

# The European Research Council



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## ERC Synergy grants

*Brussels, 12 September 2018*

*Agnes Kulcsar*

*Synergy grant call coordinator*

*Unit B2*

*Call and Project Follow-up Coordination*



# Overview



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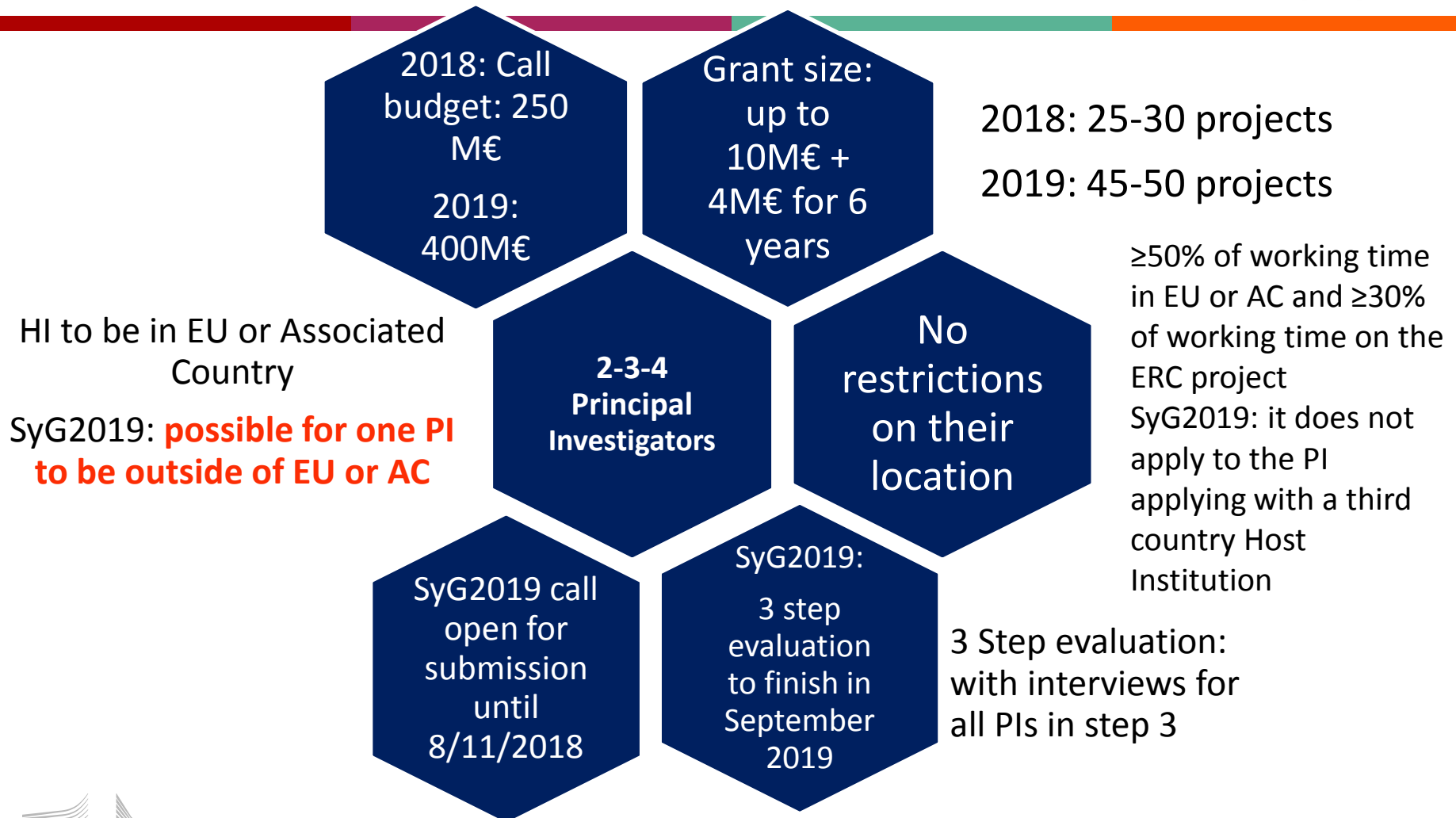
- Features
- Preparing an application
- Evaluation process and timeline
- Evaluation principles and criteria
- Hints and tips



European  
Commission

Horizon 2020  
European Union funding  
for Research & Innovation

# Design of the Synergy call in a nutshell



# ERC Synergy 2019 – Key features

## What to look for in a SyG proposal?

### AMBITIOUS RESEARCH PROBLEM

- To promote substantial advances at the frontiers of knowledge,
- To cross-fertilize scientific fields,
- To encourage new productive lines of enquiry and new methods and techniques, including unconventional approaches and investigations at the interface between established disciplines,
- To enable transformative research not only at the forefront of European science but also to become a benchmark on a global scale.

