ERC AdG: Important things to consider

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About myself

2015-2021:   ERC AdG "COMTESSA"

2013-2020:   Panel member ERC CoG Panel PE10 (Geosciences)
             Twice panel chair ERC CoG Panel PE10 (Geosciences)
             Panel member ERC AdG Panel PE10 (Geosciences)
2021   Had to leave – panel members have to leave after 8 years
2021 -   Continue to be a reviewer

Procedures have slightly changed since my experience, partly related to changes triggered by COVID (e.g., online meetings)

The panel

Each panel has **complete freedom** how to organize the reviews.

Panel members are usually **nominated for 8 years** (after 8 years they need to leave).

Panel members are active (i.e., in the committee) **every 2nd year** (i.e., 4 times max). In the other years, they are "shadow" panel members. They do not participate but can be assigned as reviewers also for step 1. This is usually done if their expertise is closer to the topic of a proposal than the expertise of active members. **Shadow panel members only submit written reviews**, to be considered by the committee.

Step 1 vs step 2

In step 1, the CV of the applicant is extremely important. How much weight exactly is given to the CV (50%?) is probably dependent on the panel/discipline but the CV is definitely VERY important.

In step 2, the CV is usually not much discussed anymore (everyone in step 2 is already a leader in their field); there, the focus is on the reviews of the science part.

The CV

To pass step 1, your **CV needs to be excellent/outstanding**. The focus will be on the last 10 years, so you should have had (also) some recent successes.

If in doubt, compare your CV with others. Your CV should be at a similar level of what you find for successful AdG grantees. Otherwise the risk is high that you will not make it, even if the project idea is great.

Important points:
- Demonstrate your **scientific creativity and leadership**
- Convince the panel that **you can handle a large project and lead a team**. Highlight your experience as a project PI/coordinator and with the supervision of PhD students, post-docs, etc.
- **Explain your role** in publications (e.g., you can mark papers with different signs to highlight papers written by your PhD students; papers where you were the research leader, etc.)
- Explain **gaps in your CV** (e.g., maternity leave, military service, sickness, etc.) or if you have worked outside academia for some time, especially if this concerns the last 10 years. Make sure this cannot be overlooked!

The Research

Do **not "just" continue your research**. Identify a new topic/idea.

The research should have the potential for "**breakthroughs**". "High gains" are expected!

High risk is accepted/expected but panel members often have different views on it: Some see it positive ("that is what ERC is about – high risk/high gain"), some see it as a slight disadvantage ("low/medium risk/high gain is even better").

Definitely include high risk components in your proposal, but explain how you **mitigate the risk**, i.e., how do you deal with a failure in one component of your proposal. Describe low/medium risk **backup plans** to convince sceptical reviewers/panel members!

While high risk is expected/accepted, **keep the project feasible** and convince the reviewers/panel members of the feasibility (again, backup plans may be important).

The Research: Step 1

Step 1 is **evaluated only by panel members** and does **NOT** involve reviewers.

Your proposal will be assigned to one lead reviewer from within the panel, plus several other panel members (possibly including "shadow" panel members).

While the lead reviewer **may be an expert in your field** (but maybe not), all other panel members very likely are not.

Keep this in mind when writing the step 1 proposal. Communicate your vision such that also **non-expert panel members can get your idea**. Strike a balance between text addressed to experts and text addressed to non-experts. But **don't make trivial statements** directed to the general public (panel members usually have a broad expertise and are clever enough to judge a scientific proposal outside their field of expertise).

Be **complete** (don't refer to step 2 proposal or expect that panel members know about it – this is not available to the panel at step1).

The Research: Step 2

Step 2 is **evaluated by several external expert reviewers** and panel members.

Again, there will be a **lead reviewer from within the panel** who will summarize the external reviews to the panel, but several other panel members will also read the proposal and reviews in detail. Yet other panel members (outside their field of expertise) may focus only on the reviews, or may not read in detail at all.

You have to **convince ALL reviewers and panel members**. Usually, if there is even only one very critical review, the proposal will fail (unless the panel senses that the review is biased/unfair or misses the point).

The issue of interdisciplinarity

ERC encourages interdisciplinary research.

HOWEVER: Unfortunately, and despite many attempts to change this, **interdisciplinary proposals fail more often than disciplinary ones**.

WHY? ERC does not know, really, but
- Cross-panel reviews are difficult to organize
- Proposals can end up being shifted between panels, with no panel really "wanting it"
- Panel is uncomfortable, as no one in the panel is competent enough to judge the proposal.
- Panels may avoid the risk of being wrong and funding a "crazy" project!

If you submit a proposal to more than one panel, be careful. Make clear which part belongs to which panel and make sure that both panels are competent enough to review at least part of it.