

Dear Grantees,

I am writing to tell you what the Scientific Council of the ERC and I have been working on over the past year.

My time as ERC President is divided between working in Brussels together with the ERC Executive Agency and the Scientific Council on assessing and improving the processes and activities of the ERC; and being elsewhere in Europe and the world to meet representatives of our communities: researchers, representatives of research institutions, academies and associations, other funders, and politicians and political administrators.

Here, I want to concentrate on the work with the Council and the Agency; the main purpose of my external meetings is, after all, to seek support for the ERC and for what the Council does in the service of the research community. Last year, we spent much of our time thinking about the future of fundamental research in Europe, and the place of the ERC in that future, specifically in the context of the next multiannual EU budget. We also finalized our discussions on the way the ERC evaluation panels assess researchers and proposals and agreed on a number of changes. Internally, we devised new procedures for channelling feedback on the evaluation process from the panels and the broader research community to the Scientific Council for discussion.

Framework Programme 10: Like many organisations concerned with research in the European Union, the ERC is thinking about the next EU framework programme for research and innovation (Framework Programme 10, 'FP10'), which will run from 2028 until 2035. An initial proposal will be presented by the European Commission by mid-2025.

We have discussed what position the ERC should take, looking at three areas that matter to us: the mission, the funding and the governance of the ERC. We easily agreed that the founding mission of the ERC is still fit for purpose, also in the wider political context. The ERC's bottom-up approach and its focus on excellence alone have been found to stimulate scientific breakthroughs, have fostered the training of the next generation of highly qualified researchers and helped find solutions that will allow us to solve the problems of tomorrow.

As concerns funding, the ERC is clearly struggling. We can fund only about 60% of the proposals that fully meet the ERC's excellence criterion, the sizes of the grants have remained the same over the last 17 years without any adjustment for inflation, and there is no leeway to experiment with innovations in the grant schemes. However, research in Europe in general is under-funded. While the Scientific Council emphasizes the importance of fundamental research as the foundation for innovation, development and the creation of wealth (in addition to its intrinsic cultural value of creating knowledge across all areas of human curiosity), we also recognize the need for supporting targeted research and innovation. Alongside many other organisations, we call, in the first instance, for a doubling of the overall EU research budget.

Finally, one reason the ERC has risen to its highly regarded position is that our processes in selecting and administering the grants are tailor-made for the intended purposes. The ERC has been able to develop these processes because of the independence given to the Scientific Council by legislation. We are adamant that this independence must be retained and re-asserted in cases of encroachment.

You can read the ERC Scientific Council's full statement and find some background facts here: <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/statement-erc-scientific-council-next-eu-FP>.

What can you do to help? As scientists, we do not tend to get on our tractors to lobby and tell the world about our achievements and the value of our work. **But you could help by going out to speak with politicians and citizens to explain why investing in research and innovation in general, and frontier science in particular, is important.** Only with a sustained and concerted effort will we be able to ensure that Europe remains competitive. Your best targets are your representatives in the European Parliament (who should be listening to you) and, if you happen to have access to them, the finance ministers, foreign ministers and heads of government or state of your countries.

I also want to remind you about the Association of ERC Grantees, which encourages former and current ERC grantees to connect with each other, to communicate the results of their work and to

advocate the importance of fundamental research in knowledge-based societies. You can read more about the association here and also sign up to join: <https://aerg.eu/about>.

Research Assessment: I already reported last year that the Scientific Council would devise some changes to the ERC's evaluation procedures. In the meantime, these have been implemented and the current round of applicants is already using new templates for their CV and track record, and new guidance is being prepared for the evaluation panels. I have written up our thinking about the 'why' and the 'what' here: https://erc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-02/Evaluation_of_research_proposals.pdf.

Feedback from the panels and the community: We have created a mechanism that makes it easier for feedback to reach the Scientific Council and helps them filter, discuss and act upon it. Some suggestions have been discussed and rejected in the past, and we will now provide brief explanations for not acting on them. Other suggestions are immediately implemented, while yet others require broader discussion, or changes in formal procedures, or may be controversial. These go on a list of strategic items for the Council to deal with in the future. So, if you have made suggestions but have seen no progress, it is not because your input is ignored. On the contrary, please keep it coming! There is a formal open ear waiting for it.

Association to Horizon Europe: You may have heard that the United Kingdom has finally been associated to the Horizon Europe programme. The ERC is thrilled to be welcoming back researchers based in the UK: they have been sorely missed and can apply again as from the 2024 competitions. Switzerland is hopefully also moving towards association to Horizon Europe following the Common Understanding that was announced by the European Commission and the Swiss authorities in December 2023. Transitional arrangements mean that the ERC is accepting applications from researchers based in Switzerland from the 2024 Advanced Grant call onwards. Having the UK, and hopefully soon also Switzerland, fully associated to the Horizon Europe programme is good news. Their participation does not reduce the chances of applicants from EU countries to obtain a grant, because the UK comes with a large contribution to our overall budget, and Swiss grants will, for the time being, be funded by Switzerland.

Maybe some of you would like to tune in to an event on 5 March 2024 in Brussels, co-organised by the ERC and Nobel Prize Outreach, on strengthening democracy: <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/events/nobel-prize-dialogue-fact-fiction-future-democracy>.

Best wishes,
Maria Leptin