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Funding excellent research: The European Research Council @10

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- I. Brief History
- II. ERC, a policy instrument
- III. Funding à la ERC

Historical excursion

- ▶ 2000: Lisbon Strategy, “to make Europe the most competitive and the most dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”
- ▶ 2000: European Research Area (ERA): “the situation concerning research is worrying”

Why such stark contrast?

“The Miracle of the ERC” (Fotis Kafatos)

2000-3: ERC Campaign

2003-5: European Commission takes over

2005-7: hammering out of ERC as it stands now
(more or less)

2000-3: The ERC Campaign

- ▶ A group of self-organized high-level researchers
- ▶ Ideological conviction: European research, but deserves better (“Loch Ness Monsters”)
- ▶ Using conferences and ad-hoc committees to advance idea
- ▶ An ERC as alternative to Framework Programme
- ▶ But: no patron, no structure, no money (“everybody is talking about something different”)

2003-5 European Commission takes over

EC had its own interests;

New, precise campaign emerging:

- ▶ ERC part of FP7
- ▶ Annual budget: 1-2 bio
- ▶ “European added-value”: competition (based on excellence)
- ▶ “frontier research”

2005-7: Hammering out the ERC

- ▶ First “Scientific Council” meeting in late 2005
- ▶ Developing “scientific strategy” in 2006
- ▶ Formal inception in 2007 (with new FP7)
- ▶ First funding call deadline in May 2007 (Starting Grant)

What is the ERC?

- ▶ Independent steering body
- ▶ Allocation of funding based on scientific quality

Hardly an innovation; but new in transnational space!

Unique effects:

