RESEARCH FUNDING BY THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL
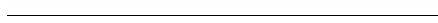
REPORT OF THE RESEARCH ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO ECREA EXECUTIVE BOARD:

October 2018

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1. <u>Introduction</u>

This report is the second from the Task Force established by ECREA to investigate and advise on the funding of research in our field by national and international research funding agencies. Its first report, *Mapping Changes In Research Support In Media And Communications Across Europe,* was delivered to the ECREA Executive Board in May 2017, following which it was agreed to transform the Task Force into a continuing body, reporting annually to the EB, and renamed. For the moment it exists as the Research Advisory Committee.

This second report looks specifically at support for the field by the European Research Council. It was noted after the first report that the EB decided to "meet formally and discuss with the European Research Council its role in supporting communication research, including basic and long-term research". This remains one of the main recommendations of the current report, which confirms the need and urgency for such discussions.

In preparing this report the Committee would like to acknowledge the very helpful responses received from officers of the Council, and in particular Dr. Lionel Thielen, who is presenting aspects of the ERC structure and funding arrangements at the ECREA conference in Lugano, and Professor Angela Liberatore, the ERC Head of Unit, Social Sciences and Humanities.

2. <u>The European Research Council</u>

The European Research Council (ERC) was established by the European Commission in 2007. It now forms part of the 'framework programme' of the Union, of which to date there have been seven. The ERC website gives the following summary data:

- The total budget allocated to the ERC for the period 2014-2020 is € 13.1 billion, which represents 17% of the overall Horizon 2020 budget of € 77 billion

- The total annual budget for 2017 is around €1.8 billion

- Since 2007, some 8,000 projects have been selected for funding from more than 65,000 applications

Application numbers are large, and the success rate is about 12%, though this is much lower (perhaps 7%) in the 'Inclusive Societies' area which would include most of the applications likely to come from ECREA members (see below). The primary form in which grants are given are 'starting grants', offered to applicants with a PhD and 2-7 years' experience and being up to €1.5m; 'consolidator grants', offered to applicants with a PhD plus 7-12 years' experience, and being worth up to €2m; and 'advanced grants', intended for established researchers, and worth up to €2.5m. There has always been some national inequity in the distribution of awards. In 2017 the UK (18%), Germany (16%), and France (13%) accounted between them for nearly half the 413 awards made. In 2017 of the 111 awards made in social sciences and humanities, 46 (41%) were to researchers in the UK and Netherlands. In social sciences and humanities in 2017 the ratio of awards to evaluated projects is 4.6%, which, if an accurate reflection of 'success rates', is low by most national standards, and suggests the rate is diminishing recently.   *Horizon Europe,* the ninth framework programme, will cover the period 2021-2027, and have a budget of around €100m.

The number of projects, and indeed the funding provided, are inevitably spread unequally across subject areas, a matter of continuing debate and controversy. In 2017 the number of projects being supported in life sciences was 1,446, in physical sciences and engineering 1,903, and in social sciences and humanities 908 (21% of the total). The European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities has long questioned the limited funding for the fields it represents, and in particular has argued for greater funding in areas such as democracy and

inequality, culture, arts, and education. In 2014 it wrote to the Commission to complain about the distribution of funding, arguing that "On the one hand, we have seen how the budget of Social Challenge 6, 'Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies' has been effectively hollowed out by other programmes being folded into the challenge. At a time when Europe meets demanding economic, political, cultural and human challenges, it is paradoxical that the previous Commission decided to downsize the SSH budget from 623 Meuros in FP7 to around 350 Meuros in Horizon 2020 (Societal Challenge 6). While the total budget of SC6 is 1300 Meuros, it is unacceptable that only 350 Meuros are dedicated to SSH research on inclusive, innovative and reflective societies." It noted that even if its demands were met the budget for SSH would only rise to 0.8% of Horizon 2020.

In assessing progress against these concerns the EASSH noted that by mid-way through the Horizon 2020 process, the number of topics 'flagged' as requiring an SSH contribution was a little under 40% of all topics. The number of projects supported had actually fallen by 20% and the actual committed funding for SSH decreased by €39m on the figure reported in 2014. In any case, EASSH suggested that 25% of the projects funded in SSH-flagged topics had no SSH research component. Only 5% of the 2015 budget available for the two major pillars of Horizon 2020 went to SSH. This was lower than the already disappointing 6% recorded in 2014. The overall budget for all calls and partners was reduced by 257 million euros, mainly because the budget share for SSH-flagged topics went down from 28% in 2014 to 24% in 2015.