### SYNERGETIC ASPECT

- PIs must demonstrate the synergies, complementarities and added value that could lead to **breakthroughs that would not be possible by the individual Principal Investigators working alone.**

### EQUALITY AMONG PIs

- With a designated corresponding PI (cPI) and corresponding HI (cHI) who will be the administrative contacts for the duration of the project

### STRONG COMMITMENT

- PIs to engage genuinely in the collaboration
- $\geq 50\%$  of working time in EU or Associated Countries (AC) and
- $\geq 30\%$  of working time on the ERC project
- SyG2019: commitment requirements apply to PIs hosted in EU or AC

# ERC Synergy 2019

## Grant features



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2-3-4 PIs

- At various career stages
- Can apply from anywhere in the world when they apply
- One PI (not the corresponding PI) can apply with a Host Instit. outside of EU or Associated Countries

MAX 10 M€ + 4M€

- **Call budget for 2019: 400 M€**
- Allow for **funding of ~40 projects**
- Additional **max 4M€ globally** for the project

UP TO 6 YEARS

- Max of 10M€ reduced *pro rata* for shorter duration

4M€ MAX

IN ADDITION FOR

- 'start-up' costs for Principal Investigators moving to the EU or AC and/or
- the purchase of major equipment and/or

**Deadline for SyG2019 proposal submission: 8 November 2019**

# ERC Synergy 2019

## Based on core ERC principles



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### EXCELLENCE AS SOLE CRITERIUM

- At project and at PI level
- Encompasses the synergetic aspects

### 'BOTTOM-UP'

- Research priorities and the configuration of the group determined by the individual investigators

### NO DISCIPLINARY PRIORITIES

- Projects expected to cover more than one discipline or research field, but not obligatory

### NOT 'CONSORTIA' TYPE

- Not loose collaborative projects
- With adequate working arrangements to suit the objectives of the project

### PIs' TRACK RECORDS

- Either an early achievement track-record (Starting or Consolidator stage) or
- A 10-year track-record (Advanced grant stage), **whichever the applicants consider most appropriate** for their career stage

### COMPLEMENTARY EXPERTISE

- Complementarity of the PIs is essential

### JOINT EFFORT

- To foster research at intellectual frontiers
- To allow for new combination of skills and disciplines
- To bring together researchers be that from the same institution or different institutions in the country or EU and Associated Countries wide



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# ERC Synergy 2019 - Proposal Structure (submissions on Participant Portal)



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## Administrative forms (Part A)

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

*4-6 ERC keywords are submitted in the  
panels are not part of the  
submission*

**In step 1 only part B1 is reviewed.**

## Part B1 (submitted as pdf)

***Evaluated in Step 1 & Step 2 & Step 3***

Text box - Cross-domain nature explanation

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

## Part B2 (submitted as pdf)

***NOT evaluated in Step 1 (Step 2 and 3 only)***

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

## Annexes

Commitment of the  
**corresponding** Host Institution,  
ethics docs, etc.

## NO RESTRICTIONS FOR

- unsuccessful applicants to the 2017 and 2018 ERC Starting, Consolidator and Advanced grant calls
- Grantees whose running ERC project ends before 8 November 2020

## RESTRICTION FOR

- PIs of proposals submitted to the ERC SyG 2018 call which received a C score in step 1 or a B score in step 1 or 2

## RULES FOR PANEL MEMBERS OF

- SyG 2019 call
  - Cannot participate in the same call neither as PIs nor as team members
  - Will **not** be able submit proposals to **SyG 2021**
  - Can submit to any other ERC call in 2019, 2020, etc.
  - Will be able to submit to SYG 2020

