SI	1%	5%	10%
SK	1%	0%	5%
TR	2%	6%	7%
MT	0%	3%	0%
Total	**3%**	**6%**	**8%**

Source: ERC evaluation data

However, progress is slow and uneven. Unless addressed directly, this performance gap will entrench a two-tier research funding, and jeopardize Europe's global competitiveness.

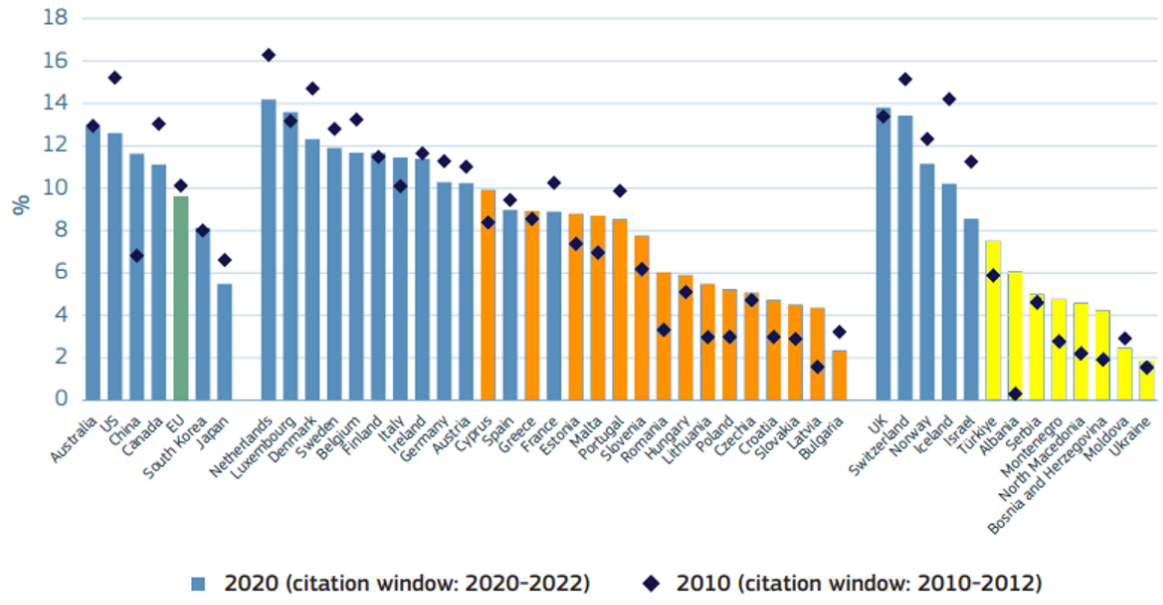
Crucially, any measures to bridge the gap must uphold the ERC's core principle: selecting projects solely based on scientific excellence. This criterion has been central to the ERC's international success and must remain inviolable.

The context: Geographical concentration of excellence

There are substantial disparities in research excellence between European regions. A commonly used indicator is the percentage of a country's publications that rank among the most cited globally[2]. In 2020, the share of publications in the top 10% of citations ranged from 14.2% in the Netherlands and 10% in Germany to 2.3% in Bulgaria (Chart 1). While Widening countries have traditionally performed lower on this metric, some, such as Cyprus, Romania, and Poland, have shown notable improvements over the 2010–2020 decade. Some Widening countries are doing better than others: for instance, the share of top 10% highly cited papers for Estonia is similar to that for Denmark. In terms of the top 1% most cited publications (Chart 2), the 2020 figures ranged from 1.6% in the UK, 1.3% in the Netherlands, and 1.2% in Italy to below 0.6% in most Widening countries. However, progress is evident in some cases; for instance, the share of top 10% highly cited papers for Cyprus increased from 0.5% in 2010 to 1.4% in 2020.

Chart 1: Percentage of publications in the top 10% of most cited publications worldwide - 2010 and 2020

(EU Widening countries in orange, Widening Associated countries in yellow, all other countries in blue)



Science, research and innovation performance of the EU 2024

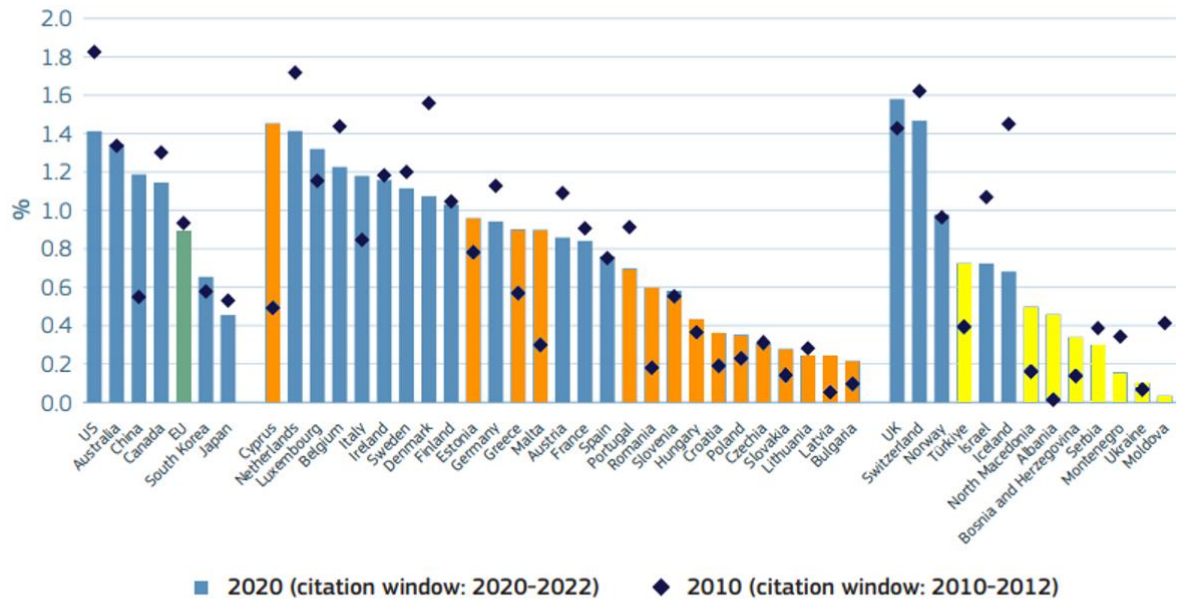
Source: DG Research and Innovation, Common R&I Strategy and Foresight Service, Chief Economist Unit, based on Science-Metrix data using the Scopus database.

Note: (1) Scientific publications within the top 10% of most cited scientific publications worldwide as a share of the country's total number of scientific publications. Fractional counting was used to assign publications to countries/aggregates.

[2] Scopus is the abstract and citation database used to calculate the indicator. Publications in languages other than English are often not included in Scopus (especially for 'small' languages), so they are disregarded in the calculation. This may distort the picture especially in SH, where many publications are in the national language.

