The European Research Council

ERC Synergy grants

Agnes Kulcsar
Synergy grants call coordinator
B2 Unit,
Synergy information webinar, Singapore
EURAXESS ASEAN
11 October 2021
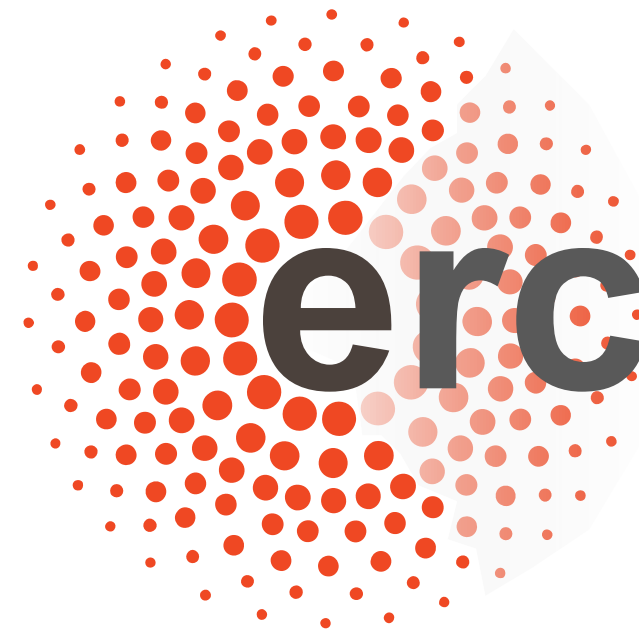
Overview

- The European Research Council

- Funding schemes

- Features of a Synergy grant

- Preparing an application

- Evaluation criteria

- Evaluation process and timeline

- Hints and tips

The European Research Council

EUR 16 billion
ERC budget in Horizon Europe (2021-2027)

17%
of the entire Horizon Europe budget
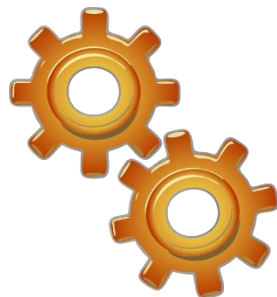
The European Research Council

The ERC Scientific Council

- **21 prominent researchers** proposed by an independent identification committee
- **President** appointed by the Commission following recommendation of an independent committee
- **Establishes overall scientific strategy/mission**
- **Controls quality of operations and management**
- **Ensures communication with the scientific community**

The ERC Executive Agency

- Executes annual work programme
- Implements calls for proposals
- Organises peer review evaluation
- Establishes and manages grant agreements
- Administers scientific and financial aspects
- Carries out communications activities

European Commission

Horizon 2020
European Union funding
for Research & Innovation

European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHERS FROM
ALL OVER THE WORLD

ANY FIELD
OF RESEARCH

LONG TERM
GRANTS

PORTABLE

HIGH-RISK/HIGH-GAIN

Starting Grant (StG)

2-7 years*
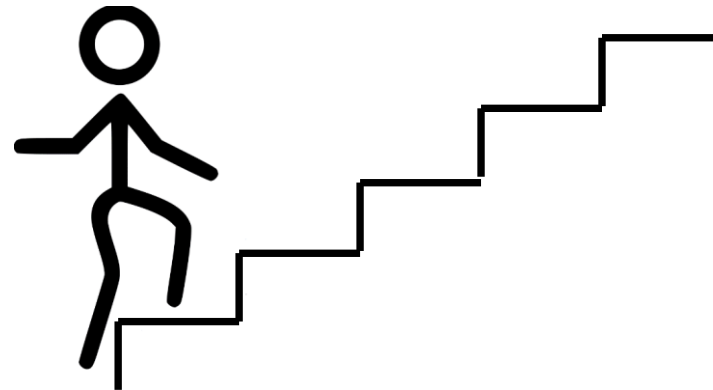
50%

1.5 M + 1 M

50%
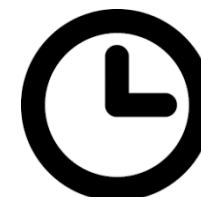
5 years

*Eligibility window can be extended in several cases

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Consolidator Grant (CoG)

