



ERC Success Stories from Widening Countries

Explore inspiring stories of researchers who have successfully secured [European Research Council](#) (ERC) funding, with a special focus on **grantees from Horizon Europe Widening countries**.

Provided by the **ERC National Contact Point network project mERCury**, these success stories offer insights into researchers' journeys and achievements, inspiring others to pursue frontier research and apply for ERC grants.



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In this **first edition**, you can discover the inspiring **ERC Success Stories of seven researchers** who have successfully secured ERC funding. Alongside **written stories**, you can also listen to [podcast episodes in the mERCury YouTube channel](#) to hear more about researchers experiences and perspectives.

We invite you to read the **success stories featured in this issue from:**

- **Dr. Huw S. Groucutt, Malta**
- **Prof. Jadranka Šepić, Croatia**
- **Prof. Alida Timar, Romania**
- **Assoc. Prof. Mojca Plesničar, Slovenia**
- **Prof. Inta Mieriņa, Latvia**
- **Dr. Olga Karagiorgou, Greece**
- **Prof. Mustafa Yücel, Turkey**

Interviews with researchers were conducted in August 2026

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Think Big, Start Small: Building a Strong ERC Research Idea

Standfirst: *Archaeologist Huw S. Groucutt turned a question prompted by Malta's terraced hillsides into TerraForm, an ERC Consolidator Grant project. His experience shows how a locally grounded study can address larger questions about landscapes, climate and human decisions without losing sight of what is feasible.*

For Huw S. Groucutt, the walls that divide Malta's hillsides are more than familiar features of the landscape. They are evidence of a vast human undertaking: stone quarried, moved and assembled to make slopes cultivable. Terracing stretches back thousands of years and, on Mediterranean islands such as Malta, covers much of the land. Yet basic questions remain unresolved, including when individual systems were built and how their long histories have shaped the landscapes people inhabit today.

That gap is the starting point for TerraForm, Huw's ERC Consolidator Grant project at the University of Malta. The project treats terraces not as a marginal subject but as a way to investigate everyday human life. Archaeology, he argues, has often been drawn towards temples, ritual sites and elite objects. Studying agricultural terraces broadens the discipline's attention to the labour and choices that created ordinary working landscapes.

The scientific opportunity has expanded as dating methods have improved. Until recently, establishing when terraces were built was difficult. Luminescence dating offers one route: it measures how long mineral grains have been buried and hidden from sunlight. This can help the team reconstruct the chronology of terraced systems and move beyond what can be seen at the surface, where a hillside may reveal only a few stones or subtly flattened ground.

The question matters because terracing has effects that extend beyond agriculture. It can limit soil erosion and is connected to flooding, carbon storage and biodiversity.



Dr. Huw S. Groucutt

Host Institution/country:
University of Malta, Malta

Grant: ERC Consolidator Grant

Grant duration:
01.03.2025 - 28.02.2030

Grant amount: € 1 999 711

Call: ERC-2024-COG

Domain: SH6

Acronym: TerraForm

Project in CORDIS

A Landscape of the
Anthropocene: An Overview
of Agricultural Terracing in
Malta

Huw's wider research has long examined how climate influences humans. TerraForm brings that concern into a landscape profoundly modified by people. In his account, climate does not act on communities in isolation. Its effects are filtered through human-made environments.

That perspective gives the project a contemporary edge. Across the Mediterranean, Huw says, the past 50 years have brought a broad movement away from agricultural livelihoods towards service-based economies. As maintenance declines, terraced landscapes can decay and collapse. The consequences are not yet fully understood, but he points to the possibility of landslides, floods and other problems when terraces fail. He hopes that solid research will ultimately support advice to governments, non-governmental organisations and the EU, while keeping the human element of landscapes visible in discussions of climate change.

The project idea emerged during a period of disruption. While working in Germany during the COVID period, when much was shut down, Huw began spending considerable time in Malta and exploring its landscape. The repeated sight of small fields separated by terrace walls led him to ask why people had invested so much labour in their construction. When he investigated, he found surprisingly little knowledge about them. Malta offered both continuity with his previous interests and something close to a blank slate.

That combination helped him rethink his approach to the ERC. He had applied twice before, without success. Those earlier proposals contained good science, he says, but largely extended work he was already doing, and he was less committed to them than he

would be to the subsequent successful proposal.

For the successful application, he returned to first principles: the gap in knowledge and the research challenge. He retained the methods, theory and recurring themes of his earlier work, but built the project around a newly defined problem.

Scale was central to making the idea credible. "One key point is about scale - how you pitch a project. For ERC grants, you must address a big-picture topic, but you cannot look at the entire planet." A single archaeological site could be too narrow for a major global question, while a planetary study would be unmanageable. Malta gave TerraForm a bounded setting in which to pursue a wider enquiry.

Turning that framing into an executable proposal required sustained dialogue and preparation. Huw spoke with previous grantees, consulted successful proposals where possible and drew on resources available online and through institutional funding officers. Colleagues provided a testing ground for his reasoning. "One of the hardest steps is moving from 'It's a cool idea' to something tangible: 'Here is my work plan, here are my hypotheses, and here is how I am going to do it.'" Draft reviews, practice interviews and mock interviews also mattered, and he cautions against underestimating how long the process takes.

Panel choice was another strategic decision. Applicants need to understand their audience and balance the research they want to conduct with what a panel will find intelligible and compelling. The ERC places considerable trust in the principal investigator, in Huw's view: a strong track record matters, but it can support a project that differs substantially from previous work.

At interview, he found the process fair rather than adversarial. Unlike a PhD defence, which assesses a completed body of work, the ERC interview concerns a future project with unavoidable uncertainty. His preparation ranged from EU guidance on climate change and agriculture to detailed methods. The guidance did not come up, but questions tested both broad command of the topic and methodological specificity.

That uncertainty also shapes the project's balance of ambition and feasibility. A proposal must promise sound scientific results even if its boldest aims prove unreachable, while still creating routes to high-impact publications and larger stories. "The ERC has now stopped using the word 'risky', but the concept remains. And that is a good thing." For Huw, an honest plan and a logical roadmap matter even when the research question may not ultimately yield a complete answer.