Chart 2: Percentage of publications in the top 1% of most cited publications worldwide - 2010 and 2020

(EU Widening countries in orange, Widening Associated countries in yellow, all other countries in blue)



Science, research and innovation performance of the EU 2024

Source: DG Research and Innovation, Common R&I Strategy and Foresight Service, Chief Economist Unit, based on Science-Metrix data using the Scopus database.

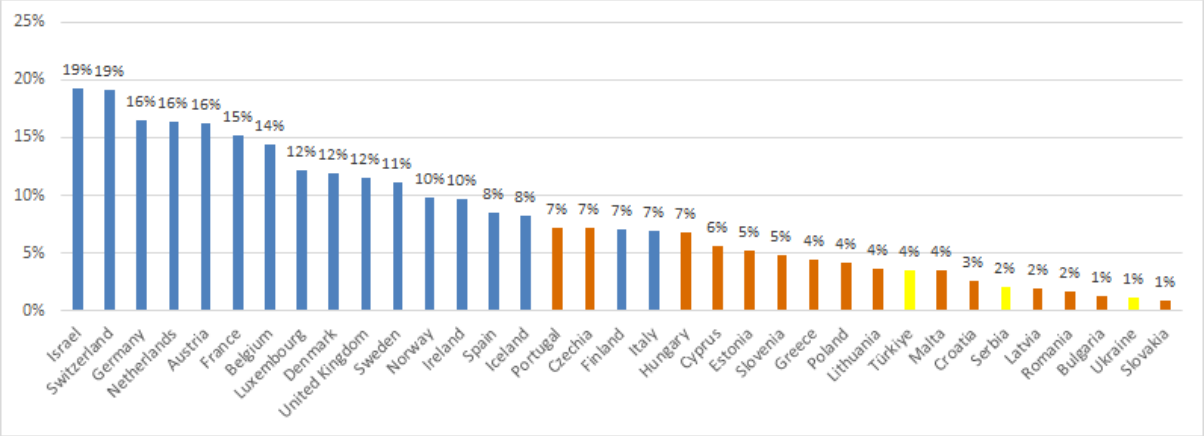
Note: (1) Share of scientific publications within the 1% most cited scientific publications worldwide by the total number of scientific publications of the country; fractional counting used.

Success in ERC calls

Researchers from Widening countries have had lower success rates in ERC calls, ranging from 1% to 7%, against the ERC average of 11%. To compare, the ERC success rate in the Netherlands and France from 2007 to 2024 has been 16% and 15% respectively.

Chart 3: ERC success rate by country of host institution, 2007-2024

(EU Widening countries in orange, Widening Associated countries in yellow, all other countries in blue)



Source: ERC Dashboard

Notably, the situation has improved for some countries in recent years. Researchers in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Slovenia have at least doubled their success rates after FP7. The ERC success rate of researchers in Slovenia increased four-fold in Horizon 2020 compared to FP7. The success rate of researchers based in Czechia tripled from FP7 to Horizon 2020. However, the gap with the rest of Europe remains.

In 2024, there have been 940 applications from researchers in Widening countries, compared to 7271 from the non-Widening[3]. In the same year, ERC grants in Widening countries were 5% of the total. The number of grants in Widening countries remains low even if normalized to the population size (Denmark has a similar population size as Slovakia but has received 355 ERC grants so far, while Slovakia received two), or the number of public sector researchers in each country: the number of ERC grants per thousand public sector researchers is 40.7 in Switzerland and 45.2 in the Netherlands, compared to 5.5 in Portugal and 4.05 in Czechia (see Table A2 in Annex 1).

Most proposals from Widening countries fail at the first step of the evaluation. In Horizon 2020, 56% of these proposals received the lowest evaluation score, compared to 30% of those from other countries[4].

There are, however, examples where researchers from Widening countries are very successful in certain scientific fields (see Table 3). For example, researchers in Hungary have achieved a 22% success rate in the ERC panel on Neurosciences and Disorders of the Nervous System, and a 14% success rate in the mathematics panel. In Czechia, success rates reached 11% in both the Computer Science and Informatics panel and the Cell Biology panel. Researchers in Portugal have a 19% success rate in the Immunity, Infection, and Immunotherapy panel. In some cases, the success rates of researchers from Widening countries surpass those of their counterparts in non-Widening countries, like in the case of Hungary for the Neurosciences field.

[3] ERC Dashboard https://erc.europa.eu/projects-statistics/erc-dashboard
[4] See Charts 2 and 3 in Annex 1

Table 3: ERC success rates 2007-2023, by country of host institution and panel (*)

	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	LS8	LS9	PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	PE5	PE6	PE7	PE8	PE9	PE10	PE11	SH1	SH2	SH3	SH4	SH5	SH6	SH7	Total
CY	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	17%	100%	14%	0%	10%	6%	0%	6%	18%	4%	0%	6%
CZ	10%	10%	11%	10%	0%	10%	3%	9%	4%	3%	0%	9%	6%	5%	11%	0%	2%	10%	6%	9%	14%	10%	6%	0%	8%	8%	0%	7%
EE	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%	8%	7%	13%	0%	0%	17%	0%	0%	15%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	7%	4%	8%	7%	0%	25%	5%
EL	5%	2%	2%	11%	8%	10%	3%	0%	4%	4%	3%	1%	0%	1%	6%	3%	7%	10%	3%	7%	0%	4%	0%	2%	7%	13%	0%	4%
HU	2%	0%	0%	0%	22%	5%	3%	13%	7%	14%	5%	12%	11%	0%	7%	0%	3%	14%	0%	0%	20%	5%	0%	12%	0%	17%	0%	8%
PL	7%	6%	4%	4%	2%	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%	5%	4%	4%	4%	17%	4%	1%	10%	0%	0%	3%	1%	6%	2%	8%	9%	25%	4%
PT	3%	2%	19%	11%	15%	19%	1%	11%	6%	3%	9%	2%	4%	4%	3%	0%	11%	4%	2%	9%	3%	4%	8%	3%	10%	12%	5%	7%
SI	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	9%	1%	8%	15%	6%	0%	0%	9%	6%	25%	5%	14%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	7%	0%	4%
TR	0%	0%	13%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	6%	5%	3%	2%	3%	5%	11%	6%	0%	3%	5%	7%	4%	5%	0%	6%	10%	14%	4%
Total	**7%**	**6%**	**9%**	**8%**	**9%**	**10%**	**4%**	**9%**	**6%**	**7%**	**8%**	**7%**	**6%**	**4%**	**9%**	**7%**	**7%**	**10%**	**6%**	**7%**	**5%**	**7%**	**9%**	**5%**	**7%**	**10%**	**12%**	**7%**

(*)

