

Swiss Government to Offset ERC Funding Block

Researchers in Switzerland breathed a sigh of relief this week after their government stepped in to replace lost funding opportunities from the European Union. This will ease the [effects of a referendum held in Switzerland on 9 February](#), in which voters agreed to curb mass immigration. The vote [indirectly led Switzerland to lose its privileged status as an associated country to Horizon 2020](#), the European Union's new research funding program, and to the higher education program Erasmus+, which both run from 2014 through 2020.

As of 26 February and until further notice, [Switzerland is now considered a so-called third country](#) in Horizon 2020. This means that its researchers can still apply for E.U. funding as part of a group with partners from E.U. member states, but individual scientists from Swiss institutions are barred from applying for coveted basic research grants from the European Research Council (ERC), as well as for Marie Curie scholarships. This was bad news for Swiss candidates, who were very successful under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme, which ran from 2007 to 2013. According to ERC, €585 million went to 321 ERC grantees in Switzerland in that period.

Switzerland's government has now offered a partial remedy: The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) will offer ERC-like grants so that Swiss applications don't go to waste. “The scientific community is especially grateful for this timely decision, less than 6 weeks after the Swiss vote,” says Martine Rahier, president of swissuniversities, a group that will merge the country's three existing rectors' conferences this year.

But this measure is not enough to solve the whole problem, Rahier adds. “In the mid-term, a full membership in the Horizon 2020 and ERC programs remains crucial—the only way—to guarantee the high standard of Swiss research and innovation potential,” she says.

SNSF's emergency plan will broadly follow the same rules, evaluation criteria, and funding calendar as ERC's. “The calls for this temporary scheme will be open to scientists who work in Switzerland or who are now negotiating positions at institutions in Switzerland,” the foundation wrote [in a statement on 10 March](#). Starting Grants applicants (who have between 2 and 7 years' experience after their Ph.D.) can submit their proposal between 15 and 25 March, while the deadline for Consolidator Grants proposals (7 to 12 years' postdoctoral experience) is 20 May.

“Based on earlier experience with the ERC Grants we expect to receive about 200 to 250 proposals” in total, SNSF spokesman Alan Knaus tells *ScienceInsider* in an e-mail. “How many of them will be funded by the SNSF depends on their quality—the success rate of the ERC Grants in previous years was between 20 and 25 percent,” he adds. SNSF will ensure that its evaluation panels include members who have experience with ERC evaluation procedures, Knaus says.

The overall budget of the temporary fund is not settled yet, pending discussions with Switzerland's government and parliamentary approval in the fall. Knaus says that it will not affect the foundation's other funding programs, as the budget for this back-up plan will “presumably” come from money that the government would have paid to the E.U. budget anyway in order to become an associated country in Horizon 2020. (Switzerland paid about €1.6 billion to become associated with the Seventh Framework Programme.)