TerraForm is ongoing and is due to run until 2030. Its opening phase has involved building a largely international team and establishing how to operate an ERC project in a country where he runs the only locally based ERC project. The team has already carried out extensive excavations in demanding heat. Because much depends on dating the terraces, progress is necessarily slow. Laboratory analysis is the next stage, and although Huw describes the early findings as exciting, papers will be coming out in the next year or two. The distinction is important: the foundations have been laid, but the project's principal conclusions remain ahead. ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **Start with the large research question, then define a study scale** that is manageable without losing wider significance.
- **Build from genuine strengths, but return to first principles** instead of simply extending existing work.
- **Research the panels** carefully and write for the audience that will assess the proposal.
- **Speak with previous grantees, review successful proposals where available and use institutional funding support.**
- Convert the **idea into explicit hypotheses, a work plan and a credible methodological roadmap.**
- Allow **enough time** for critical draft reviews, mock interviews and repeated practice.
- **Balance assured scientific value with ambitious outcomes;** explain what will still be learned if the highest-risk element does not work.
- **Treat rejection and interview experience as useful preparation, build networks and keep progressing** through appropriately scaled grants and publications.



The Science of Sudden Waves: Meteotsunamis, Persistence and the ERC

Standfirst: *Oceanographer Jadranka Šepić studies meteotsunamis: locally destructive, tsunami-like waves driven by rapid atmospheric changes. Her ERC journey links years of foundational research with a push for scientific independence, real-time detection and the persistence to apply before conditions feel perfect.*

To somebody standing on the shore, a meteotsunami can look like a tsunami caused by an earthquake. Water may rise by a metre within minutes, or retreat so abruptly that a harbour appears almost empty. The effects are usually concentrated in one bay, harbour or a somewhat larger stretch of coast rather than across a vast region, but they can still be destructive. Jadranka notes that the difference between the lowest and highest sea level can reach six metres or more, and that a six-metre event has been observed in Croatia.

The cause begins in the atmosphere. Rapid changes in air pressure over a relatively small area, sometimes associated with summer thunderstorm clouds, create a response in the sea. Under particular conditions, the atmospheric disturbance moves at the same speed as the waves below it. Resonance then allows a small wave to grow: Jadranka gives the example of an offshore wave increasing from five centimetres to 50 centimetres. As it enters shallow water, it slows, shortens and rises, potentially reaching six metres or more near the coast.

Understanding how often such oscillations occur required a change in available evidence. Sea level was traditionally recorded once an hour because mechanical instruments made more frequent measurements difficult. By the end of the 20th century, technology allowed observations at intervals of a minute or less. After the Sumatra tsunami in December 2004, the scientific community recognised the value of one-minute measurements for seismic-tsunami warning systems. Many countries began collecting such data and making them publicly available.



Prof. Jadranka Šepić

Host Institution/country:

University of Split, Croatia

Grant:

1. ERC Consolidator Grant
2. ERC Proof of Concept

Grant duration:

1. 01.09.2020 - 28.02.2026
2. 01.04.2025 - 30.09.2026

Grant amount:

1. € 806 250
2. € 150 000

Calls:

1. ERC-2019-STG
2. ERC-2024-POC

Domain: PE10

Acronyms/projects in CORDIS:

1. SHExtreme
2. MeD-Track

SHExtreme

Estimating contribution of sub-hourly sea level oscillations to overall sea level extremes in changing climate

Jadranka, an oceanographer at the University of Split, had already been studying Mediterranean meteotsunamis when she recognised another use for those records. Tsunami-like oscillations appeared in datasets from around the world at periods of few to few tens of minutes. With 10 to 15 years of one-minute observations available, she saw enough material to begin constructing a basic climatology. That insight became central to SHExtreme, her ERC Starting Grant project, which focused on estimating the contribution of sub-hourly sea-level oscillations to overall extremes in a changing climate.

The proposal was ambitious, but it did not represent a sudden change of field. It built on Jadranka's PhD research into meteotsunamis and her subsequent study of global datasets and their climatology. She already had initial results and two published papers that introduced the project's topic. She believes the work would have continued without ERC support, but more slowly and with fewer collaborators. A major benefit of the grant was the ability to employ additional young researchers.

The funding also offered something less easily quantified: scientific independence. Jadranka describes a positive relationship with her supervisor and says she could contribute ideas and steer work that she led. Even so, she wanted the space to define a programme as her own. "I wanted time to think about my ideas, develop them and lead the research from beginning to end."

Reaching that point required overcoming delay and self-doubt. Jadranka uses the Croatian idea of *dišpet* to describe a positive form of defiance: the determination to act when somebody suggests that something cannot be done. Like many researchers she knew in Croatia, she had repeatedly intended to apply, only to consider

postponing when the call arrived and the writing had to begin.

Beneath the pressure of time, she says, can lie a fear that the application has little chance of success.

In 2018, after returning from holiday, she told her husband she would wait another year because there was not enough time. His response was blunt: "No, you will have even less time next year. You have to apply this year." She followed the advice and produced the proposal in roughly six to eight weeks. The scientific idea was already developed, and an unsuccessful application for an MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship had yielded useful reviews.

The practical challenge was working out what an ERC proposal should look like. Jadranka could not find a successful example in her field, and although Croatia already had some ERC grantees, their research areas were different. Videos and instructions helped only so far. The structure beyond the prescribed elements, and the budget, both had to be worked out. Eventually, she concluded that the absence of a model gave her freedom to organise the case as she thought best. The essential task was to do the work and write.

Support has since improved. Jadranka says Croatia now has more ERC grantees and a helpful National Contact Point. Prospective applicants also approach her for general advice, critical reading and, in many cases, access to her application. She sees value in support from several directions: National Contact Points and grantees can explain how to present the excellence of the project, the applicant's CV, the idea and its feasibility. National and institutional backing matter too, especially protected time to write, which signals that the institution regards an ERC application as worthwhile.



Winning the grant did not remove uncertainty. Scientifically, some lines of research took longer than planned. Administratively, Jadranka was among Croatia's first ERC grantees and essentially the first at her university, so processes were unfamiliar and she had to work with the project officer to establish what was required. She notes that, in some Eastern European research systems, much of this work can fall on the principal investigator unless a dedicated person is employed. Recruitment brought another constraint: she found PhD students relatively easy to recruit in Croatia, but postdoctoral researchers much harder.