7-12 years*

40%

2.0 M + 1M

50%
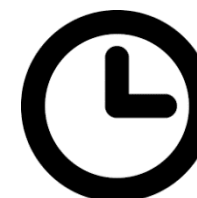
5 years

*Eligibility window can be extended in several cases

The ERC funding schemes

Significant research achievements of last 10 years

Advanced grant (AdG)
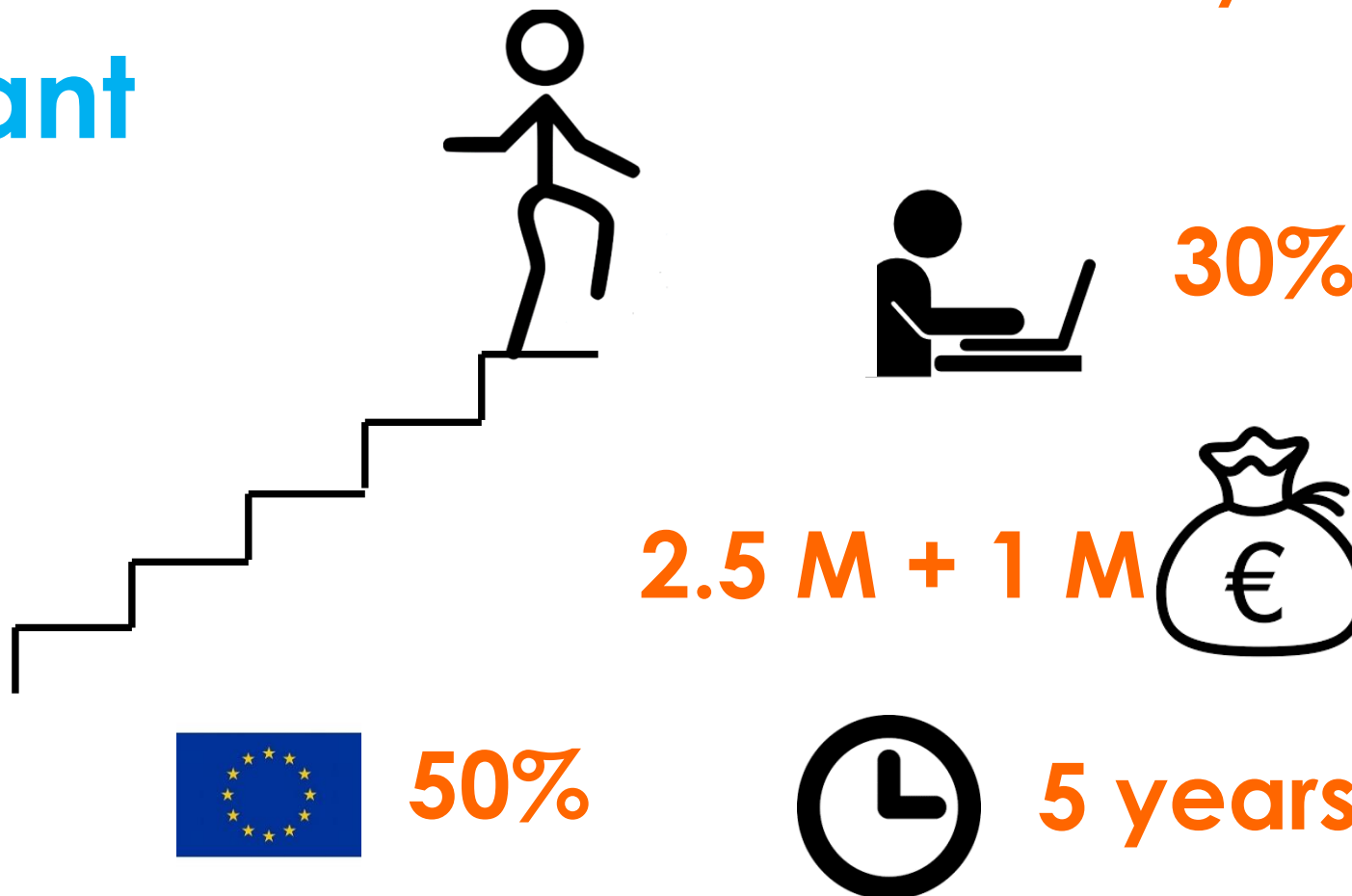
30%

2.5 M + 1 M

50%

5 years

The ERC funding schemes

Synergy Grant (SyG)

