



# **Horizon Europe**

## **European Research Council (ERC)**

### **Guide for Reviewers**

### **Proof of Concept Grant Calls**



**European Research Council**  
Executive Agency

Established by the European Commission

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**European Research Council**  
Executive Agency

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# **European Research Council (ERC)**

## **Guide for Reviewers**

**Applicable to the ERC Proof of Concept Grants  
(ERC Work Programme 2023)**

**Version 2.0  
2 February 2023**

## IMPORTANT TO NOTE

This Guide for Peer Reviewers is based on legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC frontier research grants, in particular:

- the [ERC Work Programme 2023<sup>1</sup>](#), which defines the objectives and principles of the ERC funding as well as the main features of the Calls for Proposals for the ERC Proof of Concept Grants including the call deadlines and the call budget. It also specifies that a single step review procedure will be applied following a single submission of a full proposal, and sets the framework for budgetary implementation and the evaluation criteria;
- the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe<sup>2</sup>](#) establish the rules of submission of proposals and the related evaluation process, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of – the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027);
- the Contract<sup>3</sup> for ERC experts, defines the relationship between the ERCEA and the experts, and the use of personal data by the ERCEA.

This document complements and does not supersede the aforementioned documents, which are legally binding and prevail in case of any discrepancies. This guide specifies in more details the review evaluation process, its inputs and outputs, and the responsibilities of the participating reviewers in the process.

The European Commission, the ERC Executive Agency or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

### Abbreviations

AC – Associated Country  
ERC – European Research Council  
ERCEA – ERC Executive Agency  
ERC WP – ERC Work Programme  
F&T portal – Funding & Tenders Portal - Single Electronic Data Interchange Area (SEDIA)  
HI – Host Institution  
PI – Principal Investigator  
PM – Panel Member  
PoC – Proof of Concept  
SEP – Submission and Evaluation of Proposals System  
ScC – ERC Scientific Council

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission Decision C(2022) 4861 of 11 July 2022

<sup>2</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/erc-rules-for-submission-and-evaluation\\_he-erc\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/erc-rules-for-submission-and-evaluation_he-erc_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The model expert contract was adopted by the European Commission Decision C(2017)1392 of 07 March 2017

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# 1. Introduction

The selection of proposals for funding by the European Research Council (ERC) Proof of Concept is based strictly on the evaluation criterion set in the relevant ERC Work Programme. This Guide for Reviewers is based on legal documents setting the rules and conditions for the ERC main frontier research grants, in particular:

## **The ERC Rules of Submission**

The European Research Council rules of submission, and the related methods and procedures for peer review and proposal evaluation relevant to the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe (hereinafter the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#)), which establishes the rules applying to the submission of proposals and the related evaluation process, selection and award procedures relevant to the Specific Programme of Horizon Europe – the Framework programme for Research and Innovation (2021-2027);

## **The ERC Work Programme**

The ERC Scientific Council (ERC ScC) has also established the [ERC Work Programme \(ERC WP\) for 2023](#)<sup>4</sup>, which, inter alia, defines the parameters of the Call for Proposals for ERC Proof of Concept Grants. More specifically, it defines the call deadlines or cut-off dates and the call budget. It specifies the evaluation criterion and sets the framework for budgetary implementation.

## **The Contract for ERC experts**

The [Contract](#)<sup>5</sup> for ERC experts defines the relationship between the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA) and the experts, and use of personal data by the ERCEA. Signature of this contract by the reviewer indicates acceptance of the conditions regarding confidentiality and conflict of interest (Annex 1, Code of Conduct to the expert contract), and use of personal data by the ERCEA. The ERCEA cannot make proposals available to a reviewer who has not been officially contracted (i.e. signed the Contract and, by so doing, agreed to the terms laid down in it including in particular, confidentiality and conflict of interest aspects). A breach of the Code of Conduct or other serious misconduct by a reviewer may be qualified as grave professional misconduct and may lead to the exclusion of this independent expert.