The EASSH report showed that when SSH research is included in a project, the spread of disciplines tends to be concentrated in just a few areas. The fields represented suggest that Horizon 2020 primarily draws on the SSH for 'impact' assessment or to support business plans, with the SSH aspect not really a key component of the research. In commenting on the budget proposals for the ninth framework programme, the 'Russell Group' of elite UK universities, commented that "The Commission could improve the way in which some call topics are currently framed and described where the focus is primarily on the physical sciences, with the SSH element seeming to be an 'add-on' in a minor supporting role, by making SSH a core element of the call. Use of terminology in the calls that is more appropriate for other disciplines (e.g. references to TRLs) does not help." The 'integration' of social sciences and humanities, which would include most of the fields of interest to ECREA, has been a continuing matter of contestation in evaluation of Horizon 2020 budgets, and is not discussed here. The argument is that SSH concerns are an aspect of all supported research and that budget heads are therefore not a full indicator of relative volumes of research across disciplines – is this a realistic and laudable principle or a rationalisation for

the marginalisation of SSH concerns?   In any case it should be noted in passing that many of the figures above refer more to the strategic pillar of H2020 (including the 'Inclusive Societies strand) than ERC more generally, but we do not here seek to disentangle these matters.

Within these complex matters it is, in any case of course, difficult to separate out support directly for research areas reflected by the interests of ECREA members. The categories for calls and projects have varied over time. The current call categories have one, 'communication and information, networks, media', (SH3_12) that appears within the general category (SH3) called 'The Social World, Diversity, Population'. However projects and questions of concern to members of ECREA could fit the categories appearing elsewhere in the list of panels. The descriptors also changed in 2016 so precise determination of what projects have been supported is far from easy. In all, SH3 contains 185 of the 1549 social sciences and humanities projects listed on the ERC published database (derived from CORDIS). Insofar as it is possible to glean data, the ERC website would suggest that between 2010 and 2018 the number of awards in SH3_12 was about 11% of all awards in SH3.

However, rough scrutiny of other research domain listings reveals projects that could well be construed as within the interests of ECREA. For example, within SH2 (which embraces political science among other things, including political systems, social movements, human geography, and so on), projects are listed on controlling information, the internet and authoritarianism in China, and similar. Understandably, in a broad and imprecisely defined field such as communications, it is difficult, if not impossible, to map the ERC domains onto the work of ECREA members, and it would take far more detailed analysis of project listings and so on than has been possible for this report to approach such precision.

The following summaries indicate the experience in the main geographical areas in which members of the Committee have been able to obtain information, whether from institutions, award holders, or online data.

<u>UK</u>

Scrutiny of both SH2 and SH3 current awards found very few indeed in the UK which fell within ECREA fields of interest. More widely, however, the UK has been a major recipient of ERC awards for many years, though many people are now raising the inevitable question of how or if this will continue following 'Brexit', and at the time of writing it remains unclear whether or to what extent UK researchers will be involved in future EU funded research, including via the ERC. Research evaluation schemes (the 'Research Assessment Exercise' and its successor the 'Research Excellence Framework') have accelerated the skills and motivation among UK academic researchers in areas such as research design and funding applications. Most universities have very professional and experienced departments for the support of research management, and in some this is very extensive indeed.

Interviews with current or recent ERC award holders elicited very positive responses. It should be noted, however, that the researchers were in fields which, even generously interpreted, would lie at the very margins of any conceivable definition of communications research. One researcher, in the very early stages of a Starting Grant, was at pains to contrast her experience with applications to the relevant UK national research council. She had found the application process to the ERC to be fair and helpful, and was full of praise for the quality and relevance of reviewers' comments (these remarks of course come from a successful applicant, and might not reflect those from unsuccessful applicants). As an early career researcher she underlined the prestige associated with obtaining an ERC award, and the inevitable importance of this within university promotion procedures. Like other applicants she was impressed by the relative ease of the first application stage, and fully accepted the need for much more detail in the second (B2) stage. She had found the Brussels interview process very 'professional and smooth'. Another award holder had found the interview process tough ("the worst experience of my working life") and had gone away from it convinced of failure, but on reflection (and of course on receiving a positive outcome) regarded it as challenging but not unfair. These positive comments were repeated by other (successful) ERC award holders, who stressed the fairness and openness of the process, and the lengthy duration and flexibility of the award, once granted, in contrast with their experience of funding from research councils in the UK. They each stressed that they felt the ERC supported 'ground-breaking' and high quality research, regardless of application or utility.

Another researcher, at the opposite end of the process (an experienced researcher whose advanced grant had supported research now completed), was equally complimentary.   It is worth stressing that interviewees were at the margins, or perhaps beyond them, of the fields most ECREA members would identify with. They also both stressed the importance of having strong and sufficient university support in the application and project management stages (though one felt this was manageable without such support, and that the 'time-sheet' reporting procedures, though tedious, were reasonable). In the UK much communication and media research is undertaken in smaller or newer universities (a high proportion of ERC awards in the UK are to just two large universities), where such support might be less developed or extensive. Another theme stressed by interviewees was the importance of the innovative and compelling nature of the applicant as much as of the project itself.

