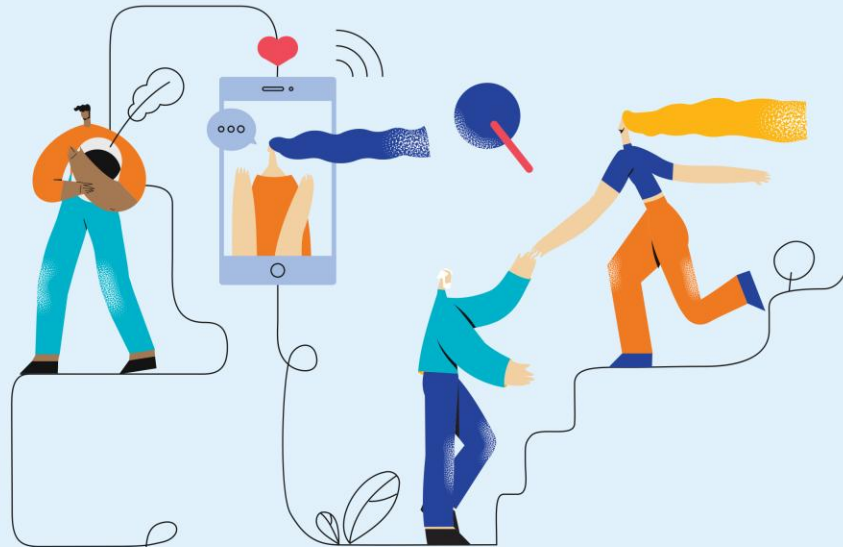
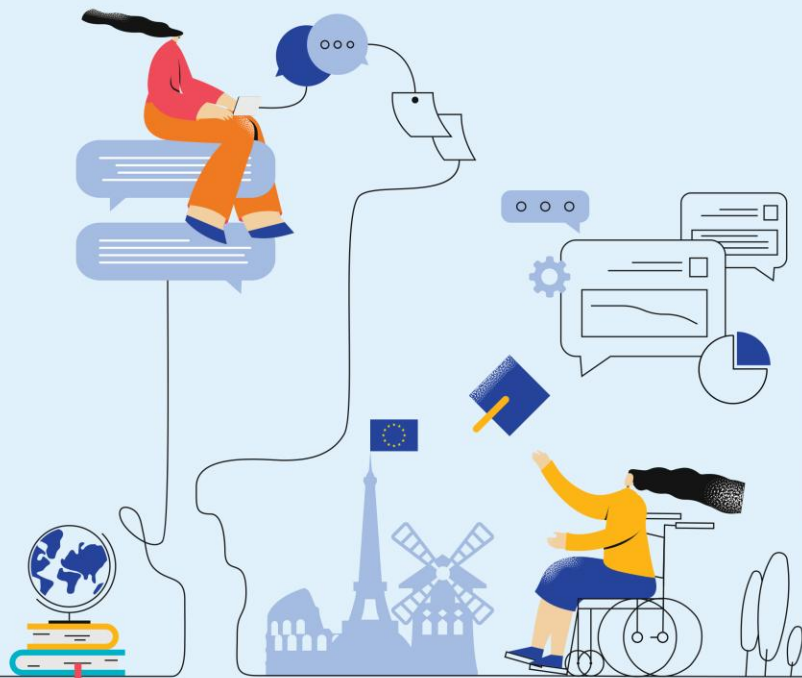


Widening countries and the ERC

Overview of participation and support measures



Emanuel Maloča
National Contact Point for the ERC



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Building ERC-Competitive Research: Lessons from Croatia
Split, September 2026

Widening countries under Horizon Europe

Widening participation and strengthening the European Research Area



15 EU MEMBER STATES

- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Cyprus
- Czechia
- Estonia
- Greece
- Hungary
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Malta
- Poland
- Portugal
- Romania
- Slovakia
- Slovenia