A PI MAY PARTICIPATE IN  
ONLY ONE ERC FRONTIER  
RESEARCH PROJECT AT ANY  
ONE TIME

- A PI to be part of only one:
  - SyG application
  - proposal published under the same ERC Work Programme
  - the first eligible proposal to be evaluated

- **BUT: not the whole SyG proposal can be declared ineligible, but only the PI concerned. This means that the proposal has to be evaluated by disregarding the CV, track record and contribution of the PI.**
- Applicants to check carefully if they are eligible or not before submitting an application to avoid complications for the Group and evaluation

# ERC Synergy 2019

## Intended restrictions for 2020 -2021 calls



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Evaluation		Can a PI apply to		
Result of SyG2018	Step	StG/CoG/AdG call in 2020?	SyG call in 2020	SyG call in 2021?
C	1	no	no	no
B	1 and 2	yes	no	yes
B	3	yes	yes	yes
A	3	yes	yes	yes

All PIs whose proposal was rejected on the grounds of a breach of research integrity of one or more of the PIs in the SyG 2019 call for proposals may not submit a proposal to the calls for proposals made under Work Programme 2019.

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# SyG 2018 Overview

## Evaluators' profile – in step 1



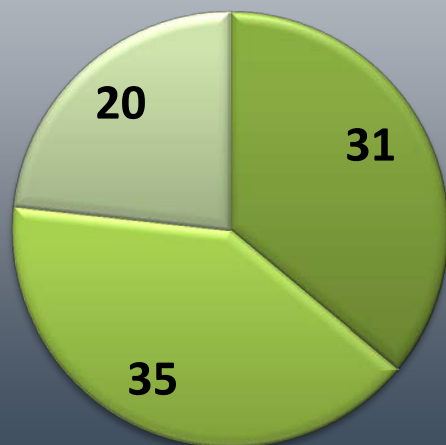
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186 Reviewers; 27 Nationalities; 59 Men and 28 Women

### Scientific background

**87 Panel Members - PM**  
(5 chairs and 6 vice chairs)

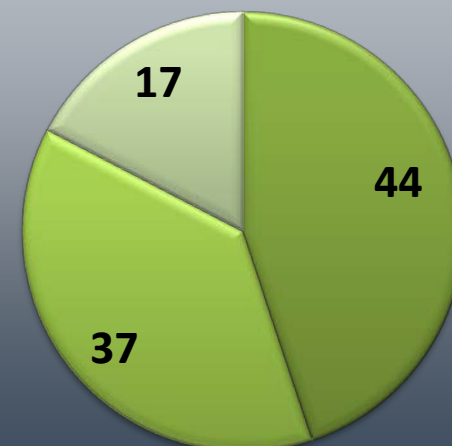


■ Life Sciences (LS)

■ Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE)

■ Social Sciences and Humanities (SH)