Portugal

Portuguese data was difficult to elicit. Coherent information about funding by the FCT (Fundação para a Ciências e Tecnologia) is very limited. There is no disclosure of the processes so the media and communication 'field' is not clear and there is no direct link between training in media and communication and application results. In the last individual competition projects just published (individuals from all areas applied for grants), there was only one grant for communication and it was attributed to someone with a PhD in Engineering with a project on Science Communication.

Specifically on ERC, there are no grants in media and communication in Portugal. The Communication and Society Research Centre at Minho (CECS) has one ERC grant because its PI has moved the grant to the CECS. She has always worked on the fringes of communication (particularly looking at media representation of science) but this project is about security, data control, etc; specifically it is on geneticists' transnational exchange of DNA data. Portuguese commentary suggests that as a field we have no recognition by the national and European institutions, despite all their efforts.

<u>Italy</u>

Initial scrutiny found just two Italian projects that could be construed as broadly within communication. One project (Starting Grant) given to Scuola Normale superiore of Pisa focused on the analysis of a visual archive, the other project (advanced grant) is to the European University Institute (to an Italian scholar) for the study "Bodies across borders: aortal and visual memory in Europe and beyond" (again, rather on or beyond the border of communications research). Most ERC grants awarded to Italians are in the field of history.

<u>Central and Eastern Europe</u>

Experience from Slovenia is that there is very little interest in the ERC funds because of :

- The lack of institutional infrastructure to carry out (large) international projects
- The number of full-time researchers is very small and there is no flexibility that would allow "commuting" between teaching and researching
- Additional work in projects has no effect on teachers' (or researchers') salaries

Specific national situations summarily are as follows:

SERBIA

The Faculty of Political Sciences, which is the oldest and in research terms the most active point for communication and media scholarship, has had 10 major international research projects in the past 10 years. Half of them were funded by the EU (COST, FP7) or some European research support programs (such as Swiss Regional Research Promotion Programme). The other half was supported through American research schemes such as USAID/IREX , Knight Fellowship or Journalism Curriculum development program.

As far as was known there is no communication or media project supported by ERC in Serbia. There are few other media and communication research projects – our informant knew of three COST projects conducted by the Faculty of Arts and colleagues from other schools. The general impression is that the number of applications in our field has not increased progressively in the past 10 years, mostly because communication and media departments still lack the institutional infrastructure to carry out large international projects. Also, the community of

researchers is not very large and usually only one or two teams can conduct large projects at the same time.

The situation is changing with the expansion of digital, information, and data science related interests. They seem to be favoured by the Ministry of Science and have been stimulated to expand their international research in the past five years or so. But these projects are mainly unrelated to media and communication even when they could be so designed as to be directly relevant for our field. This follows from a clear decision to connect digitization to economy and business- oriented applied research rather than fundamental social science or humanities fields.

HUNGARY

While Hungarian researchers are often involved in international and collaborative programmes of research, only two projects from the ERC were identified:

•   ERC Consolidator Grant titled 'No Sword Bites So Fiercely as an Evil Tongue? Gossip Wrecks Reputation but Enhances Cooperation.'
•   H2020 Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe (DEMOS) – Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences acts as coordinator.

Obstacles to greater involvement seem to include:

1.   Networking: It is difficult to get involved in international networks which facilitate the access for funds and publication opportunities
2.   Financial:
•   The expenses of international conferences (especially the high participation fees);
•   Centralising and narrowing the national funding schemes for basic researches in social science in Hungary which would support the networking activities of scholars.
•   Salary level. The average salary level in the field of social science in Hungary is amongst the lowest in CEE countries (post doc in Poland: 2500 EUR; Slovakia: 3700 EUR; Bosnia Herzegovina: 2000 EUR; Hungary: 1900 HUF.)

3.   New generation of researchers: an academic career in social science in Hungary is becoming less and less attractive for young and talented students.

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The brain drain from Hungary to West-Europe/US Universities creates unfavourable conditions for research teams seeking PhD student or junior scholars in Hungary. Such disadvantageous circumstances increasingly complicates the recruitment of proper human resources in the research teams, which may hold back the productivity of communication and media studies in Hungary.