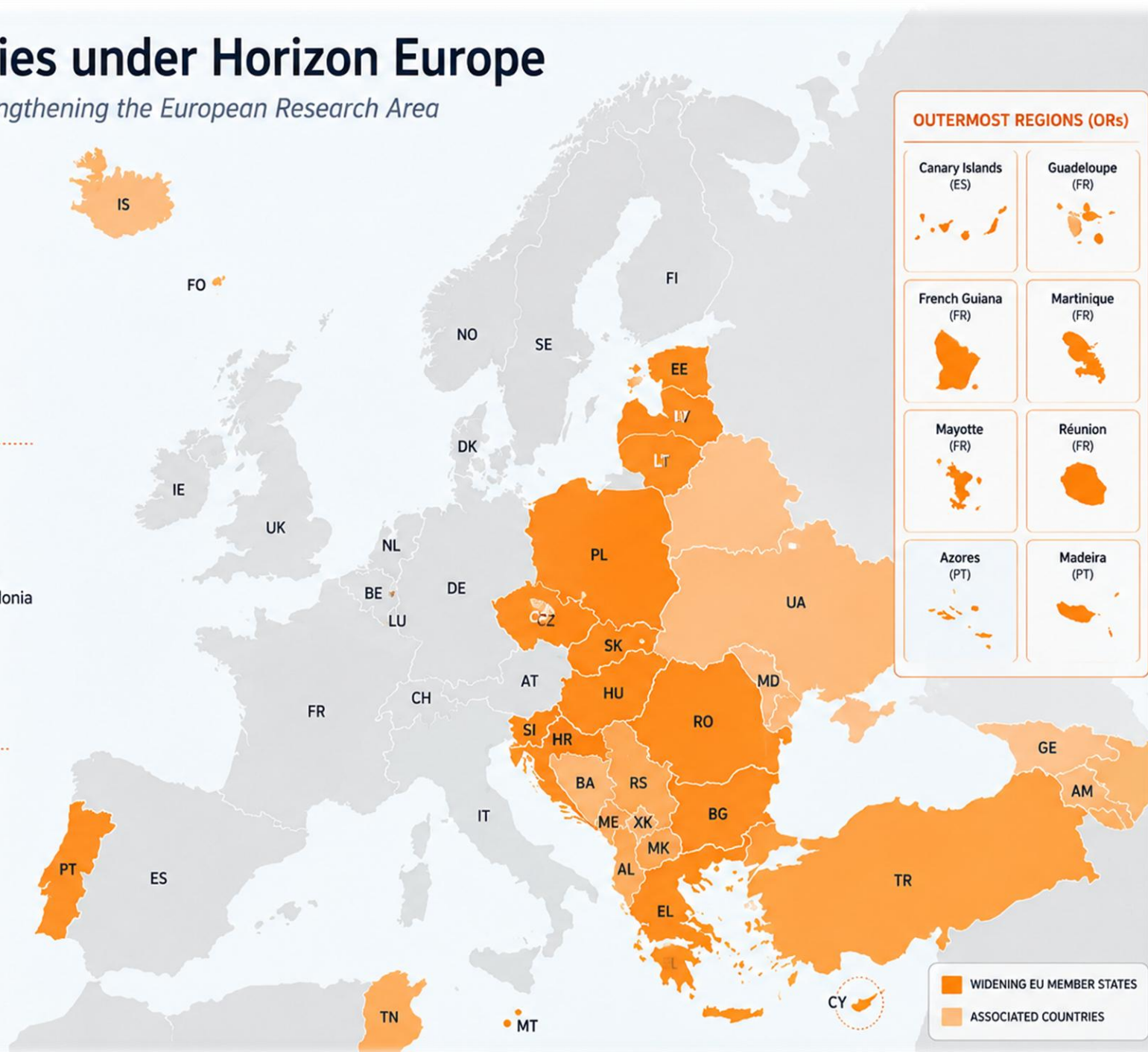
14 ASSOCIATED COUNTRIES

- Albania
- Armenia
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Faroe Islands
- Georgia
- Iceland
- Israel
- Kosovo
- Moldova
- Montenegro
- North Macedonia
- Serbia
- Tunisia
- Türkiye
- Ukraine



OUTERMOST REGIONS (ORs)