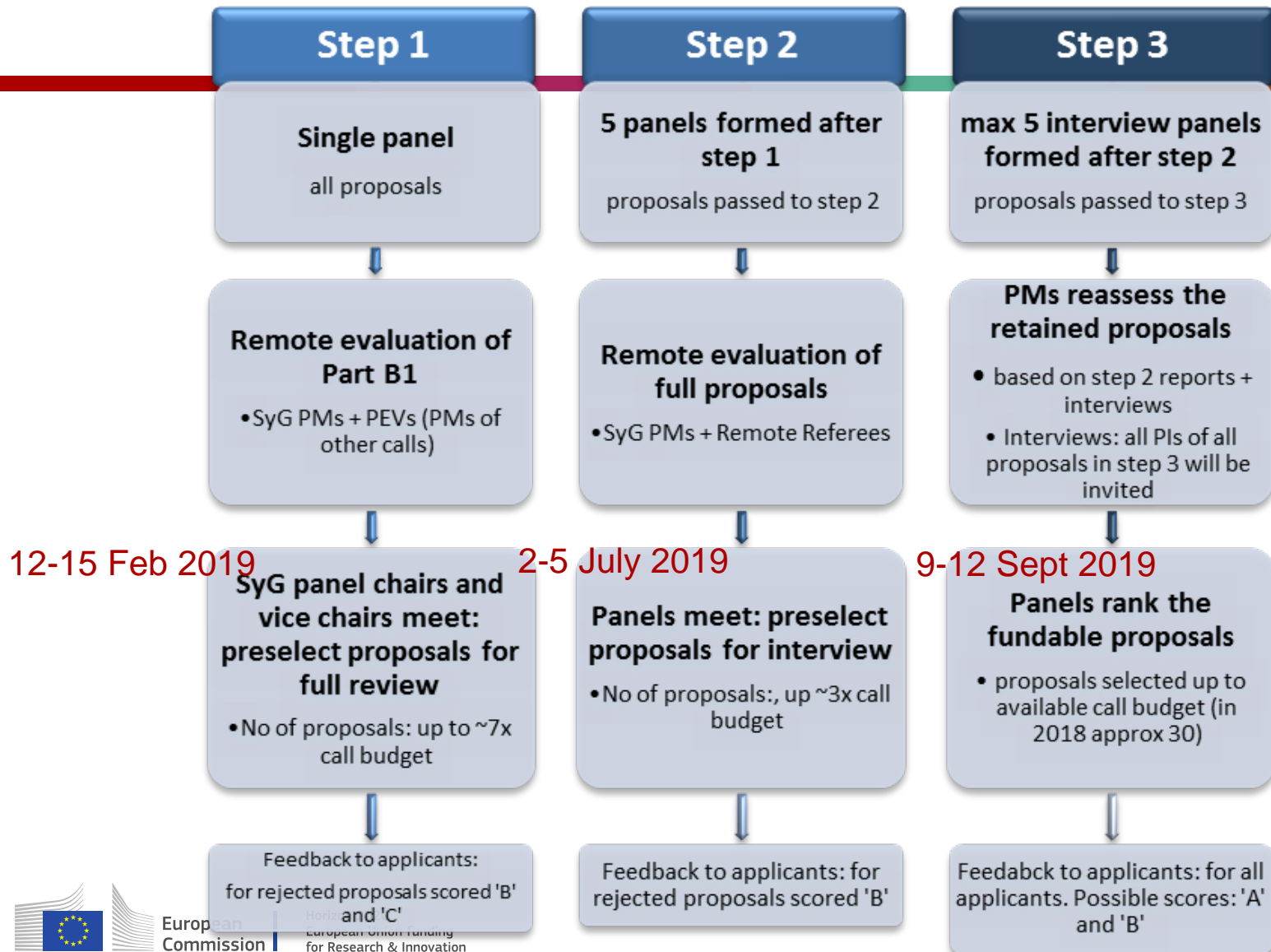
**99 Panel Evaluators - PEVs**  
(PMs from other ERC Calls)



# ERC Synergy 2019 - Evaluation process



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# ERC Synergy 2019

## Evaluation timeline



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Submission deadline	8 November 2018
Initial Panel Chairs' meeting (5 chairs)	6 Dec 2018
Step 1 meeting (5 chairs and 6 vice chairs)	12-15 Feb 2019 (1 panel)
Step 2 meetings (all panel members)	2-5 July 2019 (5 panels)
Step 3 meetings (all panel members)	9-12 Sept 2019 (5 panels with interviews)
Expected feedback to applicants (with full evaluation reports)	12/04/2019 30/08/2019 31/10/2019

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# What are the evaluation criteria?

Excellence is the sole evaluation criterion



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## 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
- Resources are not assessed in step 1

## EXCELLENCE OF THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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

# Scoring system



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At step 1 proposals are evaluated from a generalist perspective.

## REMOTE PHASE

- Each reviewer working remotely and individually
- Giving grades from 1 (non-competitive) to 4 (outstanding), with 0.5 granularity
- Grading both the 'Research Project' and the group of 'Principal Investigators'

PANEL MEETING => final score communicated to the applicant

- Panel decision
- Score **A**: The proposal is of sufficient quality to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;
- Score **B\***: The proposal is of high quality but not sufficient to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation;
- Score **C\***: The proposal is not of sufficient quality to pass to Step 2 of the evaluation.