Life Sciences (LS)	Physical Sciences & Engineering (PE)	Social Sciences & Humanities (SH)
LS1 - Molecules of Life: Biological Mechanisms, Structures and Functions	PE1 - Mathematics	SH1 - Individuals, Markets and Organisations
LS2 - Integrative Biology: from Genes and Genomes to Systems	PE2 - Fundamental Constituents of Matter	SH2 - Institutions, Governances and Legal Systems
LS3 - Cell Biology, Development, Stem Cells and Regeneration	PE3 - Condensed Matter Physics	SH3 - The Social World and Its Interactions
LS4 - Physiology in Health, Disease and Ageing	PE4 - Physical and Analytical Chemical Sciences	SH4 - The Human Mind and Its Complexity
LS5 - Neuroscience and Disorders of the Nervous System	PE5 - Synthetic Chemistry and Materials	SH5 - Text and Concepts
LS6 - Immunity, Infection and Immunotherapy	PE6 - Computer Science and Informatics	SH6 - The Study of the Human Past
LS7 - Prevention, Diagnosis and Treatment of Human Diseases	PE7 - Systems and Communication Engineering	SH7 - Human Mobility, Environment, and Space
LS8 - Environmental Biology, Ecology and Evolution	PE8 - Products and Processes Engineering	SH8 - Studies of Cultures and Arts
LS9 - Biotechnology and Biosystems Engineering	PE9 - Universe Sciences	
	P10 - Earth System Science	
	P11 - Materials Engineering	

Source: ERC evaluation data However, the number of applications from Widening countries is low (see Table A1 in Annex 1) and, in some cases, the countries themselves are too small for the success rates to be statistically significant or to support meaningful cross-country comparisons. Nevertheless, these figures highlight the presence of pockets of excellence within the Widening region.

Participation in ERC evaluation panels

From 2007 from 2023 experts from Widening countries accounted for about 10% of all ERC panellists. This is double the current share of grants in Widening countries on the total ERC grants (5%). However, this remains insufficient given the region's demographic weight in Europe. Representation also varies across panels, with some including extremely few experts from Widening countries. In 2023, for instance, out of 47 Panel Members in PE10 only one was from a Widening country. In the LS1 panel there was one out of 38. In the same year no Panel Chairs from Widening countries served in any of the ERC evaluation panels (see Chart A6 in Annex 1).

Factors explaining weak performance

Unfavourable academic system

Universities and other research institutions in Widening countries face structural, institutional, and cultural challenges that reduce their ability to compete for ERC grants. These include limited research funding and infrastructure, evaluation processes that are not merit-based, unattractive career prospects and incentives, lack of international mobility and opportunities for collaboration. There is also insufficient institutional support for ERC applicants. Many universities do not have dedicated grant offices. Applicants often have no access to colleagues or experienced researchers who could provide critical feedback. ERC proposals require ambitious research ideas, which may contrast with local traditions of conservative or incremental research planning. Fewer successful grantees mean fewer opportunities for aspiring applicants to learn from examples and experience.

Low national research and development investments

Wealthier EU member states spend more on Research and Development (R&D) relative to their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Countries like Sweden, Austria or Germany each invest around 3% of GDP in R&D. By contrast, most newer member states invest well below 2%, and many under 1%. As of today, no Central or Eastern European country has yet reached the 3% R&D target; only Slovenia and Czechia have surpassed 2% of GDP, while countries such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania are below 1%[5]. Overall, R&D investment in Central and Eastern Europe is roughly half the level of Northern and Western Europe[6].

There is a strong correlation between the number of ERC main grants (Starting, Consolidator, and Advanced) awarded to a country and its gross domestic expenditure on research and development (GERD), as illustrated in Chart 4. The correlation is relevant also if we control for the number of public researchers (Chart 5).

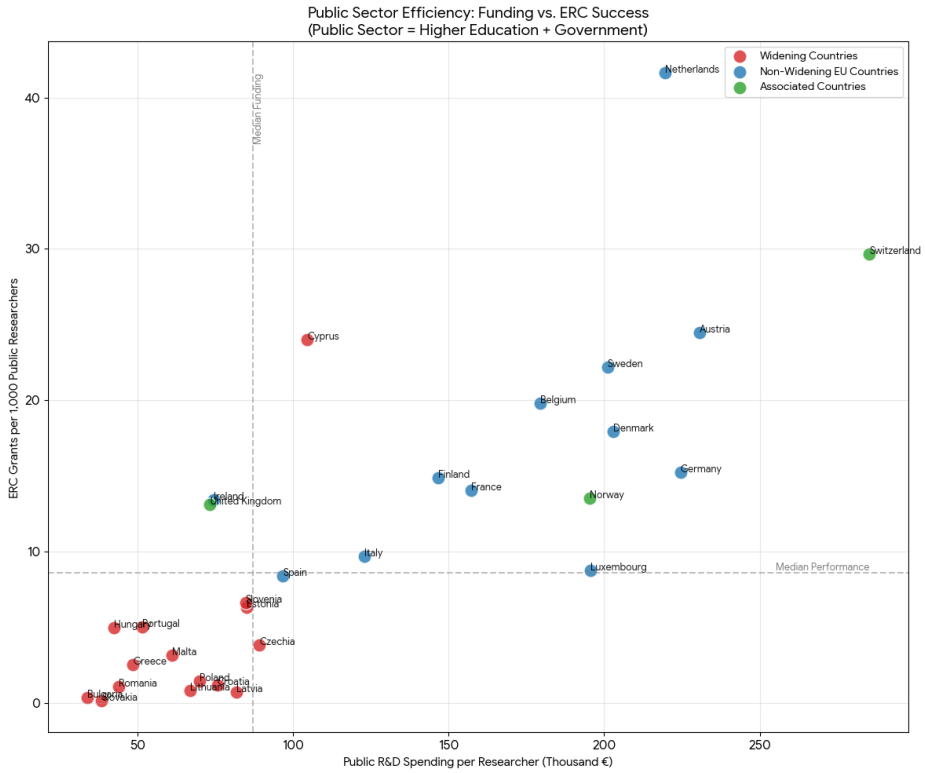
[5] EU-CEE countries need innovation for a new growth model (news article)
[6] Growth and competitiveness in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe: The role of innovation

Chart 4: ERC grants vs. national GERD (*)

*EU Widening countries in orange, Widening Associated countries in yellow, all other countries in blue

Source: *ERC Dashboard*; Eurostat

Chart 5: ERC grants vs public sector expenditure, per thousand public researchers



Source: ERC Dashboard; Eurostat.

Language, cultural and psychological barriers

Difficulties in writing high-quality proposals in English can be a barrier. Also, due to funding or institutional priorities, many researchers in Widening countries do not engage in global scientific discourse and do not have sufficient access to scientific cooperation networks in their field. Researchers may self-censor or avoid applying to ERC due to the very limited chances to succeed. Many tend to view the ERC as a closed club, beyond their reach. Senior researchers may fear losing prestige if their ERC application fails.

All these factors contribute to the gap in ERC applications and success rates across Europe, but none fully explains it. Romania, for instance, receive fewer ERC grants than might be expected based on their GERD, while others, such as Cyprus, receive more. Estonia has a share of top 1% cited papers comparable to Denmark, yet its ERC success rate is only half as high. Each Widening country has its own specific context and requires tailor-made policies.