2 to 4 PIs
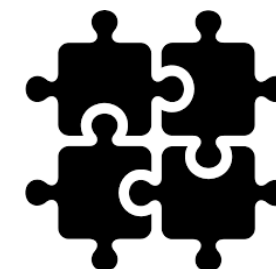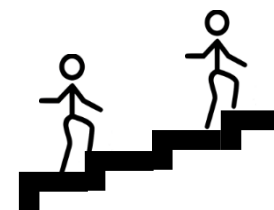
10M + 4M
Incl. for 1 non-EU PI

6 years

30%

50%, except the non-EU PI

<u>**Applicant legal entity**</u>: engages and hosts the PI for the duration of the project

Type: universities, business research units ... **as long as it is in an EU Member State or Associated Country** – Country requirement essential for individual grants. There is an exception for a PI in a Synergy grant group.

Commitment of HI: to ensure that the PI may

- apply for funding independently
- manage research and funding for the project
- publish independently as senior author
- have access to reasonable space and facilities

You **can change** it during the project's life

Negotiate with the HI (your position, equipment, administrative support, access to infrastructure, etc.)

Synergy grant 2020 – success rates

SyG 2020 Success rate by country of Host institutions
(counting all occurrences of HIs in a given country)
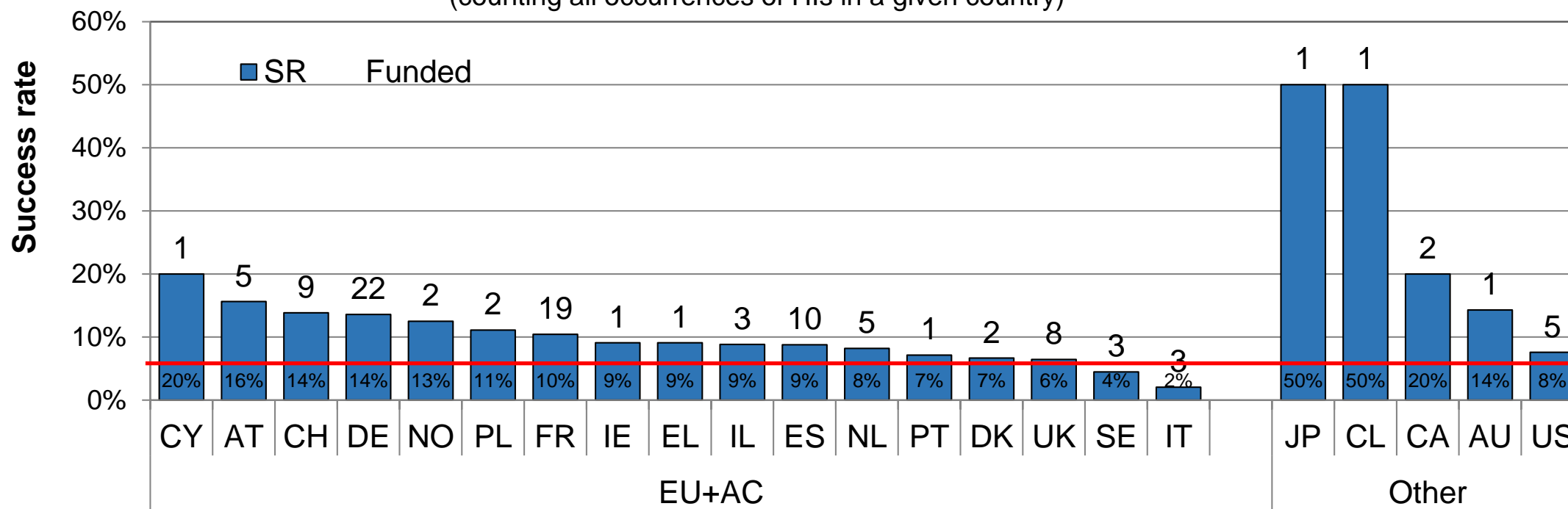
Additional 37 countries have no successful proposals

