My 5 cents about ERC grants

Ronald de Wolf
Who am I & why am I here?

- I’m a theoretical computer scientist at CWI and UvA, working on algorithms & complexity, mostly for quantum computing.

- My experience with the ERC:
  - I received an ERC Consolidator Grant 2014–2019.
  - I have been on the Starting Grant Panel PE6 (computer science) in 2021 and 2023, handling mostly theoretical CS and quantum computing proposals.
The selection process (for StG, similar for others)

- **Step 1**: Panel selects roughly 1/3 of submissions to invite for online interview, based on B1 (5-page proposal + CV)

- Panel consists of 15-20 European experts on various subareas; 3 or 4 will look at your proposal. You’re lucky to have even just one person on the panel who is very close to your topic, so don’t write your B1 for experts!

- **Step 2**: 3 or 4 panel members and at least 3 external reviewers evaluate B2. Based on this and on the interview, the panel selects ±40% of the remaining proposals
Getting to the interview phase: an outstanding B1

➤ You need a very good CV, obviously. For Starting Grant: show independence from PhD advisor

➤ Project proposal should balance what you have done (track record) and what you want to do: you should do new stuff that will greatly benefit from your existing expertise

➤ It should be a coherent project, not a list of interesting but only vaguely related questions

➤ Emphasize that your topic is important & urgent, and why you are exceptionally well-placed to address it. Implicitly answer the questions: why this, why now, why me?

➤ Sprinkle hints here and there that you have some new and promising approaches to the questions you’re asking. It’s easy to promise you’re going to solve some longstanding open problem, but not very credible unless you have some new idea.

➤ At the end: mention main risks & ways to mitigate them
The interview, if you pass Step 1

- Make clear, sparse slides, that distinguish you from others
- Again, emphasize that your topic is important & urgent, and why you are exceptionally well-placed to address it. Implicitly answer the questions: why this, why now, why me?
- Be confident but don’t brag
- Don’t let your talk go over time: the committee is on a very tight schedule and you will probably be cut off harshly
- End with a good summary slide even if you don’t have time to say it. This slide might stay on the screen during the interview
- Beware: most panel members will ignore your talk! Only 3 or 4 of the panel members have been assigned your proposal, the rest is busy preparing their next interviews
- Think of 10-20 likely questions, prepare crisp answers to them