Current measures to support frontier research

Widening countries

Several Widening countries have used national and EU resources to increase their capacity in fundamental research. Since 2007, more than 10 have introduced funding schemes inspired by the ERC, and some have established funding organizations modelled on the ERC. For instance, Poland established the National Science Centre (NCN) in 2010, while Greece created the Hellenic Foundation for Research & Innovation (ELIDEK) in 2016, both aimed at funding basic research with the ERC as a direct reference. Cyprus has achieved the highest funding per research and development personnel among all Widening countries, with €83,000 per research and development staff member in 2020[7].

More than 15 Widening countries have established national programs to support participation in ERC calls, and to support ERC unfunded successful proposals at national host institutions. Funding sources include national funds (Romania, Slovenia, Czechia), public-private partnerships (Greece), EU structural funds, or the Recovery and Resilience Facility (Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, Cyprus)[8]. Lithuania has allocated €6 million of its European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) budget to fund ERC and MSCA applicants.
Finally, there are successful bottom-up initiatives to support ERC applicants, initiated by universities or even individual researchers. It is the case of the Expert Group supporting ERC applicants in Czechia (see Box1).

[7] EURAXESS Countries in Focus: Cyprus | EURAXESS
[8] Information provided by ERC National Contact Points in Widening countries.

Actions of the ERC to support researchers in Widening countries

The ERC has put in place several measures to strengthen the success rate of researchers from less well performing regions.

Inclusive research assessment criteria

In 2011, the ERC eliminated "Research Environment" from its evaluation criteria, leaving only "Principal Investigator" and "Research Project"[9]. In 2024, ERC established formally that the excellence of the proposal should weigh more than the applicant's CV in the evaluation process[10]. It also introduced a narrative section in the CV to allow applicants to describe the importance of their contributions, rather than relying on bibliometric indicators. The changes should support diversity and avoid favouring any host institution, or types of research or research outputs over others.

The ERC also strives to include experts from Widening countries in its evaluation panels. From 2007 to 2023, 6.200 experts participated in the evaluation of 15.500 ERC main calls. About 10% of these experts were affiliated with institutions in Widening countries, with Poland, Portugal, Hungary, and Czechia among the top contributors (see Charts A4 and A5 in Annex 1). The ERC intends to raise this percentage by identifying and recruiting more excellent researchers in the region. To better monitor the number of its panellists from Widening countries, in 2026 ERC will introduce a nationality tag in the IT tool used to invite experts.

The ERC constantly monitors evaluation panels to prevent and address possible manifestations of bias against applicants from host institutions in Widening countries. At the beginning of each evaluation panel, the ERC briefs the panel members on how to identify and address various forms of unconscious bias in the assessment process.

ERC Visiting Research Fellows Programme

Launched in 2016, the programme enables prospective ERC applicants to visit ERC research teams to prepare themselves to submit grant applications. The visits last between one and six months and visiting fellows must apply for an ERC grant within a specified timeframe. Travel and salary costs are covered by national or regional agencies. Currently eight Widening countries participate in the programme.[11]

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[9] Contribution of the research environment to the project: Does the host environment provide most of the infrastructure necessary for the research to be carried out? Is it able to provide an appropriate intellectual environment and infrastructural support and to assist in achieving the ambitions for the project and the Principal Investigator? (to be assessed only during step 2 of the evaluation).

[10] The principle was already followed as a matter of practice in ERC evaluation.

[11] Romania (Bucharest): Politehnica University of Bucharest (UPB)
Croatia: Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ)
Cyprus: Research and Innovation Foundation of Cyprus (RIF)
Estonia: Estonian Research Council (ETAg)
Hungary: Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA)

ERC Mentoring Initiative

Since 2021, every year the ERC establishes a list of potential mentors among ERC grantees and former panel members willing to provide scientific feedback, training and other forms of mentorship to prospective applicants in Widening countries. Fourteen Widening countries have joined the ERC Mentoring Initiatives so far.[12]

ERC support to National Contact Points

In 2025 the ERC launched a 1.5 Mio EUR programme to support its National Contact Points (NCP), with a particular focus on those in Widening countries. The aim is to strengthen the NCPs' capacity to support potential ERC applicants in their country. The action will include training, mentoring, exchange of experiences and networking.

Ambassadors for the ERC

In April 2025, 32 ERC grantees from a variety of countries were nominated Ambassadors for the ERC. The ambassadors will engage with policymakers, the media and local research communities to promote and safeguard the value of scientific discovery. They will also collaborate closely with the ERC NCPs in offering guidance, practical information and assistance. The ambassadors for the ERC will be especially important in Widening countries, where they can inspire researchers, strengthen participation in ERC calls, and help unlock new opportunities for scientific excellence.

Information and policy dialogue

The ERC regularly organizes information and policy dialogue events in Widening countries, engaging local researchers, host institutions and decision makers.

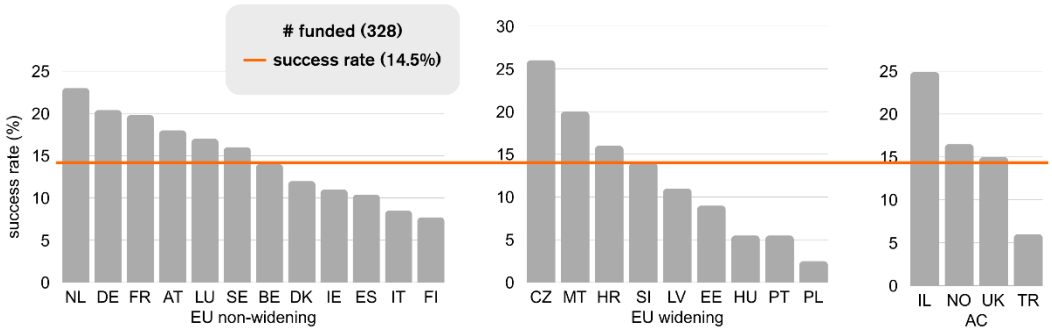
Latvia: Latvian Council of Science (LCS)
Slovak Republic: Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAS) and the Pavol Jozef Safarik University in Kosice (UPJS)
Slovenia: Slovenian Research Agency (ARRS)

[12] Malta: Malta Council for Science and Technology (MCST)
Croatia: Croatian Science Foundation (HRZZ)
Cyprus: Research and Innovation Foundation (RIF)
Czech Republic: Czech National Expert Group (NEG) for the ERC
Estonia: Estonian Research Council (ETAg)
Georgia: Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG)
Hungary: Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA)
Latvia: Latvian Council of Science (LCS)
Lithuania: Research Council of Lithuania (RCL)
Poland: National Centre for Research and Development (NCBR), National Science Centre (NCN), Foundation for Polish Science (FNP), and National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA)
Slovakia: Horizon National Office - Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information (CVTI SR)
Turkey: Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK)
Ukraine: National Research Foundation of Ukraine (NRFU)

Success stories

Countries that have strengthened their support to frontier research are seeing growing success in ERC calls. Czechia stands out as a remarkable case: in the 2024 ERC Consolidator Grant call, researchers from Czechia recorded the highest success rate of all European countries. The country has implemented several schemes supporting ERC applicants. They include a bottom-up initiative, promoted by local scientists, that provides structured mentoring and preparation well in advance of ERC calls, ensuring that only highly competitive proposals are submitted.