Design of the Synergy call 2022

Applicants with Singaporean Host Institutions are considered as outside of EU or Associated Countries: only one PI with an Singaporean Host Institution can be present in a proposal with other EU or AC countries.

3 step evaluation: with interviews with all PIs in step 3

SyG-2022 Call budget: 297 M€

~30 grants to be funded

Grant size: up to 10M€ + 4M€ for 6 years

Host Institutions in EU or AC, with the possibility of having one HI outside

2-3-4 Principal Investigators (PIs)

No restrictions on their location at the time of application

≥50% of working time in EU or AC ≥30% of working time on the ERC project

PIs can be in the same or different institutions

Note: it does not apply to the Principal Investigator applying with a Host Institution outside of EU or AC

SyG2022 call opened for submissions on 3 September 2021

SyG2022: call to close for submission of proposals on **10 November 2021**

ERC Synergy Grant features

Joint effort

Breakthroughs not possible by individual PIs working alone

Synergy

Know-how of the group + Combination of scientific approaches

Strong commitment

A PI is expected to remain part of the group for the whole grant

Ambitious research problem

Equality among PIs

With a designated corresponding PI

PIs of any career stage

PIs choose the type of track record (StG/CoG/AdG)

Synergy aspects

SYNERGY

A major scientific question with a transformative scientific potential that could not be addressed by an individual PI and their team working alone

Involves teams with exceptional combinations of knowledge and skills with the PIs holding a central role

PIs must demonstrate that their group can successfully bring together the scientific elements necessary to address the scope and complexity of the proposed research question.

ERC Synergy Grant features
Synergy aspects

NOT SYNERGY

Loose cooperation or networking between PIs

Simple passing of data or information from one team to another

Note: The proposed work does not need to cover more than one discipline or field to be considered for the Synergy grants

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ERC Synergy - Proposal Structure

In step 1 only part B1 is reviewed.

Administrative data and eligibility are checked by ERC staff.

Note! Each Host Institution has to submit their support letter for the PI(s) hosted by them.

Administrative forms (Part A)

1 – General information
2 – Administrative data of organisations
3 – Budget
4 – Ethics
5 – Call specific questions

4-6 ERC keywords are selected, panels are not defined at submission

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Annexes
Commitment letters of all the Host Institutions, ethics and security docs, etc.

Part B1 (submitted as pdf)
Evaluated in Step 1 & Step 2 & Step 3

a – Extended synopsis   5 pages
b – Curriculum vitae   2 pages *per PI!*
Appendix – Funding ID
c - Track-record   2 pages *per PI!*

Part B2 (submitted as pdf)
NOT evaluated in Step 1 (only in Step 2 & 3)

Scientific proposal   15 pages
a – State-of-the-art and objectives
b – Methodology
c – Resources (budget breakdown per PI + a joint one)

SyG2022 check Guidelines in the 2022 Information for Applicants

Submission restrictions for the SyG2022 call

When checking for a rule look for the call year, not calendar year.

Evaluation		Can a PI apply to		
Result of SyG2020	Step	StG/CoG call in 2022?	AdG call in 2022?	SyG call in 2022?
C	1	yes	no	no
B	1	yes	yes	yes
B	2	yes	yes	yes
A or B	3	yes	yes	yes
Applicants to previous StG/CoG/AdG ERC calls can apply to the SyG2022 call regardless of the score received previously.				
To be eligible for SyG2022: a running ERC grant has to end before 10 November 2023				
A PI can be part of only one application published under the <u>same</u> Work Programme regardless of the call. The first application will be considered, the subsequent ones will be declared ineligible.				