## **This document**

This document complements and does not supersede the aforementioned documents, which are legally binding and prevail in case of any discrepancies. It specifies in more detail the evaluation process and its inputs and outputs, and it defines the responsibilities of the participants in the process. It provides further details on certain provisions of the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), such as the management of conflict of interest. The European Commission, the ERCEA or any person or body acting on their behalf cannot be held responsible for the use made of this document.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission Decision C(2022) 4861 of 11 July 2022

<sup>5</sup> The model expert contract was adopted by the [European Commission Decision C\(2017\)1392 of 07 March 2017](#).

## 2. Panel structure

In the context of the PoC evaluation process, given that it does not involve any scientific evaluation per se, reviewers are grouped in a single evaluation panel.

## 3. Reviewers

### **The panels**

An ERC PoC panel differs from other ERC panels in several ways. It is composed by a pool of reviewers, who do not necessarily have similar professional background, and is not chaired by a Panel Chair. The PoC reviewers (also referred to as “Panel Members”, “Independent external experts” or “Experts”) are selected by the ERC ScC on the basis of their expertise in technology transfer and social innovation. The ERC ScC may rely on its members and on information provided by the ERCEA to identify the reviewers. The reviewers make a significant commitment of their time to the ERC review process. The size of the panel might be increased if the demand of the PoC call increases.

**PoC reviewers** perform the following tasks:

- Individual review – by electronic means – of a subset of the proposals (remote work).
- Participation in the initial panel meeting, and if necessary in an additional panel meeting.
- In case an additional panel meeting is needed, prior familiarisation with a relevant subset of proposals in preparation for the meeting.

### **Use of personal data**

All reviewers involved in the evaluation of proposals must keep in mind that any personal data received are only to be used for the purposes for which they are transmitted. All unnecessary and excessive information submitted by applicants should be disregarded.

## 4. The individual reviews

Individual reviews are carried out remotely by the deadline set by the call coordinator. All Panel Members participate in the individual remote review stage.

### **Minimum requirements**

In the PoC scheme, each proposal is evaluated by at least 3 individual reviewers. If a panel meeting takes place, each application is assigned to a “lead reviewer” who introduces the proposal to the panel for discussion and is responsible for drafting the panel comment<sup>6</sup>.

### **The interpretation of 'individual'**

During the individual remote evaluation process, there shall be no discussions of the proposals between reviewers. Moreover, reviewers should not disclose the proposals assigned for their evaluation to other reviewers. When Panel Members consider that they

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<sup>6</sup> The panel comment is part of the “Evaluation Report” which is returned to the applicant as feedback.

have insufficient expertise to evaluate any of the proposals they received to review, they should immediately inform the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator so that the proposal can be reallocated to another reviewer. If a reviewer has limited availability in an evaluation round, they should inform the PoC call coordinator without delay.

### **Marks and comments**

Individual evaluation consists of:

- Awarding a pass mark ('good' or 'very good') or a fail mark ('fail') for each of the evaluation elements<sup>7</sup>. It is of utmost importance that only the sole evaluation criterion of excellence broken down into evaluation elements as described in the [ERC WP 2023](#) are used to assess the proposals. Reviewers should refrain from using any additional criteria or evaluation element(s) no matter the importance it bears in the frame of a given proposal. Each proposal should be treated with the same severity and professionalism (equal treatment).
- Providing a succinct explanatory comment substantiating each mark. Comments should take the form of a statement and explanation of key strengths and key weaknesses of the proposal, in the light of the evaluation elements. The marks should be consistent with the comments.

### **Quality standards of individual reviewers' comments**

Comments should be provided by each reviewer for the proposal. As these comments will be sent to the applicant as feedback, they should be of high quality, succinct but substantial. They should also be impeccably polite. A decision of the reviewer to attribute a "fail" mark shall be explained in detail in order for the applicant to be able to understand the deficiencies and weaknesses of their proposal, so as to seek effective remedy for any future applications. Likewise, in case of a "good" mark, the applicant should be put in a position to understand why the reviewer did not award a "very good" mark.