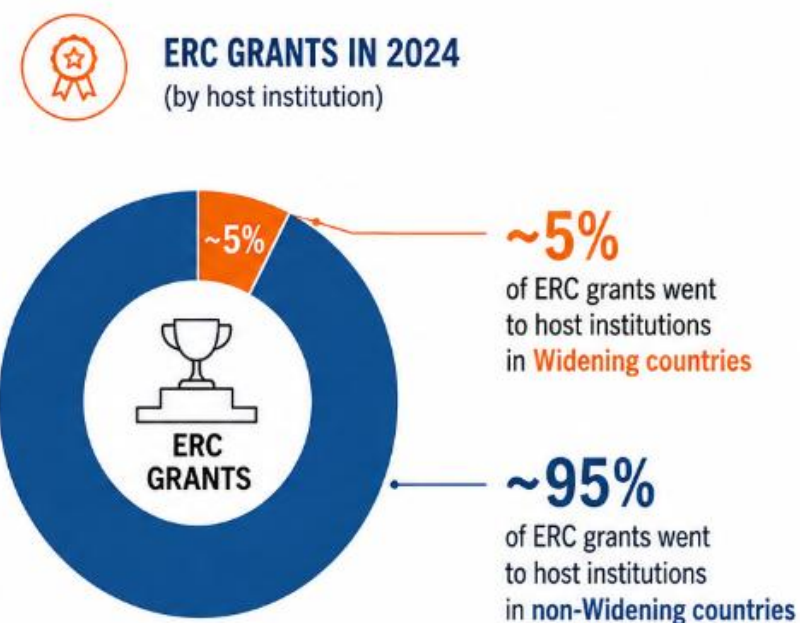
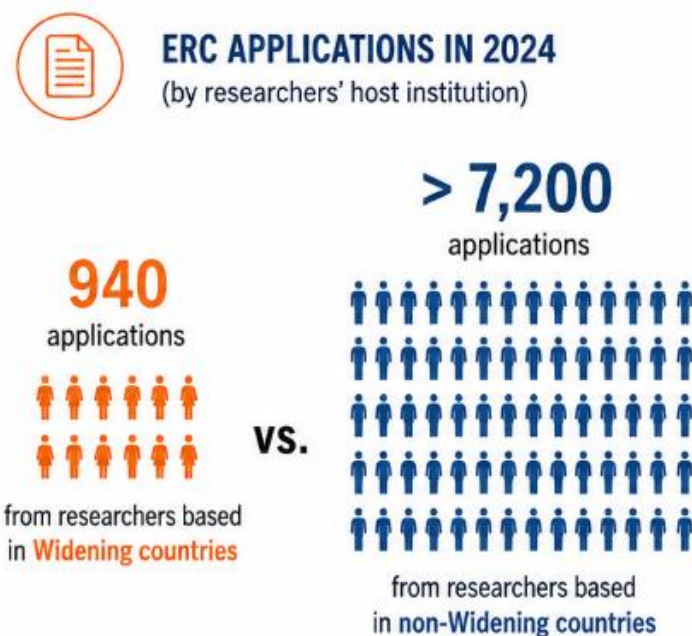
- Canary Islands (ES)
- Guadeloupe (FR)
- French Guiana (FR)
- Martinique (FR)
- Mayotte (FR)
- Réunion (FR)
- Azores (PT)
- Madeira (PT)



The ERC participation gap

A persistent participation gap

- Widening countries account for approximately one quarter of the EU population
- Yet they secure only around one twentieth of ERC grants
- Success rates remain significantly lower, with participation also lower in absolute terms



This is not simply a geographical imbalance. It reflects differences in research systems and environments.



Some Widening countries have
substantially improved their performance

Success rates **at least doubled** after FP7



Cyprus

≥2x



Greece

≥2x



Lithuania

≥2x



Slovenia

≥2x



**Four-fold
increase**

FP7 → Horizon 2020



Slovenia

4x



**Three-fold
increase**

FP7 → Horizon 2020



Czechia

3x



Strong performance
can emerge in specific
scientific fields



Life sciences



Physical sciences
and engineering



Computer science
& AI



Environment
& climate

Why is there a gap?

The ERC Scientific Council has identified five broad barriers

1. Less favourable academic environments
2. Lower national R&D investment
3. Limited access to international scientific networks
4. Weaker support for competitive grant preparation
5. Language, cultural and psychological barriers



Excellence remains the sole criterion

Support for Widening countries is **not** about:

- ✗ geographical quotas
- ✗ preferential evaluation
- ✗ lowering ERC standards

It is about:

- ✓ improving research conditions
- ✓ strengthening applicant readiness
- ✓ providing access to expertise and networks
- ✓ enabling excellent researchers to compete



A policy toolbox for ERC participation

Direct support to researchers

Before application

- mentoring
- preparatory research
- proposal review
- peer feedback
- interview training

Strengthening the research environment

- research infrastructure
- career stability
- international recruitment
- internationalisation
- talent development

After an unsuccessful application

- bridge funding
- support for resubmission



From last-minute support to long-term preparation

Czechia

1–2 years of mentoring before submission

Cyprus

Up to **€100,000** for preparatory research supporting a future ERC proposal

Portugal

Proposal **pre-assessment by former ERC panel members**

Common features:

- scientific rather than purely administrative support
- experienced ERC grantees and panellists
- critical discussion of the research idea
- preparation well before the deadline



A high-quality unsuccessful proposal is an asset

Portugal

€250,000 / 36 months for unfunded ERC “A” proposals

Estonia

Up to €100,000 per year for 1.5 years

Lithuania

Up to €150,000 / 18 months for eligible Step 2 applicants

Slovenia

National funding for highly evaluated unsuccessful proposals

Czechia

Bridge funding linked to a commitment to resubmit



Building an ERC support ecosystem

A mature institutional support model can combine:

- scientific mentors
- research managers / grant officers
- ERC grantees and panel members
- internal and external peer review
- mock interviews
- administrative and budget support
- post-award grant management
- peer communities of applicants and alumni