The research is now moving from understanding towards real-time detection through MeD-Track, an ERC Proof of Concept project. Forecasting remains difficult. Atmospheric and ocean models, combined with probability-based methods, may indicate that an event could occur, but estimating its final wave height is much harder. Thunderstorm clouds associated with meteotsunamis are not always predicted accurately enough in place and time. As Jadranka puts it, "The sea is the easier part. The difficult part is the atmosphere."

MeD-Track is therefore exploring two ongoing approaches to observing atmospheric conditions directly: stations that track air pressure and meteorological-radar reflectivity data. Jadranka says both are showing promising results, but she is clear about the limitation. Even an effective early-warning system would probably provide only around 30 minutes to one hour of notice. The work has not yet delivered such a system, it is testing the real-time information that one would require. ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **Apply early enough** to preserve another opportunity if the first review is unfavourable.
- **Do not wait for perfect circumstances;** a well-developed idea can be turned into a proposal under a firm deadline.
- **Use reviews from unsuccessful applications** to strengthen the next proposal.
- **Build on established expertise and evidence** while showing how the ERC would expand the team, pace or independence of the work.
- If examples are scarce, **choose the structure that makes the scientific case clearest** and then write it.
- **Think like a reviewer:** make the project's excellence, the CV, the idea and its feasibility easy to identify.
- **Ask trusted, critical readers to review the application** and receive their comments without defensiveness.
- **Seek help from National Contact Points and ERC grantees, and ask the institution for protected writing time.**

Beyond the Statistics: How to Turn Ambition into ERC Success"

Standfirst: *At Babeş-Bolyai University in Romania, prof. Alida Timar studies how quartz can preserve information about time. Her two ERC proposals grew from results that first looked like problems - and from the conviction that ambitious science matters more than discouraging statistics.*

Quartz is easy to overlook precisely because it is so common. It is present in beach sand, rocks and dust, and even travels on the soles of our feet. For prof. Alida Timar, Professor at Babeş-Bolyai University, that ubiquity is not a limitation but the mineral's scientific power. Using luminescence and electron spin resonance dating techniques, she investigates the information held in quartz and what it can reveal about time.

The questions that led to her ERC-funded research did not begin with tidy confirmation. During her PhD, Alida found that something was not right with the dating method she was using. She contacted leading experts, built connections and persisted until others began to take the finding seriously. Then came a deceptively simple suggestion: "Why don't you apply for an ERC grant?"

She did - and her 2015 Starting Grant proposal, INTERTRAP, succeeded on its first submission. The experience established a pattern that would shape her next proposal: rather than dismiss an unexpected result, she would examine what new scientific direction it might open.

That second opportunity emerged during the Starting Grant, when she encountered problems with another dating method. At first, she tried to work out how to fix them. No solution came. Gradually, the question changed. Instead of treating the problem only as an obstacle, she began to ask whether it could be useful for something else. That reframing became the seed of PROGRESS, her 2021 Consolidator Grant.

The new idea carried scientific risk. It represented a slight change of field and could not be presented as a simple continuation of the Starting Grant.



Prof. Alida Timar

Host Institution/country:

Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania
Member of Academia Europaea
Corresponding member of Romanian Academy

Grant:

1. ERC Starting Grant
2. ERC Consolidator Grant

Grant duration:

1. 01.04.2016 - 31.03.2022
2. 01.01.2023 - 31.12.2027

Grant amount:

1. € 1 500 000
2. € 2 657 000

Calls:

1. ERC-2015-STG
2. ERC-2021-COG

Domain: PE10

Acronyms/projects in CORDIS:

1. INTERTRAP
2. PROGRESS

Faculty of Environmental
Science and Engineering
and Interdisciplinary Research
Institute on Bio-Nano-Science

Alida spent about two years developing it. The core concept remained largely stable, but she read extensively, familiarised herself with other methods and worked to show that the proposal combined genuine ambition with a credible route to delivery. Because this was a bid for consecutive ERC funding, she felt an additional responsibility to be exceptionally well prepared.

Preliminary work was central to that balance. Alida is clear that an applicant should not complete the whole project before seeking support; doing so would defeat the purpose of the grant. But evidence that the underlying approach can produce meaningful results helps make a high-risk idea believable. In her application, preliminary findings served two purposes: they located the proposed work against the state of the art and showed how the research could move beyond it.

For her, an ERC-level project is not a bundle of techniques assembled around a topic. It needs a clear, new idea with intellectual unity—one that reflects the applicant's highest scientific ambition. That standard shaped not only the proposal but also her preparation for evaluation.

Alida prepared seriously for both interviews. For the Starting Grant, she held mock interviews and discussed the project with leading specialists in her field. For the Consolidator Grant, she widened the circle to include researchers from very different disciplines. Whenever a possible question occurred to her, she wrote it down; the list eventually ran to hundreds. The aim was not to predict every exchange, but to practice handling difficult questions and build confidence under pressure.

The Consolidator Grant process also brought a prolonged period of uncertainty. Her proposal was placed on the waiting list, one or two positions below the funding line. She

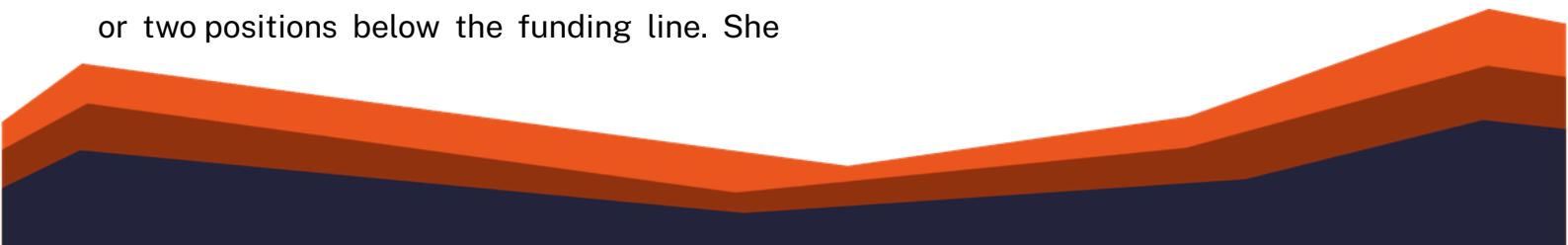
describes the experience as excruciating.