- ▶ Symbolic value
- ▶ Mobility
- ▶ Comparison

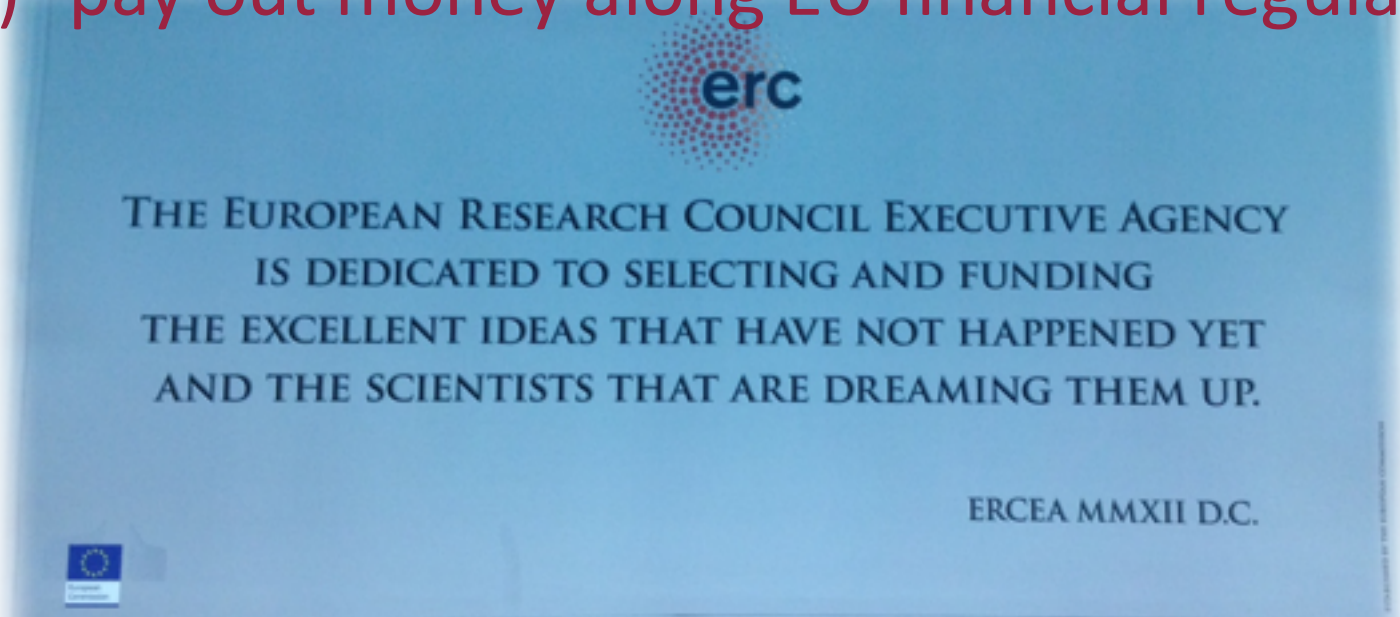
Position, Mission, Objectives, Budget

- ▶ Currently part of 8th FP edition (“Horizon 2020”)
- ▶ Legally a compound of three entities
- ▶ Mission to fund “frontier” (i.e., academic) research
- ▶ Objectives: competition,
- ▶ 17 % of EU FP budget, > 0,5 % of total EU R&D spending
- ▶ Three future challenges

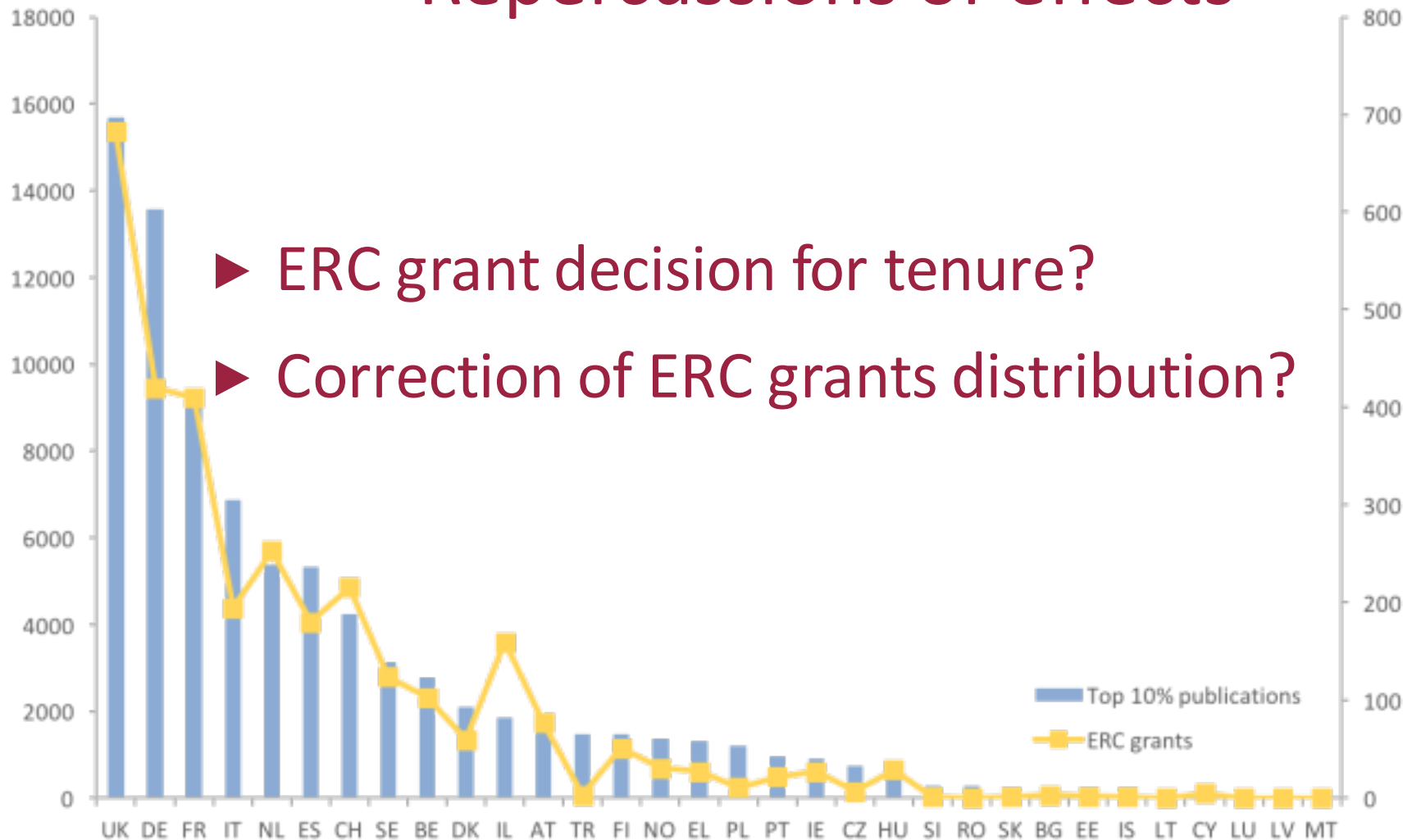
Unique mission versus “efficiency”