What are the evaluation criteria?

Excellence is the sole evaluation criterion: addressed at two levels

1. EXCELLENCE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

- Ground breaking nature
- Potential impact
- Scientific approach
- Synergetic aspects
- In **step 1** the **feasibility** is assessed only => methodology in step 2 and 3
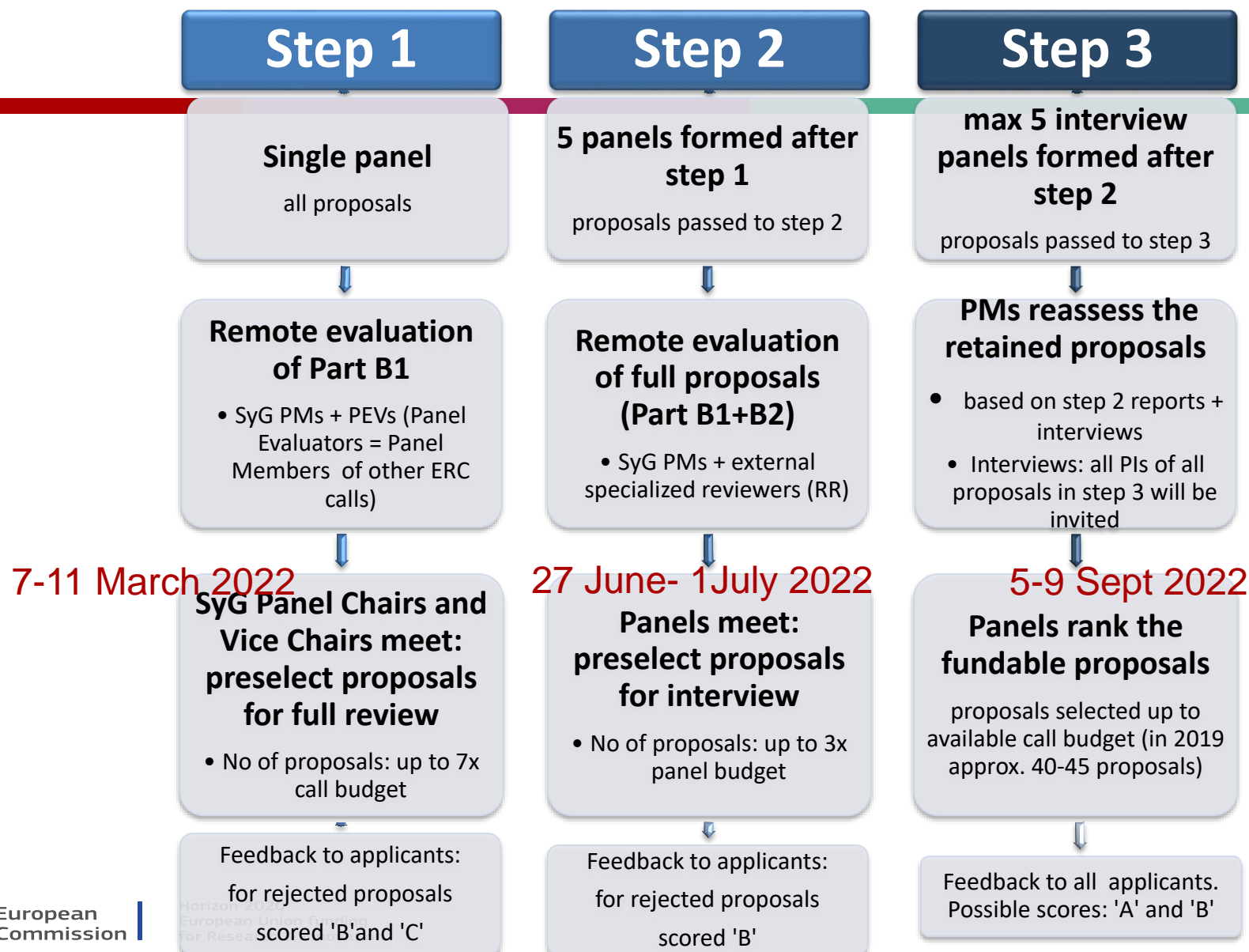- Resources are not assessed in step 1