Looking back, she believes one interview answer may have worked against her—not because she lacked a response, but because she mismanaged the remaining time. After giving a long answer to an unexpected and demanding question, she realised that only two minutes remained and rushed the next response. The lesson was practical: a strong answer must be both clear and appropriately brief.

Her psychological approach was equally deliberate. “I never approached it psychologically as, ‘I have a 30% chance.’ I thought - I am going to the interview, and I will get the grant!” That confidence did not replace preparation; it rested on it.

The support environment around Romanian applicants changed between her two grants. When Alida prepared her Starting Grant proposal, she says the dedicated structures now available in Romania did not really exist. She now points to a dedicated National Contact Point and a specialised office at her university that supports ERC applicants and grantees. She welcomes that development, while her own route also shows the value of seeking criticism and expertise beyond formal institutional channels.

Statistics can create a different kind of barrier. Early in her Starting Grant, a researcher told her that applying was irrational given the success rate in Eastern Europe at the time. Alida's response is to shift attention from aggregate numbers to the individual proposal. Applicants should examine their track record and idea, discuss the project with others and compare their scientific profile and achievements with those of researchers who have secured ERC funding. A track record matters, she says, but the idea matters even more.



She also rejects the assumption that researchers from Widening countries do not belong in the competition. In her account, nationality and the host institution should not determine the scientific assessment; researchers should concentrate on the science rather than disqualify themselves in advance. “If you believe that you have a genuinely strong idea and the scientific profile to pursue it, don’t disqualify yourself before you even apply.”

Across a decade of ERC funding, Alida says the support changed her career. It allowed her to develop ideas born from unexpected findings, create research infrastructure, combine techniques and establish a team. The larger significance of her journey lies in that transformation: a negative result need not be the end of an investigation. With time, evidence and ambition, it can become the question that defines the next one. ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **Start with a clear, genuinely new scientific idea** - not a collection of loosely connected techniques.
- **Use preliminary results** to establish feasibility, **define the state of the art and show how the project will move beyond it.**
- Do enough **preparatory work to make an ambitious proposal credible**, but do not carry out the entire project before applying.
- **Discuss the idea** with leading specialists and researchers outside your field.
- **Prepare a wide bank of possible interview questions and practise answering under time pressure.**
- In the interview, **balance substance with brevity**; protect enough time for the questions that follow.
- **Assess your own idea and track record rather than letting country-level success statistics decide for you.**



Behind the Sentence: Research Journey to ERC Success

Standfirst: *Criminologist Mojca Plesničar is examining how judges' decisions are shaped not only by law and case facts, but also by the systems and professional environments around them. Her route to an ERC Starting Grant began with rejection, then a decision to enlarge the question rather than retreat from it.*

Why can apparently similar cases lead to different sentences? Mojca Plesničar, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Criminology and Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana, has spent much of her career studying sentencing decisions as part of a broader interest in how people make choices. With her ERC Starting Grant project, Sentrrix, she is moving beyond a list of individual influences to investigate what she calls the sentencing architecture or sentencing environment.

The project starts from a familiar premise in behavioural economics: decisions are embedded in their surroundings. Mojca illustrates it with a shop, where products at eye level attract attention more readily than those placed higher or lower. Legal decisions also take place within an environment that makes some options feel more natural or straightforward than others.

For sentencing, this means looking beyond the conventional picture of a judge applying the law to the facts and arriving at a direct answer. Judges bring prior knowledge, ideas and cognitive patterns to the task. The system brings its own established routes, practices and expectations. It is the interaction between the individual and that infrastructure that produces the eventual decision - sometimes in ways that conflict with what the public regards as common sense.

Mojca sees this as an important role for research: questioning what appears self-evident and showing where reality is more complex. Criminology, in her view, repeatedly demonstrates the limits of simple assumptions - for example, that a severe punishment will necessarily deter offending or that a particular intervention must produce a predictable consequence. Sentencing provides a way to disentangle the legal, personal and institutional elements that common sense tends to collapse into one.



Assoc. Prof. Mojca Plesničar

Host Institution/country:

Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Grant: ERC Starting Grant

Grant duration:

01.01.2025 - 31.12.2029

Grant amount: € 1 598 495

Call: ERC-2024-STG

Domain: SH3

Acronym: Sentrrix

Project in [CORDIS](#)

Sentrrix

The Sentrrix project introduces a new approach based on decision architecture to investigate a complex social and legal question: How do judges make sentencing decisions?

Sentrix therefore uses a broad methodological platform: statistical data, interviews, courtroom observations, experiments and simulations. These are not parallel activities added for scale. Each method reveals an aspect that another cannot capture, while their combination allows the same problem to be examined from several perspectives. “The fact that an ERC project allows you the time and resources to use mixed methods is one of its greatest strengths,” Mojca says. For social scientists often restricted to smaller questions by time and funding, that breadth changes what can be asked.

The project begins with Slovenia, the system she knows best and can interpret most closely. But Slovenia is a starting point rather than the project’s limit. Mojca is also looking at other systems through interviews and courtroom observations. Her ambition is to identify elements that move sentencing systems towards greater or lesser punitiveness and to establish a framework that can illuminate sentencing across different settings.

That scale marks the decisive change from her first ERC application. The earlier proposal was a classical comparative study of sentencing in four European countries representing different approaches. She still regards it as a satisfying proposal, but not ambitious enough for the ERC. In the successful application, she dared to claim more: that the research could uncover principles of sentencing across systems rather than simply compare a small number of countries.

Reaching that point required recovering from rejection. Mojca was devastated when the first application failed and briefly wondered whether she was capable of research at that level.

Time altered the judgement. The reviewers’ comments were not wholly negative, they also

identified aspects they valued. That made the feedback usable. The failed bid could become material for a stronger proposal rather than a final verdict on the researcher.