Reviewers are obliged to observe the following guidelines:

- Provide substantial, explanatory comments; avoid comments that merely give a description or a summary of the proposal.
- Use dispassionate, analytical and unambiguous language.
- Use grammatically correct, complete, clear sentences with no jargon.
- Provide polite comments.
- Critical comments should be constructive and not offensive.
- Avoid self-declaration of insufficient expertise (personal or panel) or non-confidence in the proposal.
- Avoid any comments about your expertise that may reveal your identity.
- Avoid reference to the applicant's age, nationality, gender, or personal matters.
- Avoid making reference to marks in the comments.
- Avoid inconsistency between the nature of the comment and the mark attributed.

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<sup>7</sup> See [ERC Work Programme 2023](#)



- Be aware of unconscious bias and gender issues<sup>8</sup>.
- Avoid any comments on PI's past, current or future Host Institution; its standing is not an ERC evaluation criterion.
- Avoid any direct comparison with any other proposals.
- Avoid any reference or comparison with previous assessments in case of a resubmitted proposal.
- Avoid dismissive statements about the Principal Investigator or the project. Keep in mind that previous experience in innovation is not required for the Principal Investigator. Avoid very short comments, especially in the case of a "fail" mark.
- Double check after submitting the review if the mark appearing for each element assessed corresponds to the intended mark.
- Avoid comments on the ethical aspects of the proposal. Ethical clearance security pre-screening is performed by the ERCEA for all fundable proposals.
- Avoid any reference to costs, budget figures when assessing the description of resources (see point 6 below).

**Individual reviews have to be submitted in due time according to the deadline set by the ERCEA.**

## 5. Conflict of Interest (Col)

Reviewers should not be put in a situation in which their impartiality might be questioned, or where the suspicion could arise that recommendations are affected by elements that lie outside the scope of the review. To that effect, a clear set of rules pertaining to conflict of interest (Col) are annexed to the Contract and can be found at the end of this document.

A list of conflicts of interests (see below) will be displayed in the on-line evaluation system, and the experts will be asked to confirm the absence of conflict of interests when accepting to review and when submitting their individual review. Based on the information available, call coordination shall avoid assigning proposals to reviewers who have a conflict of interest. Please note that it is always the responsibility of the expert to declare the conflict of interest.

**A list of conflicts of interests displayed in the on-line evaluation system<sup>9</sup>:**

- I am PI or team member in the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same call).
- I was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I would benefit directly should the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel) be accepted or rejected.

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<sup>8</sup> Unconscious bias apply equally, regardless of whether the evaluators are male or female. Whereas possible gender biases may be rooted in the institutions or the community where the applicants may come, a wealth of evidence points at possible introduction of unconscious biases in evaluation processes (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g978T58gELo>). Experts are requested to be vigilant and aware so such elements are not introduced in the evaluation process.

<sup>9</sup> The above-mentioned briefly outlined examples of the conflict of interest situations are fully described in the [Code of Conduct](#) annexed to model expert contract.

- I am employed or contracted by the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am involved in the management of the host or partner institutions of the proposal - or have been so in the past 3 years.
- I am collaborating scientifically - or have done so in the past 5 years - with the PI.
- I have (or have had) a mentor/mentee relationship with the PI.
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with the PI (or any PI submitting a proposal to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who was involved in the preparation of the proposal (or any other proposal submitted to the same panel).
- I have family ties or close personal relationship with anyone who would benefit directly from the proposal being granted (or from any other proposal submitted to the same panel being granted) or rejected.
- I am (or was) in a relationship of scientific rivalry or hostility with the PI.
- I am a National Contact Point or working for the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN).
- I am a member of an EU programme committee.
- I am in any other situation that would preclude the impartial review of the proposal or that could appear to do so.

## 6. The criteria

The criteria express the objectives of the ERC activity at the level of the review. They are, therefore, defined in the applicable ERC Work Programme. There are two types of criteria:

- Admissibility and Eligibility criteria.
- Evaluation criterion.