**\*B and C-scored applications may be subject to resubmission restrictions in future calls**

# Evaluation reports (ER)

## Part of the feedback sent to the applicants



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### STEP 1 REJECTED PROPOSALS

- Predefined standard panel comment based on the score, summarizing the decision taken by the panel
- Individual assessments, without names and grades
- Possible scores given by the panel: 'A', 'B', 'C'
- For 'A' score (passed to step 2) ERs are not provided

### STEP 2 REJECTED PROPOSALS

- Carefully drafted panel comments for each rejected proposal
- Individual assessments, without names and grades
- Possible scores: 'A', 'B'
- For 'A' score (passed to step 3) ERs are not provided

### STEP 3 ALL PROPOSALS

- Carefully drafted panel comments for each proposal
- Individual assessments, without names and grades
- Possible scores: 'A', 'B'
- Outcome based on ranking: 'A' –( funded; reserve; not funded, but excellent quality) 'B'- not fundable

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# Hints and tips

## How to prepare an ERC SyG proposal?

- Have a **bright, original and exciting idea** that 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 a **corresponding Host Institution (in EU or any of the H2020 associated countries)**
  - The HI letter lists all the PIs, even if they will be engaged by other HIs
- **Write** the research proposal (carefully plan the resources)
  - Choose carefully the 4-6 keywords: applications are not submitted to a StG/CoG/AdG type of the panel
- **Get feedback** from your peers
- **Submit** your research proposal **before the deadline** -> fully electronic/web based submission system

# Hints and tips

## Questions to ask yourself as an applicant



### Principal Investigators

- 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?



# Hints and tips

## Questions to ask yourself as an applicant

### Research Project

- Why is the proposed project important?
- Does it promise to go substantially beyond the state of the art?
- Has it the chance to 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?

# Typical reasons for rejection

## Principal investigators

- Insufficient track-record
- Insufficient (potential for) independence (StG and CoG)
- Insufficient experience in leading projects (AdG)
- Complementarity of PIs not evident enough

## Proposed project

- Scope: Too narrow  $\leftrightarrow$  too broad/unfocussed
- Not synergetic enough; (SyG)
- Incremental research
- Work plan not detailed enough/unclear
- Insufficient risk management

**Poor interview:** prepare well! ( all PIs in step 3 are invited to Brussels)

# Hints and tips

## Preparing an application

### Differences in Part B1 and Part B2

In **Step 1: Panel members** (act as **generalists**) they see only **Part B1** 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 crucial (complementarity and possibly interdisciplinary to be emphasised)
- Know your competitors – what is the **state of play** and why is your idea and scientific approach outstanding?
- **Only the extended Synopsis is read at Step 1: concise and clear presentation** is crucial (**Outline** of the **methodological approach** – feasibility is assessed)
- Show , if applicable for StG and CoG profiles, the **scientific independence** in the CVs, the scientific leadership in the AdG profile

# Hints and tips

## Preparing an application

### Differences in Part B1 and Part B2

- In **Step 2** : Both **Part B1 and B2** are sent to specialists around the world (**specialised external referees**)
  - Do not just repeat the synopsis
  - 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)
  - 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**



# Explain the budget properly!

- Budget analysis carried out in Step 3 evaluation.
- Panels have the responsibility to ensure that resources requested are reasonable and well justified.
- Budget cuts need to be justified on a proposal-by-proposal basis (no across-the-board cuts).

## **Not explained costs are often cut!**

- Panels recommend a final maximum budget based on the resources allocated/removed.
- Panels do not 'micro-manage' project finances.
- Awards made on a 'take-it-or-leave-it' basis: no negotiations.
- Ask for funding for Open Access in case needed– this is obligatory in Horizon2020!

**Rumour :** *Ask for more money, the reviewers will anyhow cut it down.*

✗ **NOT true:** however, unexplained or non-motivated requests can be cut, so if you artificially inflate your budget, it will be reduced.

# 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

**Rumour :** *One needs publications in Nature/Science/High Impact Factor journals to succeed.*

✗ **NOT true:** in addition note: publishing with senior scientists (former supervisors) raises doubts about maturity/scientific independence.

# SyG 2018 Overview

## Evaluation data - 52% success rate at step 1



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	Step 1	Step 2
Proposal evaluated	295	154
Success rate	52%	47%
Average Duration (mths) (max 72)	69	70
Average # PIs	3.3	3.4
Average budget requested (million €)	8.4	9.3
Average # beneficiaries	3.0	3.2
Average # HIs	2.8	2.9
% submissions including partner organisations	23%	19%