Her writing changed alongside the scope. In Part B1, she learned not to overload the central idea with detail that belongs in Part B2’s implementation framework. She also wrote for a panel whose members would not necessarily specialise in her precise topic. That meant giving more context than a disciplinary audience might need and explaining why the question mattered beyond her own field.

For Mojca, this is a form of storytelling. The research question sits at the centre; the proposal builds around it to show why the story matters. The approach does not simplify the science. It gives a diverse panel a coherent route into an ambitious project.

Several kinds of support helped her find that route. Colleagues shared both successful and unsuccessful applications, allowing her to see their structures and, reassuringly, how different strong proposals could look. Slovenia’s ERC National Contact Point also organised reading sessions using applications whose authors had agreed to share them.

A visit to an ERC grantee offered another perspective. The researcher advised Mojca on applying and managing a project, but the visit also made an ERC grant feel less remote: a very large research project, certainly, but not fundamentally unlike projects she had managed before. Just as importantly, time away from her institution gave her space to think about what she truly wanted to investigate. She then put that idea into conversation with others, exposing it to criticism and deciding which suggestions to adopt.

Three mock interviews tested the result in different ways. European sentencing specialists helped her sharpen and defend the

idea within the field, even though their questions were too detailed to resemble a panel's. Institute colleagues then conducted the deliberately severe session she had requested, probing methods, content and implementation for about two hours. She left exhausted but reassured that she could withstand difficult questioning and use unanswered questions to prepare. A final mock interview, organised by the National Contact Point with former panel members and grantees from her broader field, more closely simulated the evaluation setting.

Sentrix is currently focused on understanding what happens in sentencing, not on building a tool that recommends sentences to judges. Mojca sees the eventual findings as potentially valuable to legislators and designers of sentencing systems. They may also help judges recognise influences beyond guilt, previous convictions and the facts of a case — such as the normal sentence in a court, professional culture or a prosecutor's recommendation. Greater awareness could support more conscious decisions, while any practical application remains a later possibility rather than the project's present objective.

For researchers considering the same path, Mojca returns to confidence. She observes that applying can feel natural in some research environments and exceptional in others. Where ERC applications are less common, taking the step demands more courage. Her own experience makes the case without disguising the risk: rejection can hurt, criticism can be severe and the second proposal may need to become bolder. "But it is absolutely worth trying!" ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **If an earlier proposal fails, separate useful reviewer feedback** from the final outcome and use it to revise the idea.
- **Test whether the question is ambitious enough for ERC level** and **do not stop at a conventional comparison** if a broader scientific principle can credibly be investigated.
- **Keep Part B1 focused on the central idea** and its significance, **reserve detailed implementation for Part B2**.
- **Write for panel members beyond your precise speciality** and **explain why the question matters to science more broadly**.
- Read varied successful and unsuccessful applications to understand structure without assuming there is a single model.
- **Put the idea into conversation** with other people and **decide deliberately which criticism to incorporate**.
- **Use several mock interviews with different audiences:** field specialists, demanding colleagues and panel-like reviewers.
- **Treat unanswered mock-interview questions as preparation material**, not as evidence that you should withdraw.



The Idea Comes First: Excellence Before the Proposal

Standfirst: *The initial welcome given to Ukrainians across Central and Eastern Europe challenged familiar accounts of the region's attitudes towards migrants. Sociologist Inta Mieriņa's ERC Consolidator Grant project, WICE, asks what brings groups together - and her route to funding shows the value of comparison, critical scrutiny and persistence.*

For years, Central and Eastern Europe had often been portrayed as hostile towards migrants, particularly after the 2015-2016 refugee crisis. Then, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, many of the same societies opened their doors widely to Ukrainians arriving in large numbers. For sociologist Inta Mieriņa, the contrast was not an anomaly to explain away. It was a sign that established ways of thinking about migrant reception might no longer capture the situations researchers were trying to understand.

There were ready explanations. Ukrainians might be seen as culturally closer to people in the region; attitudes towards people from the Middle East might be shaped by racism. Inta did not dismiss these factors. But her experience in memory politics, international relations and security politics suggested that the reasons were more complex - and scientifically more interesting.

That tension became the starting point for WICE, Welcoming immigrants in Central and Eastern Europe: lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, funded through an ERC Consolidator Grant. Rather than beginning with hostility, the project reverses the usual direction of inquiry. "A major focus is understanding what brings people together, rather than only what divides them." In today's divided world, it is difficult to overstate the importance of this question.

Migration research has often examined prejudice, racism, xenophobia and divisions between groups. WICE instead asks what makes people perceive another group as part of us rather than them, and what makes them willing to help others, sometimes at a cost to themselves. The ambition lies in using an unexpected historical moment to reassess familiar assumptions and build a more precise account of solidarity.



Prof. Inta Mieriņa

Host Institution/country:

University of Latvia, Latvia

Grant: ERC Consolidator Grant

Grant duration:

12.05.2025 - 31.05.2030

Grant amount: € 1 996 386,25

Call: ERC-2024-COG

Domain: SH7

Acronym: WICE

Project in CORDIS

WICE

*Welcoming immigrants in
Central and Eastern Europe:
lessons from Russia's
invasion of Ukraine*

The question may sound intuitive, but answering it requires a demanding research programme. Comparative fieldwork is planned in Latvia, Poland, Hungary and Italy. Inta describes the need to organise quantitative fieldwork and international tenders, build a team and then undertake analysis robust enough to withstand critical scrutiny. Research ethics create further responsibilities. These are presented as planned elements of the project, not completed results.

The pace of academic work once felt unusual to Inta, who began her career in market research. Moving into academia, she was surprised that a study could take one or two years. She came to see why social science needs that time: its task is not to confirm an answer that seems obvious, but to examine complex behaviour carefully and objectively.

This view also shapes her understanding of impact. Social scientists are under pressure to produce directly applicable solutions to everyday problems. Inta acknowledges our mission as scientists to take an active role in the betterment of our societies, however, she resists making immediate utility the fundamental test of research. Scientists, she argues, should seek to understand the world, in a reflexive and open-minded way, rather than adopt or further any political position such as whether migration is good or bad.