<u>Austria-Germany-Switzerland</u>

Between 2014-16 in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the Life Sciences got the highest number of ERC grants. Between 2014 and 2016, 297 German universities and 159 non-university research institutions received ERC-grants. With a share of 13% (N=58), the Humanities and the Social Sciences rank lowest. The following table shows this in slightly more detail:

Art der Einrichtung	Gesamt	Geistes- und Sozial- wissenschaften	Lebens- wissenschaften	Natur- wissenschaften	Ingenieur- wissenschaften
	N	N	N	N	N
Hochschulen	297	50	90	82	75
Außeruniversitäre Einrichtungen	159	8	82	54	15
Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft (FhG)	1				1
Helmholtz-Gemeinschaft (HGF)	44		28	14	2
Leibniz-Gemeinschaft (WGL)	12	1	1	5	5
Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (MPG)	84	5	41	31	7
Weitere Einrichtungen	18	2	12	4	
Insgesamt	456	58	172	136	90

Datenbasis und Quelle:
EU-Büro des BMBF: ERC-Förderung in Horizon 2020. EU-Rahmenprogramm für Forschung und Innovation (Projektdaten mit Stand 10.10.2017). Zahlen beinhalten Starting Grants, Advanced Grants und Consolidator Grants.
Berechnungen der DFG.

Most of the grants for the Humanities and Social Sciences in Germany came from DFG and the Federal Government and most of the grants were given to universities. While we have considerable and detailed data on communication research activities in these countries, there is little relating to the ERC specifically.   Due to the size of the German-speaking scientific community much of the research output is published in German and in the form of books but there is a clear trend towards publishing in English and a growing preference for the publication of journal articles. This shift has been fostered by efforts to intensify internationalization of the discipline, which is also reflected in the participation of Austrian/German/Swiss researchers in international

conferences (ICA, ECREA). An increased interest in comparative research across countries has also contributed to the trend towards publishing in English.

Nordic Countries

Information from the Nordic countries suggests the current situation is as follows:

Denmark: one researcher has applied for a starting grant 2018 – no decision taken as yet.

Finland: No applications could be identified.

Norway: 3 applications for advanced grants have been submitted in recent years. No grants.
2 applications for starting grants in 2017. Did not make it to round two.
1 application for a starting grant submitted in 2018 - no decision taken as yet.

Sweden: We are not aware of any applications for advanced grants in recent years. There would seem to be one starting grant, awarded August 2018, to a researcher at Gothenburg University. According to his website, his research area is "media use and effects in a changing media environment" but, oddly, it has no information on the ERC grant.

Conclusions

While the data is far from complete it would seem clear that the field of research represented by the majority of ECREA members receives very little support from the European Research Council. It is impossible to be certain but this may reflect the paucity of applications for funding rather than any selective rejection of applications from within the field. Even in countries where research traditions and managerial experience are substantial (UK and Germany, for example), there would seem to be relatively little funding of the field. In the

former the uncertainty posed by BREXIT is a particular obstacle, but this may be exacerbated by the prevalence of media and communications research in smaller or newer universities, where research support centrally is less sophisticated or developed, which would seem to be a requirement both for awareness and award management. While competition for funding is intense, it would seem that funding from the ERC should be seen as one avenue to explore if seeking expansion of research in fields represented by ECREA.

Recommendations

1. ECREA should seek ways of increasing awareness of ERC funding schemes among its members and encouraging applications.
2. Involvement of ECREA members in the refereeing of applications should be enhanced, following appropriate discussions with the ERC and actions by ECREA to encourage such activity.
3. ECREA should open or continue discussion with the ERC to make its field of interest more apparent in ERC calls and domain descriptors. The notion that communications and media (or indeed social science and humanities more generally) can form an aspect of most fields probably hinders the development and research funding of the field in its own terms.
4. ECREA should further its involvement in the work of the European Alliance for Social Science and Humanities, not least in its attempts to address the apparent imbalance in ERC funding away from the social sciences and humanities, and towards more applied or commercially oriented research. There may be a particular dimension to this in the frequently overly-technological understanding of communications and media related research areas.
5. ECREA should seek further help from the ERC in identifying applications within its areas of interest as at present available data relates rather more to awards than to unsuccessful applications.
6. Discussion with the ERC should consider whether smaller grants, requiring less administrative support, should be available and whether this might assist fields such as those covered by ECREA.

APPENDIX : MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEE

Prof. Peter Golding (UK) – Chair.   Emeritus Professor Northumbria University and Visiting Professor Newcastle University

Prof. Kirsten Drotner (Denmark) . Chair of Media Studies, University of Southern Denmark

Prof. Christina Holtz-Bacha (Germany). Chair of Communications Science, Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg.

Prof. Paolo Mancini (Italy). Professor of Sociology of Communication and Academic Director of the School of Broadcast Journalism, University of Perugia.

Prof. Helena Sousa (Portugal) Prof of Communication Sciences and Dean of Social Sciences, University of Minho.

Prof. Slavko Splichal (Slovenia). Professor of Communication and Public Opinion, University of Ljubljana

Prof. J. Downey – as Vice President ECREA acted as a member of the Committee and as liaison with the ECREA Executive Board