# SyG 2018 Step 1 Results

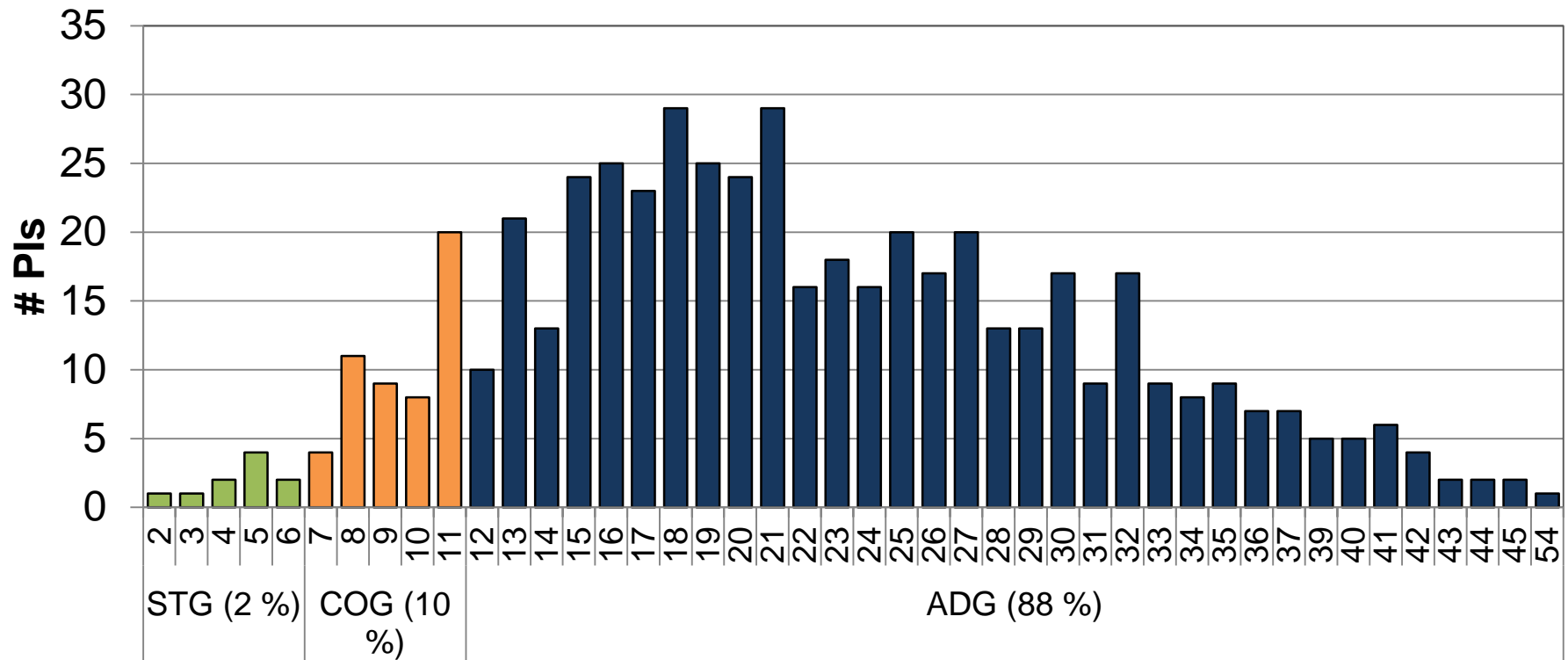
Applicants' ERC profiles – by career stage

Similar profile distribution for submission data



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## SyG 2018 PIs in step 2 by years since PhD from call deadline and no allowance for extensions