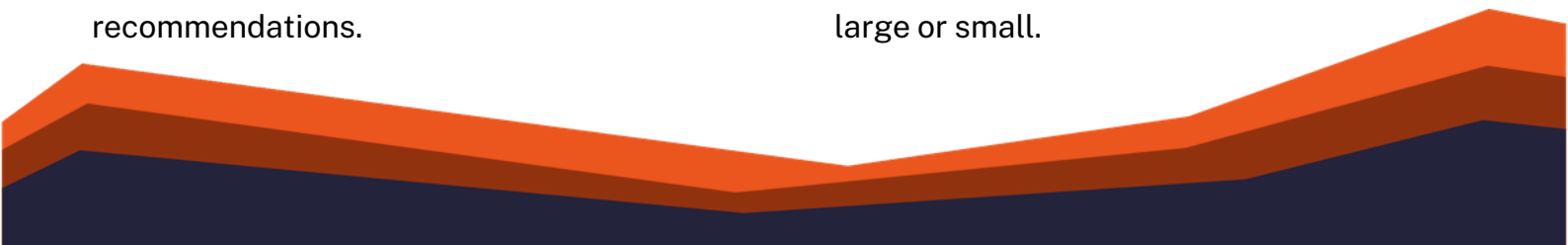
Even so, WICE is intended to connect evidence with public discussion. One planned output is a set of communication guidelines facilitating a sense of togetherness rather than sowing further division. In line with the principles of dialogic sociology, Inta also wants NGOs, policymakers, teachers, educators, journalists and other stakeholders involved throughout the project. Their participation can help keep the research grounded and make them more likely to engage with its eventual recommendations.

Inta identifies a contradiction: governments may recognise a future need for workers and develop targeted policies to attract labour in particular sectors, while attitudes towards refugees from some regions remain restrictive. Politicians may hesitate to discuss migration openly because it is controversial. Research cannot settle that debate by telling people what to think, but it can reveal more nuance than polarised positions allow.

At either ideological end, she sees small minorities: people who would close borders completely and people who would accept everyone regardless of circumstances. Between them is a much larger group willing to discuss policies that are both humane and realistic. Better evidence could create the conditions for a more honest conversation.

Inta's comparative outlook was shaped by international mobility. At Yale, as Fulbright scholar and 2016 Juris Padešs fellowship recipient, she met scholars whose work she had previously only read and encountered - top academics in her field, UN representatives, renowned journalists and other leading professionals. The experience brought her close to a major centre of scientific exchange, while also revealing its limits. Researchers there naturally followed the most topical global questions, but interest in her region could be limited unless it connected directly to Russia or Ukraine.

That realisation strengthened her belief that European researchers must study their own region through its historical, social and political experiences, then bring those insights into global knowledge. Mobility also encouraged her to look for parallels across countries and historical periods and to think more ambitiously about methods. Comparison provides a reference point: without it, a researcher may struggle to judge what is typical, exceptional, large or small.



International networks were equally important to her proposal journey. During her doctoral studies, few researchers in Latvia were working on the questions that interested her. She attended as many conferences, seminars, workshops and summer schools abroad as she could. Those encounters supported her intellectual growth and later gave her access to the range of perspectives needed to test an ERC proposal.

Her three previous ERC application had not succeeded. In one attempt, the mock panel she built consisted mainly of people from her immediate surroundings; they missed issues that the actual panel later noticed. For the successful application, she examined the profiles of experts involved in panels in previous year - their topics, countries and disciplines - and assembled a mock panel with a comparable breadth of competence. She also shared the proposal with readers from different countries and disciplines. They saw vulnerabilities that she and her immediate team might never have identified, and allowed to rectify them.

Preparation for the interview was intensive. Inta practised until she could give the presentation almost from memory. She anticipated possible questions and prepared short, pointed answers. None of the questions in the successful interview surprised her. That readiness was not about yielding to every alternative proposed. It was about knowing the project well enough to acknowledge other possible methods, or perspectives, and explain clearly why her chosen approach was justified.

The process taught her to value fair criticism over reassurance and clarity over accumulation. Friendly approval does not prepare an applicant for a panel. Nor does squeezing every possible element into a proposal. The stronger application was streamlined around one clear

idea, concept, theory or innovation.

Underlying those lessons is a question of confidence. Researchers in Latvia, and perhaps the region more broadly, can be too modest about their work, Inta believes. ERC ambition requires recognising the strength of an idea and daring to make the case for it. It also requires resilience: “You may not be successful the first time. But you will learn. You will fall, you will stand up again, and you can apply again. Persistence pays off - in my case, it took four attempts to finally succeed.” ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **Build the proposal around one clear, ambitious idea,** concept, theory or innovation.
- **Keep the application streamlined,** do not try to include too much.
- **Seek feedback of reviewers from different countries and disciplines,** not only close colleagues.
- **Ask for rigorous criticism** from people willing to expose weaknesses before the panel does.
- **Study the range of expertise represented on earlier panels** and reproduce that breadth in a mock panel.
- **Practise** the presentation repeatedly and **prepare short, direct answers to likely questions.**
- Know the project well enough to **acknowledge alternatives while defending your choices.**
- Use conferences, seminars, workshops and summer schools **to build international networks and comparative insight.**
- **Do not wait for a perfect publication record** if the central idea is strong.
- **Learn from an unsuccessful attempt and be prepared to apply again.**

Lost in communication: What Byzantine seals reveal that modern emails leave unsaid

Standfirst: *A small lead seal can open a remarkably detailed window onto the people who governed Byzantium. Dr. Olga Karagiorgou's five-year ERC project will use these objects, alongside literary evidence and digital methods, to reconstruct the careers and networks of state functionaries and to turn a dispersed heritage into a platform for collaboration, access and cultural diplomacy.*

Open an email and the first clues about its sender may be limited: a name, perhaps a signature, a role and an affiliation. The message itself may say more, but its visible frame can still leave much unsaid. A Byzantine letter secured with a lead seal offered a different kind of introduction. Depending on what survives and what was originally inscribed or represented, the seal may reveal a person's identity and office, illuminate status or career progression, and sometimes offer clues to the communication's context or intention.