Chart 5: C0G 2024 – Performance of researchers in Czechia.
(Results of step 2 - Funded proposals by success rate of host institution country)



Source: ERC evaluation data

The ERC support initiative in Czechia

The programme was born in 2010 at the initiative of Prof. Zdenek Strakos, a Czech former ERC panel member, with the goal of mentoring researchers and increase the number of competitive ERC applications. At the time, the ERC was either ignored or considered too competitive to apply.
The initiative was entirely led by volunteers, unofficially supported by the Charles University in Prague and the Technology Centre of the Academy of Sciences. From 2021, in the framework of the ERC Mentoring Initiative, it obtained the public support of Charles University and the Czech Academy of Science. The initially informal group became the Expert Group for supporting ERC applicants, including 12 volunteers from Charles University, the Czech Academy of Science, the CEITEC consortium, and Masaryk University. Every year, the Expert Group provides free information and training events to potential ERC applicants, open to all researchers in Czechia. The scientific mentoring is provided by former or inactive ERC panel members and experienced ERC applicants.

Researchers are advised to participate in mentoring activities at least one year (better two) before starting to work at the ERC application. Once ready to apply, they are offered three consecutive workshops. The first examines their scientific proposal. In the second, applicants are asked to evaluate an ERC proposal that has been funded. The third workshop provides feedback on proposal's Part 1. Experts offer individual mentoring as well. For applicants who passed Step1, the experts organize mock interviews. The workshops are specific for LS, PE, and SH domains, and the final one is split into StG and CoG parts. Together with mock interviews, this implies 15 intensive workshops per year.

Since 2010, several hundreds of researchers have participated in the mentoring cycle. Out of 45 ERC Principal Investigators based in Czechia who obtained their grant in Horizon Europe, 34 had participated in the workshops and/or mock interviews.

According to Prof. Strakos, "the key for success is the atmosphere of […] unconditional mutual help. Experts are very demanding, straight, and very clear about the observed drawbacks. They provide guidance with genuine interest in the individual proposals, they show empathy to the applicants, and an overwhelming will to support. The independence of the Expert group is essential: during our events there is no place for rivalry between individuals and institutions". There are challenges as well. " There are not enough mentoring and support by the host institutions. Many applicants still enter our workshop pipeline unprepared, with the seed idea not sufficiently mature to develop a competitive proposal. […] Despite the persisting large effort of the volunteers, we do not yet observe a generally supportive research environment. ERC is still not considered an important priority by most Czech research institutions and their leadership."

There is evidence that support measures implemented by the ERC may have contributed to increase the quality of applications in some Widening countries. The success rates of researchers who participated in the ERC Visiting Research Fellows or the Mentoring Initiative have been higher than those of their colleagues in the region. Since 2016, more than 100 fellows from Widening countries have visited ERC projects. 60 of them applied to ERC calls, and eight were funded. About 140 potential ERC applicants in Widening countries have benefited from ERC mentoring services. More than 120 of them applied to ERC calls, and 13 were funded.

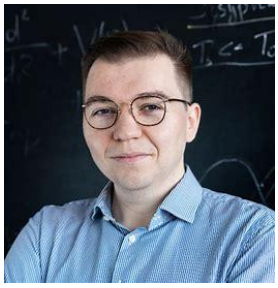
However, not all countries have taken up the two programmes with equal enthusiasm. In Hungary, Czechia, and Georgia the Visiting Fellows Programme is offered but has never been used. Possible explanations may include limited mobility of researchers, lack of support by

local host institutions, political changes and administrative staff turn-over and lack of local funds. By contrast, an increasing number of countries have shown interest in joining the ERC Mentoring Initiative, and the number of mentees is growing as well as the number of them who applied to ERC calls. The advantage of this scheme might be that is does not require researchers to move out of their country.

In some cases, researchers from Widening countries encounter obstacles after winning the ERC competition. This is when their home institutions do not meet the administrative requirements to host the grant, pushing grantees to move abroad, as illustrated in some of the experiences below.

ERC Visiting Fellows and Mentoring programs: Researchers' stories

Michal Smetana *is associate professor at the Charles University in Czechia and Director of the Peace Research Institute in Prague. In 2022 he was a beneficiary of the* ***ERC Mentoring Initiative****. "As soon as I thought to apply to ERC, I looked for opportunities to receive scientific feedback. I learned about the ERC mentoring programme from my department. It was quite amazing. The university contacted an ERC grantee in Norway working in the same field. I received a detailed written opinion, that forced me to substantially restructure my ERC proposal. Besides the mentoring initiative, I approached other ERC grantees. I also talked to colleagues who had failed their ERC application but had learned a lot from the process. All these consultations were extremely helpful." Prof. Smetana received an ERC Starting Grant 2024 in Social Sciences, for a project on the micro foundations of collective defence.*



Michal Tomza *is associate professor at the University of Warsaw in Poland, where he leads the quantum molecular systems Research Group. In 2020 he was awarded an ERC Starting Grant for a project on ultracold polyatomic molecules. In 2018 he participated in the* ***ERC Visiting fellows Programme*** *and joined the ERC team at the Institute for Quantum Optics and Quantum Information at the University of Innsbruck in Austria. "The visit lasted 3 months. In my country it is not easy to find other ERC grantees in the same field. The visit gave me the possibility to share ideas with a prominent scientist and her research group, and to understand the weak points*

of my proposal. It was also a way to disconnect from my daily routine at the university and exclusively focus on my research. Scientists from my region are struggling to create a network out of their country. The fellowship helped me to become visible in Europe".

***Matej Praprotnik** is Head of the Theory Department at the National Institute of Chemistry and Professor of Physics at the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, University of Ljubljana. In 2019 he was **Visiting Fellow** at ERC Petros Koumoutsakos' computational science and engineering laboratory, at ETH, Zurich. He won an Advanced ERC grant in the same year.*

"My previous research had developed mature numerical methods for nano fluidics, and with my ERC project I wanted to apply this methodology to a completely different field. During my fellowship I gained more experience in multiscale methods necessary for my project. I also got a better idea on how to present my project. What was very important for me was that by accepting the fellowship I obliged myself to apply (for ERC funding) within the next two years. I think it's quite motivational."

However, once Prof. Praprotnik won the grant, he had problems recruiting team members. "In Slovenia scientists, as public sector employees, have salary caps. Salaries in my field are not competitive with those offered by big players outside academia. I had to transfer part of my project group to the University of Barcelona".