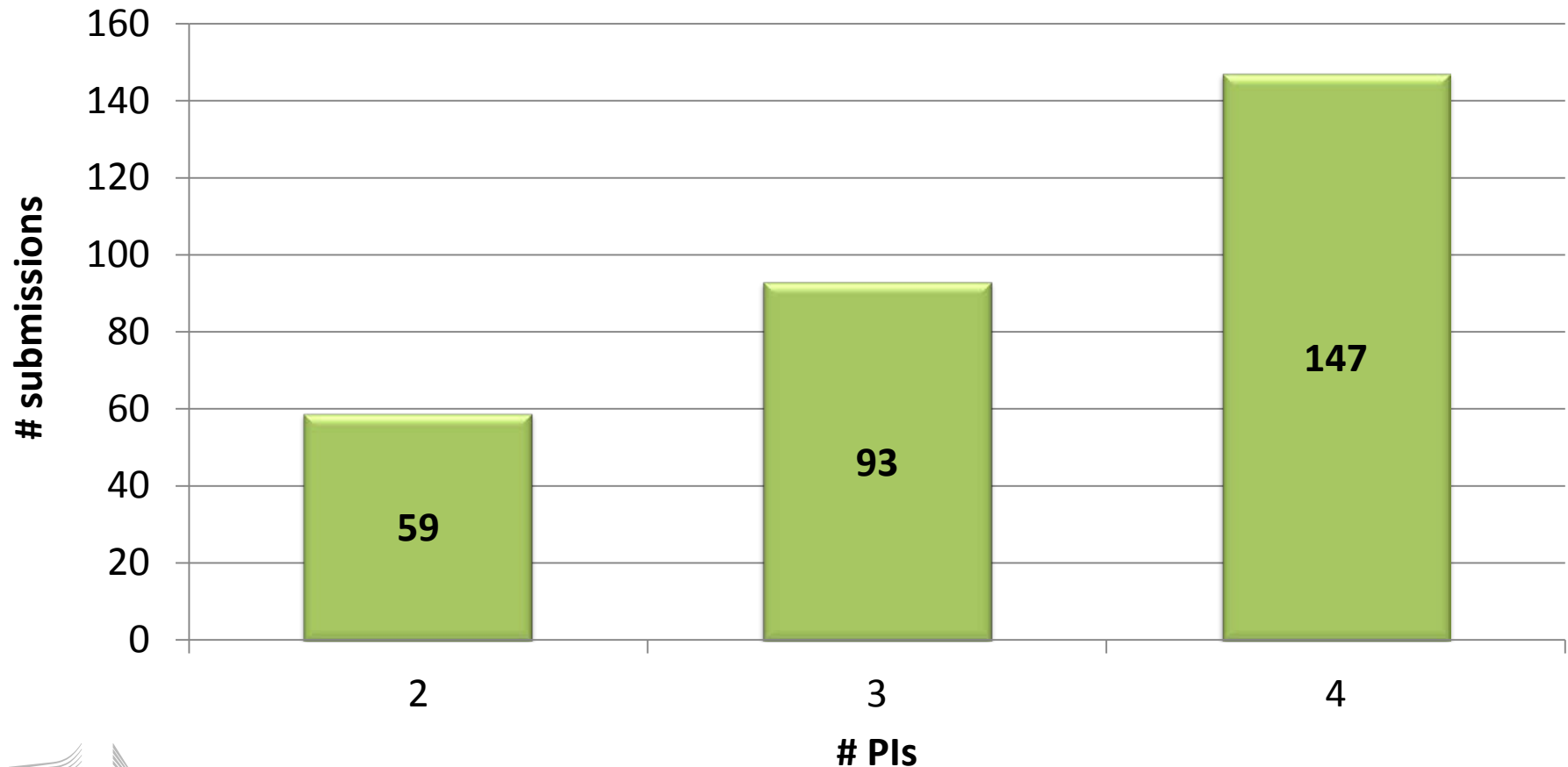




# SyG 2018 Overview

## Submissions by number of PIs grouped per proposal

**SYG 2018 Submissions by # PIs per proposal**



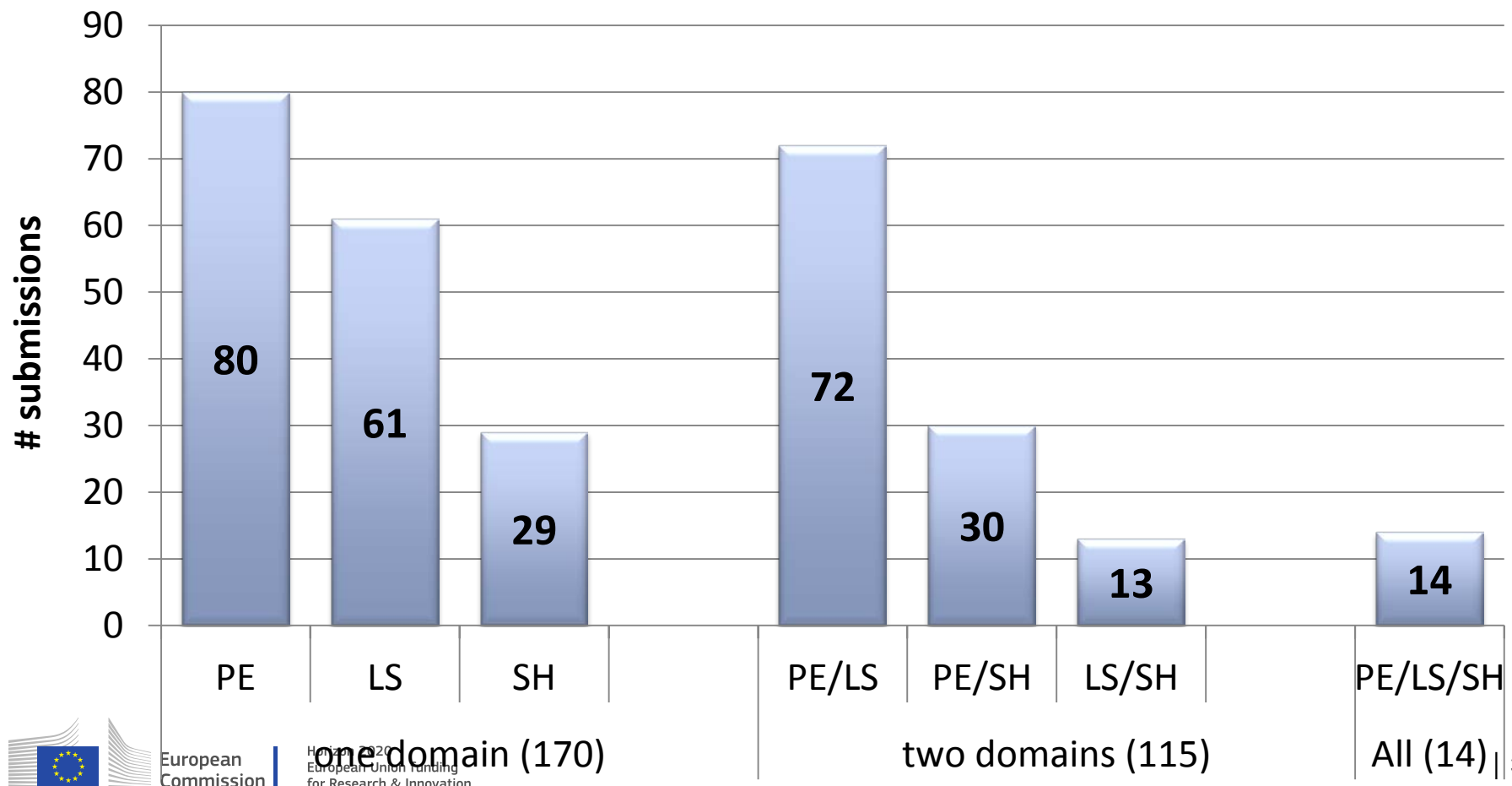
# SyG 2018 Overview

## Inter-domain classification of submitted proposals



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### SYG 2018 classification from abstracts



# Take home messages



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- ERC foresees to be a highly competitive call
  - 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 complementary and synergistic group of PIs.
- ‘Synergy’ is not simply a successful collaboration
  - 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.
  - Not loose consortia type of projects
- Tough future restrictions on submissions planned
  - applicants to think twice before applying: PIs evaluated with a **C score in 2019 will not be able to apply to any** ERC call in 2020.

# Preparing your application

## Information sources

- Check the **ERC website** for latest funding opportunities: <https://erc.europa.eu/>
  - July 2019: videos about ongoing Synergy grants will be published
- **Register early**, get familiar with the European Commission's Participant Portal system, download the templates and start filling in the forms  
<http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/home.html>
- View the **step-by-step video** Introduction to application process, including tips & tricks for the interview: <https://vimeo.com/94179654>
- Use the **help tools and call documents** (**Information for Applicants**, Work Programme, Frequently Asked Questions) to prepare your proposal
  - 💡 Read the guidelines carefully!
  - 💡 Find out about the formatting rules and page limits to respect!
  - 💡 Check statistics on ERC website
- **Talk to your Institution's grant office and other ERC grantees**
- **Contact your National Contact Point if you have questions**

# Thank you!

Don't hesitate to contact us:

[ERC-SYG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu](mailto:ERC-SYG-APPLICANTS@ec.europa.eu)