That contrast raises a distinctly modern question: how much do people need - or want - to know about those who communicate with them? For Olga, the answer begins with close attention to objects that once authenticated correspondence and now preserve fragments of administrative life. Her ERC project places Byzantine state functionaries at the centre of an investigation into cohesion and fragmentation within the administration of a major, long-lasting state.

The project aims to reconstruct Byzantine administrative, political, institutional and social history through prosopography: the systematic study of people, their relationships and their careers. Literary sources form part of the evidence, but lead seals are especially important. Well over 80,000 seals survive in more than 100 public and private collections, while further examples continue to emerge from excavations. Individually, they may be modest objects. Read together, they can help trace how officials moved through posts, how authority was expressed and how the state connected people and places.



Dr. Olga Karagiorgou

Director of Research, Academy of Athens

Host Institution/country:

Academy of Athens, Greece

Grant: ERC Advanced Grant

Grant duration:

01.05.2026 - 30.04.2031

Grant amount: € 2 492 721

Call: ERC-2024-ADG

Domain: SH6

Acronym: Byz-GOVAG

Project in [CORDIS](#)

Byz-GOVAG

*Agents of Cohesion in the
Governance of an Empire: the
Anthropogeography of Byzantium,
7th to 12th centuries*

This is not simply a matter of assembling names. The project will develop career schemes for state functionaries and bring together evidence dispersed across institutions and borders. Improved photography and conservation are intended to make difficult material more legible and more secure for the future. Innovative digital and computational methods will help the researchers organise, connect and interpret a body of evidence whose scale would challenge conventional approaches.

The breadth of the question demands an equally broad team. The five-year project brings together four research institutes and almost 30 senior and early-career researchers from 18 universities. Its work crosses political, military and social history, as well as epigraphy and art history. Olga prioritised the creation of a communication and conference room and hopes that virtual meetings will take place at least once every two weeks. The room represents more than infrastructure: it is a practical expression of a project designed around sustained exchange.

Collaboration also extends beyond universities. Museums are crucial partners, particularly provincial museums in Greece, Cyprus and Turkey, while private collectors hold another significant part of the surviving material. The project intends to support restoration and preservation, make objects visible through open-access databases and develop exhibitions and educational programmes for schoolchildren and people with disabilities. Research, conservation and public engagement are therefore conceived as connected responsibilities rather than separate activities.

That approach reflects the nature of the material itself. Byzantine seals are now distributed among modern nation-states, institutions and individuals, but they form part of a shared cultural heritage. Bringing them into conversation creates opportunities for international conferences and exhibitions as well as scholarship. Olga sees this extensive cooperation across countries, disciplines and scientific backgrounds as part of the project's

intended legacy: a basis for high-quality interdisciplinary research and for cultural diplomacy.

The field has accompanied her since her doctoral studies at Oxford. A partly related ARISTEIA II project, funded in 2013-2015, strengthened her expertise and helped prepare the ground for a proposal of greater scale. She attributes the successful application to experience, dedication, hard work, love for discipline, methodical preparation, attention to detail and a network of collaborators developed over many years.

Even with those foundations, preparing the ERC proposal was among the most demanding processes she encountered. ERC funding was a deeply held ambition, and she succeeded on her first attempt. The achievement did not come from treating the application as an isolated writing exercise. It depended on aligning a large research vision with partners, methods, facilities, administration and a budget capable of sustaining the work.

Timing made that coordination especially important. Her deadline fell at the end of August 2024, when summer holidays slow parts of the Greek public sector. Olga advises applicants to begin discussions with potential institutional and individual partners at least eight months before submission, taking holidays and other slow periods into account. Nothing essential should be left until the final days.

Budget preparation was among the hardest elements. Her experience points to a need for more structured specialist support, ideally through a dedicated state bureau able to advise on employment contracts for national and international partners, taxation and related administration. The scientific case may be the proposal's centre, but a complex international project also rests on rules and arrangements that researchers should not have to decipher alone.

The ERC National Contact Point provided targeted help at both evaluation stages. In Part A, it reviewed proposal's drafts. In Part B, organised a mock interview that Olga found highly beneficial. The sequence matters: first sharpen the written argument, then practice explaining and defending it under interview conditions.

Her ambitions for early-career researchers are equally concrete. She wants them to hold meaningful roles through which they can develop skills, accumulate experience, exercise creativity and build careers. In a project concerned with reconstructing professional lives from the past, that commitment gives the work a forward-looking dimension: it will not only study career trajectories but also help create them.

The research may ultimately bring Byzantine officials closer to present-day experience. The project will ask what their careers and communications reveal about the workings of the state, while remaining alert to continuities in institutional life. "I am absolutely convinced that the anxieties and the problems that a state functionary had in Byzantium are very similar to what a modern state functionary has to face," Olga says.

Those parallels are questions for investigation rather than conclusions already reached. The project sets out from a vast, scattered archive and an ambitious programme of collaboration, conservation and analysis; its principal findings still lie ahead. Yet its premise is already compelling. A seal once closed a letter, protected its contents and identified the authority behind it. Centuries later, opening the evidence carried by those seals may reveal not only how Byzantium was administered, but how people working inside institutions navigated status, responsibility, connection and uncertainty. ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- Begin discussions with prospective institutional and individual partners **at least eight months before submission**.
- **Map the preparation period** around holidays and predictable administrative slowdowns.
- **Leave no essential** scientific, partnership, administrative or budget **tasks until the last minute**.
- **Treat budget development as a major workstream** and seek specialist advice early.
- **Build the proposal methodically**, with close attention to detail and a clear division of roles among collaborators.
- **Draw on a network developed over time**, while ensuring that every partner has a meaningful contribution.
- If possible, **contact your ERC National Contact Point for support** in providing content-focused feedback on Part A.
- **Use a mock interviews** to practice explaining and defending the project.
- **Design substantive roles for early-career researchers** so that the project develops skills, creativity, experience and careers.



Life Beyond Earth: Turning Persistence into Discovery

Standfirst: *Marine geochemist Mustafa Yücel is developing ways to trace life-supporting metals in Earth's deep-sea ecosystems, with methods that may also inform the study of oceans elsewhere in the Solar System. DeepTrace succeeded on its first submission - but only after five earlier ERC applications taught him to rethink novelty, risk and persistence.*

The floor of Earth's ocean may seem far removed from the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. For marine geochemist Mustafa Yücel, however, the connection begins with a question that reaches beyond any single discipline: "One of the biggest questions humanity has is where we come from, right? But another enormous question is: are we alone?"