***Jasenka Gudelj** is Associated Professor of History of Architecture at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University of Venice.*

In 2018 she was Visiting Fellow in ERC Angela Nuovo's EMoBookTrade team at the University of Milan. The ERC project dealt with the economic and juridical framework of the European book market in early modern Europe. " I was able to expand my previous work on the circulation of architectural books, and it eventually became part of my own ERC proposal. I discovered so much helpful information about writing up a grant. Some of the unwritten rules of how to do it, about the whole evaluation process, and then about the team composition and how to hire it. […]Spending three months with the EMoBookTrade team showed me that ERC projects are a doable endeavour. Moreover, I learned what kind of administrative support I would need to run the project smoothly." Prof. Gudelj won a Consolidator ERC grant in 2020. "Before my project started, I unfortunately realised that my host institution in Zagreb would not meet my specific administrative needs. I therefore used my 'portability' option to move my project to Ca' Foscari university in Venice. "

Prof. Gudelj suggest that " if you want to expand for the underrepresented countries, it is not only the grantees that need to pass through the (VF) program but also administrative staff".

The way forward

To improve the position of Widening countries in ERC calls further, all sides can make contributions: the member states' governments as well as the ERC.

Member States

National investments and reforms to support frontier research

Many examples show that when adequate national research reforms and investments are in place, excellent researchers in Widening countries have more opportunities to succeed. Reforms to improve the governance, autonomy, and international competitiveness of universities can help countries to improve their performance in internationally competitive research, alongside the promotion of merit-based hiring and promotion systems and the reduction of administrative burdens. To retain and attract talent, it is essential to provide stable, predictable, and appealing career paths for researchers.

Synergies with cohesion funds

EU cohesion funds have provided significant resources to bridge the research funding gap, with some Widening countries using them effectively to boost research capacity. Since 2022, EU member states are allowed to transfer up to 5% of their European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) budget to other EU funds or instruments, including Horizon Europe. This creates a new opportunity for Widening countries to finance projects from programmes such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) and the ERC that were positively evaluated but not funded for lack of sufficient budget. In 2025, 69 applicants from Widening countries in Horizon Europe reached the second evaluation round but did not receive funding—grants that could potentially be financed through ERDF. To date, only Lithuania and Latvia have taken advantage of this option.

For a summary of best practices that Widening countries have taken in the past or have in place and that led to higher success in ERC calls, see: *Actions by Widening Countries to Increase Success in ERC Calls – Good Practices (ERCEA 2026).*

The ERC

The ERC will intensify its policy dialogue with stakeholders in Widening countries to support reforms, using its direct communication channels with national funding agencies and ministries to discuss how to enhance research performance.

The ERC 2026 communication strategy will concentrate on information, dissemination, and dialogue initiatives in Widening countries. Successful grantees in Widening countries and lesson learned from successful programmes will be featured across different communication channels.

The ERC will increase its efforts to identify outstanding researchers in Widening countries as experts in ERC evaluation panels. For this it is important to create local support networks in each Widening country, using national “ERC communities”. Current and past ERC grantees, including Ambassadors for the ERC in Widening countries, are the best placed to identify other top scientists in their country and encourage them to participate.

The ERC will explore ways to further support the ERC Mentoring and Visiting Fellows programmes. It will strengthen data collection on their impact, highlight success stories in collaboration with national stakeholders, and intensify the dissemination of good practices. ERC will keep mapping the national programmes supporting ERC applicants in the region, and share the lesson learned with other Widening countries.

Data availability

The publicly available source data for this white paper can be consulted on the ERC Dashboard. The access to source data linked to ERC evaluation data are not publicly available.

Annex 1 – Additional charts and tables

Table A1: Evaluated proposals, funded proposals, and success rates by panel in Widening countries

ERC evaluated proposals 2007-2023

	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	LS8	LS9	PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	PE5	PE6	PE7	PE8	PE9	PE10	PE11	SH1	SH2	SH3	SH4	SH5	SH6	SH7	Total
CY	2	8	7	1	8	3	34	1	3	7	10	9	7	12	29	44	30	1	14	3	21	17	9	32	11	24	3	350
CZ	49	21	44	20	21	20	31	75	27	68	39	57	119	73	72	15	45	10	34	11	22	31	18	32	26	52	2	1034
EE	10	15	5	3	4	5	13	41	8	7	12	6	16	10	13	14	13	6	23	3	5	27	25	12	27	11	4	338
EL	38	58	42	65	48	52	167	32	56	46	62	73	68	86	163	121	158	60	103	14	51	45	26	47	30	64	7	1782
HU	44	31	41	40	54	20	35	38	27	102	42	49	46	32	41	20	29	22	18	7	30	60	13	73	25	48	5	992
PL	56	50	28	57	51	29	113	38	59	67	99	84	107	114	71	75	143	50	52	35	39	77	47	65	62	92	4	1764
PT	39	54	72	76	99	78	121	104	81	39	67	42	69	108	91	68	184	49	45	33	60	118	98	67	104	83	21	2070
SI	12	8	7	5	13	8	26	18	23	67	24	41	31	25	34	11	49	4	19	7	11	37	19	15	33	42	1	590
TR	20	38	23	33	33	13	66	17	78	18	22	30	47	58	61	112	112	6	29	19	45	52	42	26	17	29	7	1053
Total	383	391	337	396	426	301	766	519	463	500	503	524	653	622	713	577	865	308	486	146	365	624	404	473	447	552	85	12829

ERC funded proposals 2007-2023

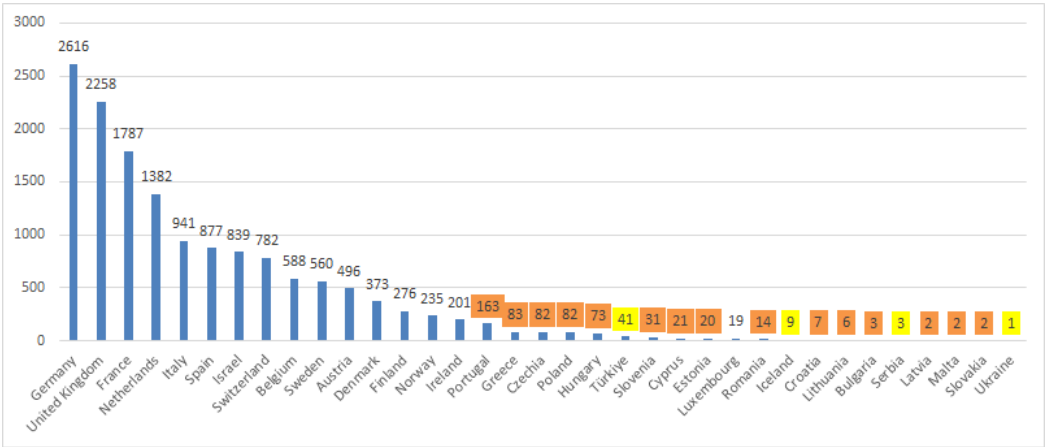
	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	LS8	LS9	PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	PE5	PE6	PE7	PE8	PE9	PE10	PE11	SH1	SH2	SH3	SH4	SH5	SH6	SH7	Total
CY		1					1									4	5	1	2		2	1		2	2	1		22
CZ	5	2	5	2		2	1	7	1	2		5	7	4	8		1	1	2	1	3	3	1		2	4		69
EE	1					1	1	3	1			1			2				1			2	1	1	2		1	18
EL	2	1	1	7	4	5	5		2	2	2	1		1	9	4	11	6	3	1		2		1	2	8		80
HU	1				12	1	1	5	2	14	2	6	5		3		1	3			6	3		9		8		82
PL	4	3	1	2	1			1	2	2	5	3	4	4	12	3	2	5			1	1	3	1	5	8	1	74
PT	1	1	14	8	15	15	1	11	5	1	6	1	3	4	3		21	2	1	3	2	5	8	2	10	10	1	154
SI		1						1	2	1	2	6	2			1	3	1	1	1			1			3		26
TR			3	1					1	1	1	1	1	2	3	12	7		1	1	3	2	2		1	3	1	47
Total	28	24	31	31	37	30	33	45	27	35	38	38	36	23	63	39	62	30	30	10	19	44	36	25	33	57	10	914

