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## **The Association of ERC Grantees (AERG) urges European leaders to enhance the autonomy and the funding of the European Research Council to secure European competitiveness**

**Brussels** — May 28, 2025

The Association of ERC Grantees calls on European leaders to increase the autonomy and funding of the core EU agency supporting fundamental research - the European Research Council (ERC). Current discussions of the successor framework programme to Horizon Europe suggest it will be “tightly connected” to a European Competitiveness Fund. This greatly endangers the ERC’s unique position as a pan-European funder, one that is independent of any national and European political agenda and dedicated solely to scientific excellence.

Since 2007, the ERC has funded over 14K individuals to lead frontier research projects throughout Europe. Their work has created new knowledge, transformed lives, and spurred innovation in Europe. It has led to over 2200 patents (and other Intellectual Property Rights applications), over 400 spin-off companies, and no less than 14 ERC awardees have received a Nobel Prize. Commission President von der Leyen called the ERC “*the crown jewel of the Horizon Europe framework programme*” [1].

Continuation of this success story can only be guaranteed by 1) enhancing the ERC’s autonomy and 2) increasing its budget [2]. Autonomy is key: The ERC must be a stand-alone body with a dedicated permanent legal and institutional basis, to make it optimally functional for the next twenty years. Budget growth is particularly needed to keep up with a changing world in which bottom-up, excellence-based research is under threat.

The Association of ERC Grantees believes that the best and brightest minds in Europe will always contribute to shaping the future of Europe through their ideas, innovations, and applications. To do so, they need intellectual freedom, a research landscape that ensures quality and rigor, and the resources to support their work. The ERC has played a key role in providing all these enabling factors, and it must continue to be led by scientists, for the common good. Fundamental curiosity-driven research provides the breakthroughs of tomorrow, and is therefore an essential pre-requisite for true competitiveness. Planned programmatic research also, of course, has its place. However, it is crucial to recognise the distinct and complementary natures of these two forms of research. If both types of research compete for

resources within a single fund, the importance and organisation of fundamental research risks being re-negotiated over and over again. This is a danger zone for any advanced society, because it shifts the focus to incremental rather than transformative impacts.

Now is the moment to update the ERC's legal and operational structure, to strengthen it for the future and to guarantee its continued contribution to Europe's competitiveness. The autonomy that the agency was granted in 2007 should be extended by establishing the ERC with its own governance, so ensuring its permanence as a stand-alone EU body. This is essential to implement its scientific strategy. Increasing its funding is essential to keep Europe's top scientists and to be a magnet for talent from elsewhere. At this point, 40% of applicants to ERC calls are rejected not because of a lack of excellence, but simply because there is no budget to fund them. This is a missed chance for Europe. The ERC represents a crucial investment in Europe's future. An autonomous and well-funded ERC will continue to make an outstanding contribution to European competitiveness and quality of life, by transforming the breakthrough ideas of today into the innovative products, policies and systems of tomorrow.

We strongly urge all European leaders to demonstrate their commitment to fundamental research in Europe when discussing the successor framework programme to Horizon Europe. It is essential to enable scientists to continue delivering their groundbreaking contributions to societal progress. The best way for them to do so is to enhance the autonomy and the funding of the ERC.

**Note:**

*The Association of ERC Grantees (AERG: [www.aerg.eu](http://www.aerg.eu)) is a non-profit international organisation based in Brussels. Its constituency comprises the current and previous holders of a grant from the European Research Council – over 14K outstanding scientists from all over Europe. Its core goals are to connect ERC Grantees, to communicate the results of their work to the general public, to policy makers and to relevant stakeholders, and to advocate for the importance of fundamental research in knowledge-based societies. This statement has been approved by the AERG Board.*

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[1] Speech by President von der Leyen at the 70th anniversary of CERN, October 1, 2024:

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_24\\_4982](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_24_4982)

[2] See our statement "AERG Fully Supports the ERC Scientific Council's Call for a "Doubling of Spending on Research and Innovation" <https://aerg.eu/news/the-aerg-fully-supports-the-erc-scientific-council-s-call-for-a-doubling-of-spending-on-research-and-innovation>