Mustafa's starting point is the growing scientific interest, described in the interview, in moons that appear to hold large quantities of water beneath ice. Active cores, friction and the gravitational forces exerted by their planets may allow some of that water to remain liquid. To an oceanographer, these are not merely distant astronomical objects. They are other oceans that can be considered alongside Earth's, at least at the level of basic chemistry.

Earth's oceans support life and provide conditions for evolution. If oceans elsewhere share some of their basic chemistry, Mustafa argues, that offers a starting point for asking whether they could be habitable. He presents this as an open, partly philosophical question rather than a result. Possibilities about how life might arise or move between planets remain unknown.

The ERC Consolidator Grant project DeepTrace brings that far-reaching curiosity back to a problem that can be investigated on Earth. Its stated aim is to advance mechanistic, analytical and predictive understanding of how life-supporting metals cycle across deep-sea ecosystems. At its core is the development of methods to detect metal-containing nanoparticles in the oceans. Mustafa says these methods could also be used to search for such particles in other planetary oceans wherever those oceans exist.



Prof. Mustafa Yücel

Host Institution/country:

Middle East Technical
University, Türkiye

Grant: ERC Consolidator Grant

Grant duration:

01.01.2023 - 31.12.2027

Grant amount: € 2 399 350

Call: ERC-2021-COG

Domain: PE10

Acronym: DeepTrace

Project in CORDIS

DeepTrace

*DeepTrace will advance a
ground-breaking
mechanistic, analytical, and
predictive understanding of
how the life-supporting
metals cycle across Earth's
deep-sea ecosystems*

This approach combines ambition with methodological risk. Detecting substances at very low concentrations can demand extreme precision. Mustafa had faced that challenge in an earlier project, where the research question depended heavily on such measurements. DeepTrace does not depend on extremely low-level measurement to the same extent, although method development remains central. The project was the sixth proposal in Mustafa's ERC journey, but the distinction matters: DeepTrace itself was funded on its first application. His five earlier applications concerned a different project. Some methods overlapped, but the central research question was completely different.

His record also complicates the language of rejection. "I submitted two Starting Grant applications and four Consolidator Grant applications. They all reached the second stage and received an A score. They were excellent projects, but funding was not available. At one point, I was even on the reserve list. So, calling those earlier applications 'rejections' is not entirely accurate."

Detailed evaluation reports helped him understand what had held the earlier project back. There was a methodological issue: the need for highly precise measurements at very low concentrations. Yet Mustafa does not consider that the decisive weakness. In his reading, panels saw the earlier question as important and worth investigating, but not sufficiently new.

That feedback redirected rather than ended the work. For a Starting or Consolidator Grant, he believes, panels want to see researchers carving out a new niche. An established or decades-old question can still be viable, but the method or approach must then be highly innovative and capable of making real

progress. Mustafa took his expertise and some of his methods, developed new ones and applied them to a different question. Looking back, he considers the critical feedback fortunate.

DeepTrace may also prove useful much closer to home. The same sensitive methods being developed to detect metal-containing nanoparticles in seawater could help researchers assess anthropogenic nanoparticles in coastal environments. Mustafa points to technologies such as phones, screens, batteries and electric-vehicle components as contexts in which metal-containing nanoparticles are used, with waste eventually entering the environment.

Sunscreens offer another example in the interview. They can contain titanium nanoparticles, and Mustafa says research has found enrichment of these particles on some beaches. Their health effects are not yet fully understood. Before toxicological work or health assessment can proceed, however, the particles must first be detected reliably. DeepTrace's methodologies could therefore contribute to understanding pollution levels and, potentially, to future regulation. These are possible applications, not outcomes the interview reports as completed.

Continuing to apply was emotionally difficult. The evaluation reports were positive, but the ERC had become a dream, making each unfunded result painful. After his second Starting Grant application, Mustafa felt he had failed and feared that moving into the Consolidator Grant eligibility window would make the competition harder. He thought his ERC journey might be over.

Support brought him back. His university's project support office, his funding agency and his National Contact Point encouraged him to continue.



Their role was not described as rewriting the science, it was to restore momentum when disappointment had made another application difficult to contemplate.

Persistence, however, did not mean resubmitting the same idea unchanged. The crucial learning was to be more ambitious about the scientific question. “I would tell my younger self to be bolder - to think well beyond what already exists in the literature.” That requires time to think, read and connect ideas beyond a researcher’s doctoral and postdoctoral work - time that is difficult to protect amid pressures involving tenure, publications, grants and wider uncertainty.

Mustafa also challenges applicants’ anxiety about choosing a panel. In his view, panel selection should be one of their later concerns. The first test is whether the idea genuinely goes beyond the state of the art. Rather than trying to reverse-engineer a panel, researchers should think about who will use the results and whether the work can open a new direction.

Some of the most useful prompts may come from people at the beginning of their scientific lives. Mustafa urges researchers to listen to students, interns and undergraduates. At lectures and popular-science events in Türkiye, students asked whether life originated in the oceans. They were concerned about climate change and pollution, but often even more curious about how life begins. Their questions reminded him that a panel is also made up of curious people.

A proposal must survive expert scrutiny, but its animating question should still be capable of awakening that human curiosity. ●

Advice for future ERC applicants

- **Be bold enough** to pursue a question that goes well beyond the existing literature.
- **Do not remain confined to the topic of your PhD or postdoctoral work**, allow time to think, read and connect ideas.
- **Use evaluation reports** to distinguish a fixable methodological concern from a deeper problem of novelty.
- If the question is established, make the method or approach highly innovative and show **how it can produce real progress**.
- **Treat persistence as learning and redirection**, not automatic resubmission of the same project.
- **Seek encouragement from institutional project support, the national funding agencies and the National Contact Point.**
- **Focus first on an ERC-level idea and who will use the results**, worry about panel choice later.
- **Listen to the questions asked by students, interns and undergraduates.**
- **Do not interpret a strong but unfunded assessment as proof** that the scientific work has failed.



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