ERC success rates 2007-2023

	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	LS8	LS9	PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	PE5	PE6	PE7	PE8	PE9	PE10	PE11	SH1	SH2	SH3	SH4	SH5	SH6	SH7	Total
CY	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%	17%	100%	14%	0%	10%	6%	0%	6%	18%	4%	0%	6%
CZ	10%	10%	11%	10%	0%	10%	3%	9%	4%	3%	0%	9%	6%	5%	11%	0%	2%	10%	6%	9%	14%	10%	6%	0%	8%	8%	0%	7%
EE	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%	20%	8%	7%	13%	0%	0%	17%	0%	0%	15%	0%	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%	7%	4%	8%	7%	0%	25%	5%
EL	5%	2%	2%	11%	8%	10%	3%	0%	4%	4%	3%	1%	0%	1%	6%	3%	7%	10%	3%	7%	0%	4%	0%	2%	7%	13%	0%	4%
HU	2%	0%	0%	0%	22%	5%	3%	13%	7%	14%	5%	12%	11%	0%	7%	0%	3%	14%	0%	0%	20%	5%	0%	12%	0%	17%	0%	8%
PL	7%	6%	4%	4%	2%	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%	5%	4%	4%	4%	17%	4%	1%	10%	0%	0%	3%	1%	6%	2%	8%	9%	25%	4%
PT	3%	2%	19%	11%	15%	19%	1%	11%	6%	3%	9%	2%	4%	4%	3%	0%	11%	4%	2%	9%	3%	4%	8%	3%	10%	12%	5%	7%
SI	0%	13%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	6%	9%	1%	8%	15%	6%	0%	0%	9%	6%	25%	5%	14%	0%	0%	5%	0%	0%	7%	0%	4%
TR	0%	0%	13%	3%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	6%	5%	3%	2%	3%	5%		6%	0%	3%	5%	7%	4%	5%	0%	6%	10%	14%	4%
Total	7%	6%	9%	8%	9%	10%	4%	9%	6%	7%	8%	7%	6%	4%	9%	7%	7%	10%	6%	7%	5%	7%	9%	5%	7%	10%	10%	7%

Source: ERC *evaluation data*

Chart A1: ERC grants by country of host institution as of September 2025



(*) EU Widening countries in orange, Widening Associated countries in yellow, all other countries in blue. Source: ERC Dashboard

Chart A2: Evaluation results for researchers in Widening countries - Horizon 2020

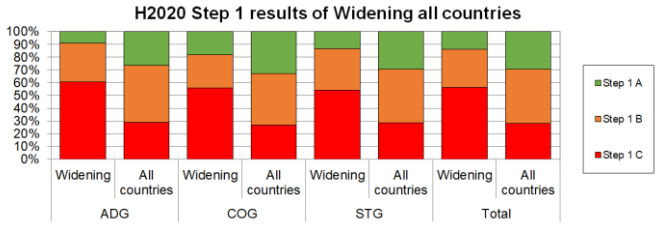


Chart A3: Evaluation results for researchers in Widening countries - Horizon 2020, by country. Source: *ERC evaluation data*

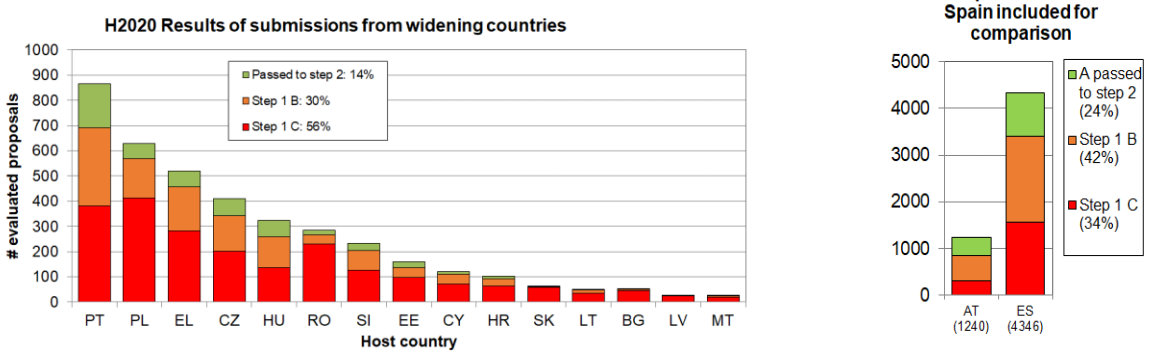
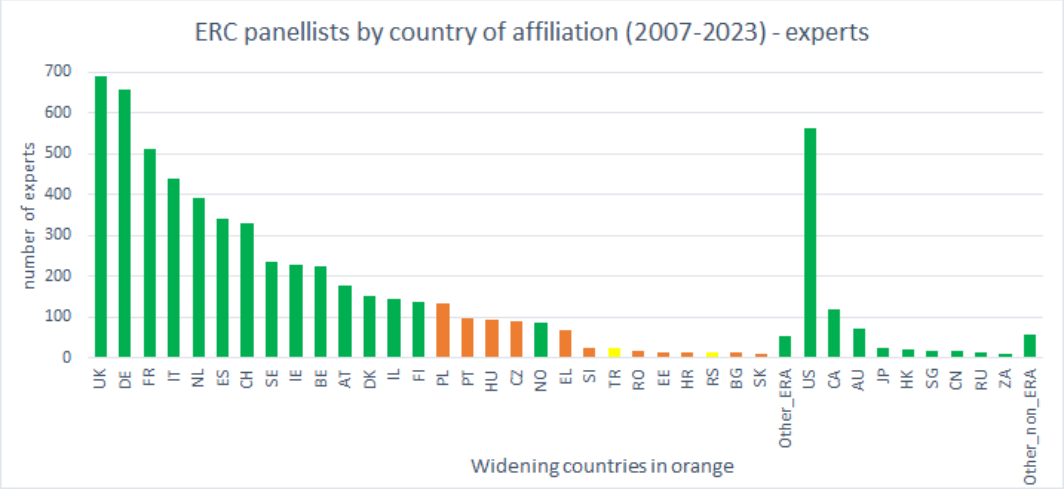