### Admissibility and Eligibility criteria

Admissibility and eligibility criteria<sup>10</sup> are simple, factual and legally binding. Their interpretation does not involve technical or scientific judgement. Hence, neither admissibility nor eligibility is part of the review process. Instead, it is carried out in parallel by the ERCEA staff. Nevertheless, if a reviewer considers a proposal to be potentially inadmissible (incomplete proposal because sections are missing) or ineligible during the evaluation process they should clarify the case immediately with the ERCEA's PoC call coordinator. In some cases, proposals may be declared inadmissible or ineligible during or even after the evaluation, if it becomes clear that one or more of the admissibility or eligibility criteria has not been or are no longer met.

### Evaluation criterion and elements

The evaluation criterion is at the core of the review process. The evaluation criterion and evaluation elements as well as their interpretation are described in the [ERC Work Programme 2023](#). All judgement on proposals must be made against the evaluation elements and against these evaluation elements alone. It is to be noted that, **in order to be considered for funding, proposals will have to be awarded a pass mark by a majority of experts on each of the three evaluation elements.** The incorrect application of an evaluation element or the application of an inexistent or irrelevant evaluation element is considered a procedural error, which may justify a re-evaluation of the proposal.

Reviewers should give particular attention to the evaluation element “Approach and methodology” due to the fact that the grants to be awarded under the Proof of Concept take

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<sup>10</sup> See Admissibility and eligibility criteria of the [ERC Work Programme 2023](#).

the form of a standard lump sum pre-fixed at EUR 150 000<sup>11</sup>. The lump sum is deemed to cover all eligible (direct and indirect) costs for the action and it cannot be increased or decreased. The Principal Investigator must demonstrate that the proposed timescales and resources are adequate and properly justified, which is part of evaluation element 1.b. The applicant is expected to provide a **narrative description** of the resources planned for each activity. Examples of resources that the applicant is expected to describe are the type of staff working on a task and the estimated effort (person-months), type of equipment and consumables required for the project implementation, staff travel requirements, etc. **The applicants are specifically requested not to describe the resources financially**, which means that **no cost figures should appear in the proposal**. The applicants are expected to justify the good use of the lump sum for the resources described. In case a proposal includes budget figures, cost details etc. they shall be disregarded by the reviewer and the applicant shall not be penalised for this. The reviewer shall refrain from assessing budget and costs figures and avoid any reference to them that include their assessment. However, when a proposal does not include sufficient details about the resources once the budget and cost details are disregarded, the reviewer can comment on this deficiency in their individual review.

Reviewers have access to the annexes of PoC proposals containing Letters of support or intent from relevant stakeholders. If such contacts already exist, applicants are asked to include them to document the 1b.ii description of PoC activities (Part B template). Reviewers should disregard any Ethics and Security issues annexes, as Ethical clearance is performed by the ERCEA and Security clearance by the European Commission for all funded proposals. Reviewers should avoid comments on the ethical aspects of the proposal. Any other Annex than Support letters can be disregarded by the reviewers. NB: Annexes do not count towards the maximum page limit of Part B (10 pages, excluding references and the risk mitigation table).

## 7. Preparation and organisation of the evaluation including panel meetings

### About the necessity of the panel meeting

Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking described below, up to depletion of the available budget. If necessary, the reviewers will meet as an evaluation panel in order to determine a priority order for proposals which have the same ranking. Panel meetings will hence only be held if there is any ambiguity on the list of proposals to be considered for funding. Otherwise, the determination of the priority order for proposals which have the same ranking will be carried out remotely.

### Briefings of reviewers

At the start of the evaluation session, Panel Members are invited to an Initial Panel Meeting. This meeting's purpose is two-fold – the first is to brief the Panel Members on all relevant aspects of the evaluation processes and procedures, and the second is to exchange views with the ERCEA's staff about the evaluation.

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<sup>11</sup> In accordance with the Decision authorising the use of lump sums for the European Research Council Proof of Concept actions under the Horizon Europe Programme – the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation  
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/lis-decision\\_he-erc-poc\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/guidance/lis-decision_he-erc-poc_en.pdf)

Reviewers are strongly encouraged to participate at this initial briefing.