Tasks:

- 1) identify best applications (“excellence only”)
- 2) pay out money along EU financial regulations



Repercussions of effects



Whom does the ERC belong to?

“The ERC has been a unique and bold experiment to put the scientific community in charge. It must safeguard this position.” (Helga Nowotny, Science, 10 March 2017)

Attracting applications

Funding opportunities:

- ▶ Starting Grant (since 2007): 2-7 years PhD
- ▶ Consolidator Grant (since 2013): 7-12 years PhD
- ▶ Advanced Grant (since 2008): senior researchers

All funding streams are:

- “investigator-driven” (no predetermined fields, topics, missions)
- Open to all fields of science and scholarship (*Wissenschaft*)
- Decided on “sole criterion” of “excellence”

Peer Review

To legitimize a decision!

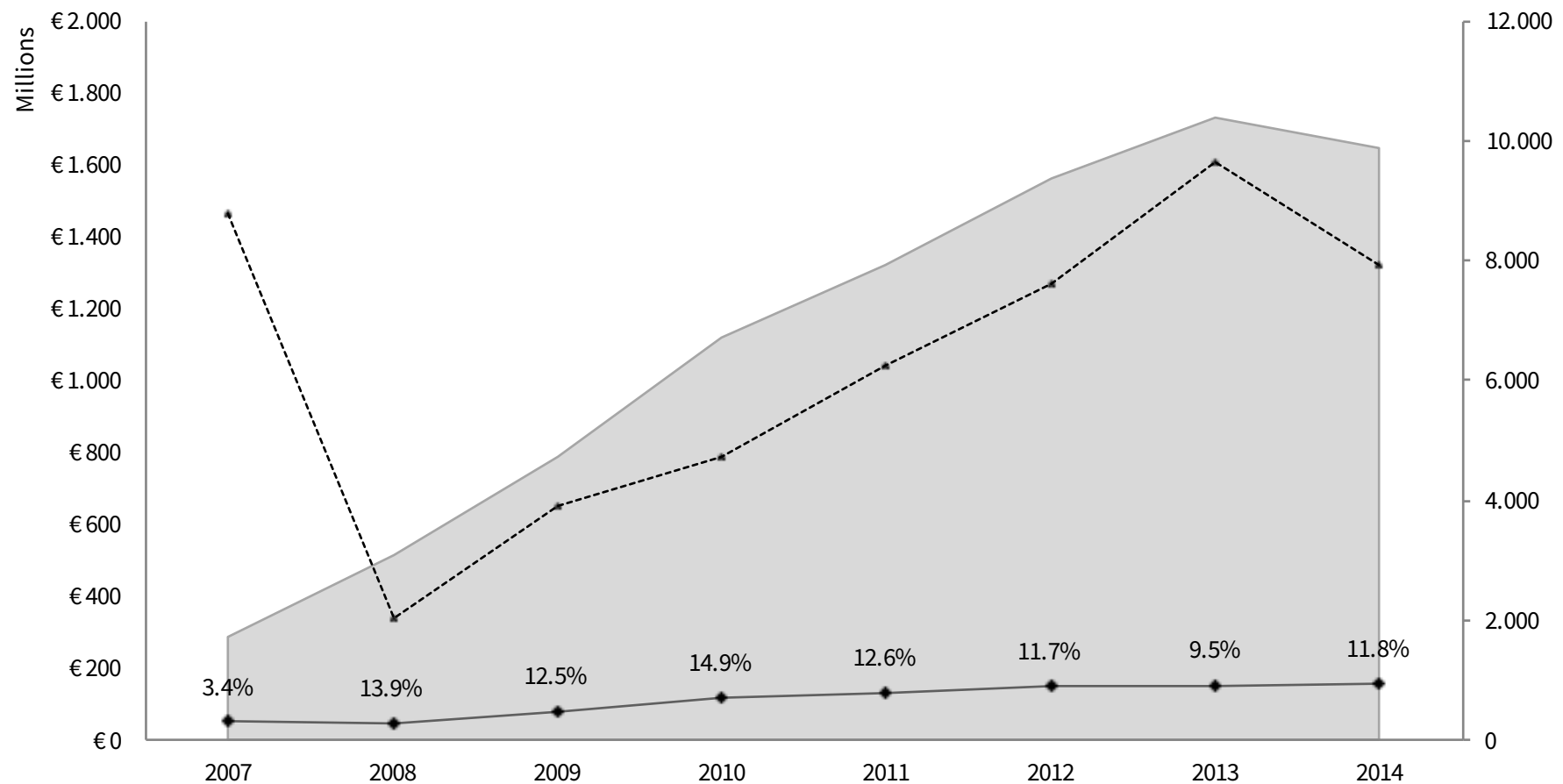
Two necessary differentiations:

- ▶ Principle vs. procedure
- ▶ Deployment: within scientific culture (publishing) vs. at the fringe (funding)

Allocating funds through peer review

- ▶ Dual legitimacy
- ▶ Two objects of evaluation: CV and proposal
- ▶ Features to look for:
 - ▶ Quality
 - ▶ Promise
 - ▶ Feasibility
- ▶ Peers: responsible for balancing and judging

ERC, a funding machinery



Inconsistencies of peer review

Implicit expectations:

- ▶ Only ambition is to advance science
- ▶ Reviewers are open to new avenues
- ▶ Rev. and applicants do this for free

Tackled by the ERC through: panels, panel members, process workflow, close observation

Panels

Set of only 25 panels for each funding stream

- ▶ Interdisciplinary by nature
- ▶ Intention to establish ‘customary rules’, which ‘discourage[] corruption and thus helps ensure that the best proposals are identified’ (M. Lamont)
- ▶ Establish common (relational, temporary) understanding of “excellence”

Panel members

- ▶ Panel chairs (appointed by ScC): broad knowledge; highly esteemed;
- ▶ Panel members (appointed by ScC): broad knowledge
- ▶ Remote referees (appointed by panel members): specialists

Process workflow

1st step: assess “extended synopsis”

-> result: short list

2nd step: assess “full proposal” (StG and CoG: interviews)

-> result: funding decision

Each step consists of 2 routines:

- a) Individual review of applications (remotely)
- b) Collectively assess reviews (and interview applicants)
(panel meeting in Brussels)

Close observation

- ▶ Do panel members “perform”?
- ▶ Do panels need revision?
- ▶ Are there enough/too many proposals?

Regulation for application is regularly refined

Why is ERC unique?

- ▶ Not because of its philosophy,
- ▶ Not because of its funding streams,
- ▶ Not because of its decision-making principle,

But:

- ▶ Funding is transnational (visibility)
- ▶ Reviewers are international (avoids informal networks)
- ▶ Panels are interdisciplinary
- ▶ Procedure is sophisticated/expensive

The European Research Council

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