2. EXCELLENCE OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

- Each PI assessed according to their career benchmarks
- Intellectual capacity
- Creativity
- Commitment => evaluated in step 2 and 3 only

ERC Synergy 2022 - Evaluation process

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3

Single panel

all proposals

5 panels formed after step 1

proposals passed to step 2

max 5 interview panels formed after step 2

proposals passed to step 3

Remote evaluation of Part B1

• SyG PMs + PEVs (Panel Evaluators = Panel Members of other ERC calls)

Remote evaluation of full proposals (Part B1+B2)

• SyG PMs + external specialized reviewers (RR)

PMs reassess the retained proposals

• based on step 2 reports + interviews
• Interviews: all PIs of all proposals in step 3 will be invited

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7-11 March 2022

SyG Panel Chairs and Vice Chairs meet: preselect proposals for full review

• No of proposals: up to 7x call budget

27 June- 1July 2022

Panels meet: preselect proposals for interview

• No of proposals: up to 3x panel budget

5-9 Sept 2022

Panels rank the fundable proposals

proposals selected up to available call budget (in 2019 approx. 40-45 proposals)

Feedback to applicants: for rejected proposals scored 'B'and 'C'

Feedback to applicants: for rejected proposals scored 'B'

Feedback to all applicants. Possible scores: 'A' and 'B'

Reviewers:

PMs: 87 - Panel members of the given call

PEV: approx. 130 - Panel evaluators (panel member of other ERC calls)

RR: Remote referee – approx. 1200 (specialized external reviewers), they participate only in step 2

Hints and tips
How to prepare an ERC SyG proposal?

- Have an **original and exciting idea t**hat requires the **joint effort** of 2 or 3 or 4 PIs
- **Design a research project** to implement the idea
  - It is not about a consortium, but about a tight-knit small group of PIs and their teams. The PIs are equal and indispensable for the project!
- Get a letter of support from your **Host Institution**- each HI has to provide a support letter for the PI(s) hosted by them
- **Write** the research proposal (carefully plan the resources)
- Read carefully the **evaluation criteria** and try to ensure that the reviewers can find the answers to them in your proposal (part B2 is not a mere repetition of part B1)
- Plan **sufficient time to write and refine** a SyG grant application
- Don't underestimate the **obstacle of different scientific languages** when you are merging fields
- **Get feedback** from your peers
- **Submit** your research proposal **before the deadline** -> fully electronic/web based submission system – try to avoid submitting it on the last day

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Hints and tips
Questions to ask yourself as an applicant

Principal Investigators – Why me, why this group?

- Is each of the PIs internationally competitive as a researcher at each of their career stage and in each of their discipline?

- Is each of the PIs able to work independently, and to manage a 6-year project with a substantial budget?

- How strong is the group of PIs as a whole?

- Does the proposal demonstrate that the PIs bring together the necessary elements, the know-how to address the research question?

When writing the CVs

- Remember that the CVs/Track Records are as important as the project!
- Explain what has been each PI's own contribution to their key publications.
- Explain publishing habits in the field and country if needed.
- If the PI knows that he/she has gaps or other issues in the CV (e.g. co-authored publications), explain them.
- Describe activities which can indicate scientific maturity.
- Use the CV template provided by the ERC in the submission system
- No need to provide PhD supporting documents
- Consider including a short narrative description of the of the scientific importance of the research outputs

Hints and tips
Questions to ask yourself as an applicant

Research Project – Why now? Why is it important?

- Why is the proposed project important?

- Does it promise to go substantially beyond the state of the art?

- Has it the chance the cross-fertilize disciplines?

- What is the scientific transformative potential?

- Does it have a grand challenge that can boost European research?