The briefing covers matters such as the evaluation processes and procedures; the content of topics under consideration; the terms of the experts' contract, including confidentiality, impartiality, concealment of conflict of interest rules, completion of tasks and approval of reports and the possible consequences of non-compliance.

## **Ranking**

A proposal which fails overall one or more of the evaluation elements will not be ranked and will not be funded.

If there is not enough budget to fund all the proposals which pass all three evaluation elements, those proposals will be ranked according to the aggregated marks<sup>12</sup> (which they received from reviewers for each of the three evaluation elements which constitute the Excellence criterion, and sorted in the following order:

- 1.a Breakthrough innovation potential,
- 1.b Approach and methodology,
- 1.c. Principal Investigator - strategic lead and project management.

Proposals will be funded in order of the ranking resulting from this 3-level sorting exercise until depletion of the available budget per evaluation round.

At the Initial Panel Meeting, ERCEA staff presents the methodology to be followed for the evaluation, marking and final ranking and the Panel Members agree to follow a remote evaluation process. If as a result of the remote evaluation process, there is a tie between two or more proposals, a ranking methodology is also agreed ahead of time to break the tie.

Reviewers are explicitly asked in the Initial Panel Meeting to agree to follow the methodology for the evaluation and ranking. This agreement is asked explicitly and minuted. If not, a final ranking meeting is offered.

The final ranking order is later sent to the Panel Members for their information and endorsement. The endorsement may also take place electronically in the evaluation IT system.

## **The possible use of a voting system**

In the later stages of the evaluation process, the panel may expedite their ranking process by the use of a voting system (e.g. a majority vote on one or more proposals, with each Panel Member having one vote per proposal being considered). A Panel Member cannot vote for a proposal if under a Col, and in such case, an appropriate adjustment is applied. Voting can be an effective way of finalising a ranking list. If there is a group of equally ranked fundable proposals that crosses the budget cut off line, the panel will proceed as follows:

- ✓ All the reviewers involved in the evaluation of at least one proposal in this group will be sent the reviews of all the proposals in the group taking into account the Cols proposals, without revealing the reviewers' identity.

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<sup>12</sup> The awarded marks can be: very good – good – fail.

- ✓ The reviewers will then examine all the proposals in the group and the existing reviews, and decide on their own personal ranking.
- ✓ The ERCEA will compile a sub-ranking within the group taking into account the Cols, and will then come up with an overall final ranking list, for final endorsement by all Panel Members.

### **Outputs of the evaluation**

The output of any panel meeting, to be provided at the end of the meeting, consists of the following elements:

1. The ranked list of proposals;
2. The feedback to applicants (see section 8 below);
3. A panel report.

## **8. Feedback to applicants (the Evaluation Report)**

Apart from recommendations on fundable proposals and their ranking, the most important output of the evaluation process is the feedback to applicants. According to the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), the ERCEA will provide an Evaluation Report to each applicant, which documents the results of the evaluation process. Especially in the case of rejection, the Evaluation Report needs to convey a comprehensive explanation of the fate of the proposal and the position of the Panel with regard to it. The principle applied is that the Evaluation Report of each proposal contains a documentation of all comments and observations it received from Panel Members.

### **Components of the Evaluation Report**

The Evaluation Report of any proposal comprises three components:

1. The recommendation of the panel (according to the ranking list and the available call budget)
2. The ranking range of their proposal among the proposals evaluated by the panel.
3. A compilation of the individual reviews by evaluation element including the final marks for each element 'pass' or 'fail').

### **The comments by individual reviewers**

The comments by reviewers are included in the Evaluation Report as received. The ERCEA will not change the content of the ERs that form part of the panel report, except if necessary to improve readability or, exceptionally, to remove any clerical errors or inappropriate comments, provided such errors or comments do not affect the evaluation results. These individual comments may not necessarily be convergent - differences of opinion about the merits of a proposal are legitimate among evaluators, and it is potentially useful for an applicant to be informed of the various views. The PoC call coordinator can contact the

reviewer for clarification if necessary and can also alert the reviewer if potential irregularity is spotted by the ERCEA, which would necessitate the revision of a comment or mark.