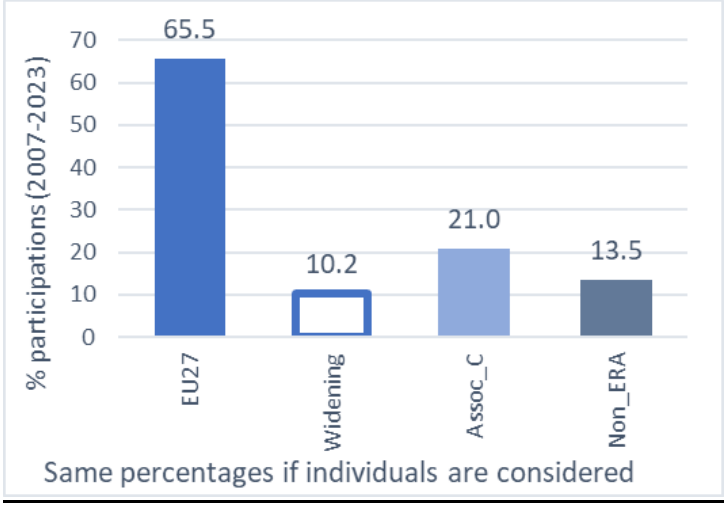
Chart A4: ERC panel members (number of individuals) by country of affiliation 2007-2023*



** Widening Associated countries in yellow*

Source: ERC evaluation data

Chart A5: ERC panellists' participation by category of country 2007-2023



Source: ERC evaluation data

Chart A6: Experts from Widening countries in ERC panels, Year 2023

2023 main grants schemes - Panel Members by country of affiliation																															
	LS*	LS1	LS2	LS3	LS4	LS5	LS6	LS7	LS8	LS9	PE*	PE1	PE2	PE3	PE4	PE5	PE6	PE7	PE8	PE9	PE10	PE11	SH*	SH1	SH2	SH3	SH4	SH5	SH6	SH7	Total
Total	31	38	38	38	42	44	35	54	46	40	36	43	48	43	45	49	50	50	54	42	47	48	21	49	50	55	51	54	52	48	1341
DE	3	6	6	3	4	4	6	7	6	6	4	6	5	4	6	5	5	6	4	5	5	6	1	4	3	4	4	6	5	4	143
UK	2	4	3	5	4	6	5	6	6	3	3	4	5	4	4	7	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	3	5	4	6	4	5	6	134
IT	3	3	2	3	3	4	4	4		3	3	3	6	5	5	4	6	5	5	4	5	2	1	4	4	4	3	3	7	3	111
US	3		5	2	7	2	2	1	4		3	5	5	6	4	2	2	4	6	3	6	4	3	3	3	5	3	4	1	4	102
FR	2	2	1	3	4	5	4	2	2	1	1	5	3	5	4	5	3	4	2	3	6	3	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	3	85
NL	1	6	1	2	4	3	3	6	1	1	2			2	4	2	5	2	3	1	2	3	1	4	4	4	6	6	2	2	83
ES	3	2	1	4	1	4	1	6	3	3	2	2	3	5	2	3		3	4	3	1	4	1	3	3	1	5		2	3	78
CH	1	3	3	5	4	1	4	1	2	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	1	2	2	3	1	2	1	1	1	1		2	61
BE	1	1	2		3	2		4	3	3	1	3	2	1	1	4	3	2	3					2	4	4	4	2	2	3	60
AT	1	1	2	3		2	1		1	2	2	3	3	1	2	2	3	1	2			1	1	2	5	2	1	4	2	2	52
SE	2	2	2	2	1			2	3	3	1		1	1	1	1	2	3	2	1	1		1	4	1	4	2	3	2	1	49
DK	1	1	1			3		3	3	2	1	1					1	2	1	1	3	1		4	1	3					33
PL		1	1		1	3			1				1		1	2	1			3			1		1		5	4	4	1	31
PT	1			1					1	2	2		1		2	2			2	1	1	2		2	2	2		1	2	1	28
IL	2	2	2			1	1	3	1		1	2				1	3	2						1		2			1	2	27
CZ	1		1	1				1		1	1	1	4	2	1	1	2			1		1		1	1	1			2	2	26
FI	2	1			1	1		2	2	1	2	1	1	2				1			2			1		1	2	1		2	26
CA			2	1	3	1			1		1	1	1		2			1			1			1	1	2		3		3	25
AU				1	1		3		2		2			1	1		1	2	3			2				1	1		1	1	23
ND								2	2		1						1			2	4	1	1		2	3	2		1		22
IE		1			1					2					2	3		1		1	1	1		1	1	2		2			19
HU	1					1		1		1	1		2		1		1	1		2				1	2				3		18
EL								1		1						1	1		2	1		2						2	1	2	1	15
SG				1			1					1							3			2									8
''	1	2	1			1							1							1											7
TR								1									2		1			1							2		7
HR				1						1			1						1				1	1							6
JP												1	1							1	1		1							1	6
HJ										1								1					1				2				5
Others	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	1	2	4	1	2	5	1	3	3	3	2	6	4	2	51
Total	31	38	38	38	42	44	35	54	46	40	36	43	48	43	45	49	50	50	54	42	47	48	21	49	50	55	51	54	52	48	1341

Source: ERC evaluation data

Table A2: ERC main grants per thousand higher education sector researchers

	N. of researchers	ERC main grants	ERC grants per 1000 researchers
Netherlands	28598	1370	48
Cyprus	790	21	27
Austria	18288	483	26
Sweden	21251	549	26
Belgium	23474	579	25
Germany	125100	2578	21
Finland	14555	278	19
France	95861	1768	18
Denmark	20489	364	18
Norway	13994	233	17
Italy	64672	918	14
Ireland	14289	197	14
Luxembourg	1538.5	19	12
Spain	77974	863	11
Slovenia	2831	31	11
Iceland	1032	9	9
Hungary	10470	73	7
Estonia	2897	20	7
Czechia	13798	81	6
Portugal	31073	161	5
Malta	581	2	3
Greece	27566	83	3
Romania	6475	14	2
Croatia	5086	7	1
Poland	58321	80	1
Lithuania	5377	6	1
Bulgaria	3357	3	1
Latvia	2271	2	1
Slovakia	9603	2	0
Switzerland	not available	781	NA
United Kingdom	not available	2219	NA

Source: ERC Dashboard; Eurostat 2023

Table A3: Horizon Europe – ERC unfunded successful proposal (As) from Widening countries.

	Unfunded	Funded	Total As
CY		7	7
CZ	9	23	32
EE	11	8	19
EL	10	19	29
HU	7	12	19
LT	2	2	4
LV	1		1
PL	9	36	45
PT	15	41	56
RO	2	5	7
SI	2	12	14
SK	1	2	3
Grand Total	69	**167**	**236**

Source: ERC evaluation data