Different models, same objective

Applicant-centred national support

Hungary

- NCP proposal reading and advisory support
- access to ERC grantees and successful proposals
- mock interviews with panel-specific expertise
- national mentor programme for StG/CoG applicants

Türkiye

- Proposal Development Programme for PIs
- support for visits in Türkiye
- national support for ERC finalists not selected for funding

Cyprus

- ERC Visiting Research Fellowship
- €25,000–€50,000 for visits to ERC grantees
- 3–6 month visits to strengthen proposal development



Different models, same objective

Funding the ERC pipeline

Hungary

- ERC-style national schemes: Momentum, STARTING, ADVANCED, HIGHLIGHT
- support for young PIs and excellent researchers with research groups
- Step 2 ERC applicants can apply with their ERC proposal

Lithuania and Latvia

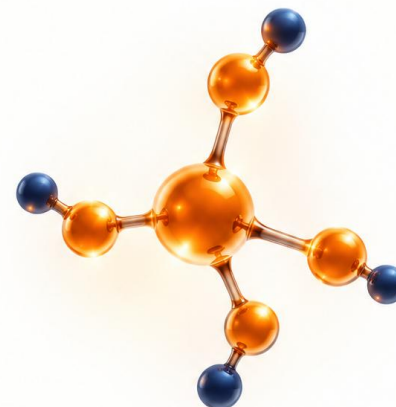
- use of ERDF transfer possibilities
- funding positively evaluated but unfunded Horizon Europe / ERC-type proposals

Poland and Greece

- national funding bodies modelled on ERC principles
- Poland: National Science Centre
- Greece: Hellenic Foundation for Research & Innovation

Cyprus

- “Horizon Europe — 2nd Opportunity”
- up to €100,000 for 12–18 months to improve high-quality unfunded ERC proposals



Creating an ERC-friendly research environment

Czechia — CEITEC

- Structural Funds used to strengthen R&D capacity and infrastructure

Lithuania — Life Sciences Centre

- Advanced research environment hosting many Lithuanian ERC grantees

Bulgaria — INSAIT

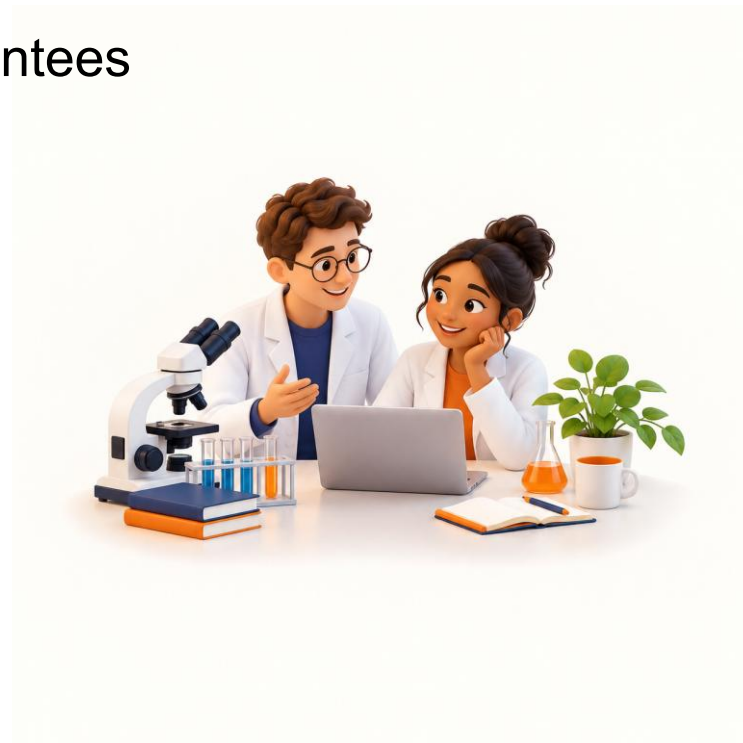
- approximately **€85 million / 10 years**
- partnership with ETH Zurich and EPFL
- internationally competitive recruitment conditions

Portugal

- ERC-PT Careers Programme to attract and retain ERC grantees

Lithuania

- Up to **€1 million** to attract/reintegrate researchers



From support measures to ERC culture

- **Identify potential applicants early**
- **Begin preparation 12–24 months before submission**
- **Build communities of grantees, panellists, mentors and applicants**
- **Combine scientific and professional grant support**
- **Treat resubmission as part of the pipeline**
- **Provide support before, during and after the ERC grant**
- **Invest in careers, infrastructure and internationalisation**
- **Use national and EU resources strategically**



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

And above all:

Do not change the standard of excellence.

Change the conditions in which excellence can emerge and compete.