### **The panel report**

In addition to the ranked list of proposals, the panel report briefly documents the evaluation methodology followed by the panel. It may also contain, as deemed appropriate, reflections on issues such as the quality of proposals in relation to the call budget and other observations. It may furthermore contain recommendations to be taken into account by the ERC in future review sessions.

## **9. The role of the ERC Scientific Council (ScC)**

The ERC ScC may delegate its members to attend panel meetings. The role of the ERC ScC delegates is to ensure and promote coherence of reviews, to identify best practices, and to gather information for future reviews of the procedures by the ERC ScC.

In conformity with the mandate of the ERC ScC, to carry out the scientific governance of the ERC, and in line with the role of the ERC ScC foreseen in the WP, ERC ScC Members will abstain from influencing the results of the evaluation process.

## **10. The role of Independent Observers**

Under the [ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe](#), independent external experts may be appointed as observers to examine the evaluation process from the point of view of its working and execution. The Independent Observers are not associated with the ERCEA or the ERC ScC. Their function and role is described in the ERC Rules of submission and evaluation under Horizon Europe.

## **11. Electronic tools used in evaluation**

Reviewers work individually using the on-line Commission's Evaluation tool ([SEP](#)).

Useful information on SEP is reported below:

[Quick Guide on SEP Evaluation tool](#)

Detailed how-to procedures and instructional video presentations on the usage of the SEP evaluation tool are available on [this location](#) under 'Expert Evaluation of Proposals'.

Information on EU Login is available [here](#)

# **Annex 1 – Evaluation form**

## **Criterion 1 – Breakthrough Innovation potential**

Does the proposed idea have the potential to drive innovation and business inventiveness and/or tackle societal challenges?

Are the proposed expected outcomes innovative or distinctive compared to existing solutions?

Is the proposed idea high risk-high gain?

o If successful, will the outcome result in a breakthrough innovation?

o Is there a risk that some aspects are difficult to overcome?

## **Criterion 2 – Approach and methodology**

Are the proposed activities and planning appropriate and effective to explore the pathway from ground-breaking research towards innovation? Activities may include:

- testing, experimenting, demonstrating and validating the idea;
- conducting research required to carry out the above activities and to address the weaknesses uncovered by them;
- clarifying IPR protection or knowledge transfer strategy;
- involving industry partners, societal or cultural organisations, policymakers or any other potential stakeholder supporting the translation of research results into innovation;
- assessing potential “end users” of the expected innovation.

Are the proposed timescales and resources adequate for the implementation and feasibility of the project, and properly justified? Will the activities be conducted by persons well qualified for the purpose?

## **Criterion 3: Principal Investigator - strategic lead and project management**

Does the PI demonstrate a clear vision on how to organise the management of the project, the consolidation of information and data needed to take strategic decisions and implement the proposed plan, including risk and contingency measures?

### **Use of human embryonic stem cells (hESC)<sup>13</sup>**

Does this proposal involve the use of hESC?

If yes, please state whether the use of hESC is, or is not, in your opinion, necessary to achieve the scientific objectives of the proposal and the reasons why. Alternatively, please also state if it cannot be assessed whether the use of hESC is necessary or not because of a lack of information.

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<sup>13</sup> Only relevant for proposals, which make use of human embryonic stem cells

### **Non-associated third country participation<sup>14</sup>**

Does this proposal involve the participation of any non-associated third country beneficiaries receiving paid ERC contribution?

If yes, please state whether their participation is, or is not, in your opinion, essential to achieve the scientific objectives of the proposal and the reasons why. Alternatively, please also state if it cannot be assessed whether their participation is essential or not because of a lack of information.

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<sup>14</sup> Only relevant for proposals, with paid contribution to third country beneficiaries (beneficiaries who are not located in an EU or a country, which is associated to Horizon Europe)