- Why are we the best/only persons to carry it out?

- Why is this particular combination of the PIs the best for the project?

- Is the other person(s) really needed as a PI or only as a team member?

- Is it timely? (Why wasn't it done in the past? Is it feasible now?)

- What's the risk? Is it justified by a substantial potential gain? Do we have a plan for managing the risk?

Hints and tips
Preparing an application
Differences in Part B1 and Part B2

In **Step 1**: **Panel members** (**act as generalists**) they see <u>**only Part B1**</u> of your proposal: Prepare it accordingly!

- Pay particular attention to the **ground-breaking nature** of the research project – no incremental research. State-of-the-art is not enough. Think big!

- For SyG: Synergetic aspects important – **know-how of the group** is assessed together with the **combination** of the scientific elements

- Know your competitors – what is the **state of play** and why is your idea and scientific approach outstanding?

- <u>**Only**</u> **the extended Synopsis is read at Step 1**: **concise and clear presentation** is crucial (**Outline** only of the **methodological approach** – feasibility is assessed at step 1)

- Show, if applicable for ERC Starting and Consolidator profiles, the **scientific independence** in the CVs, the scientific leadership in the Advanced Grants profile

- **Funding ID** to be filled in carefully for each PI

Hints and tips
Preparing an application
Differences in Part B1 and Part B2

In **Step 2** : <u>Both</u> **Part B1 and B2** are sent to specialists around the world (**specialised external referees**)

- Do not just repeat the synopsis in part B2

- Provide **sufficient detail** on methodology, work plan, selection of case studies etc. (15 pages) (references do not count towards page limit)

- Check coherency of figures, **justify requested resources** (outside of 15 pages) – pay attention to the calculations and provide budget for each of the PIs

- Explain **involvement of additional team members** (it is possible to have further beneficiaries/partners in the project)

- Provide alternative strategies to **mitigate risk**

In Step 3: no new reviews are written, but part B1 and B2 are re-assessed

Take home messages – ERC Synergy grants

The end result should be more than the mere sum of the parts.

- Competitive call (7,5% success rate in SyG 2020)
  - only exceptional proposals are likely to be funded that will demonstrate that the **truly ambitious** research questions could lead to breakthroughs **only through the joint effort** of the group of PIs.
- 'Synergy' does not mean a loose consortium
  - The interaction would yield something more than just the sum of the individual parts.
  - To yield possibly either unforeseen, completely new science, to cross fertilize disciplines or to solve important research problems that until now could not be dreamt of solving.
  - 'Synergy' is not the end goal, rather the means to achieve the aims of the project
- Early career applicants are encouraged to apply

# Hints and tips
Where to find more information

1. **The ERC Work Programme 2022 – our legal basis**
2. **Information for applicants**
3. **Videos on Synergy grants on the ERC website:**
   https://erc.europa.eu/funding/synergy-grants
4. **Examples of Synergy grants selected in SYG2020 call:**

https://erc.europa.eu/news/erc-2020-synergy-grants-results

5. **Videos on ERC Classes**
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbFbzkVWgCU&list=PLtv6FnsXqnXAYRk6HCErwMxwML0ZKoMcy
   - What to consider before applying
   - How to fill in the application
   - The interview
   - How the evaluation works
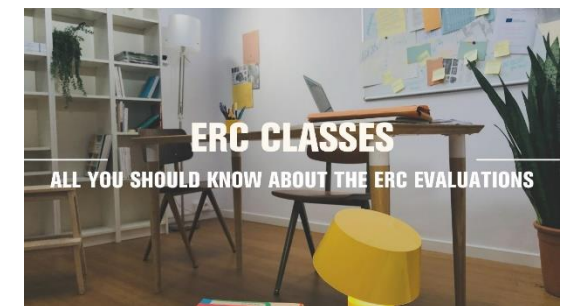
6. **National Contact Points (NCP)** https://erc.europa.eu/funding/national-contact-points

Thank you!

Don't hesitate to contact us:

ERC-SYG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu